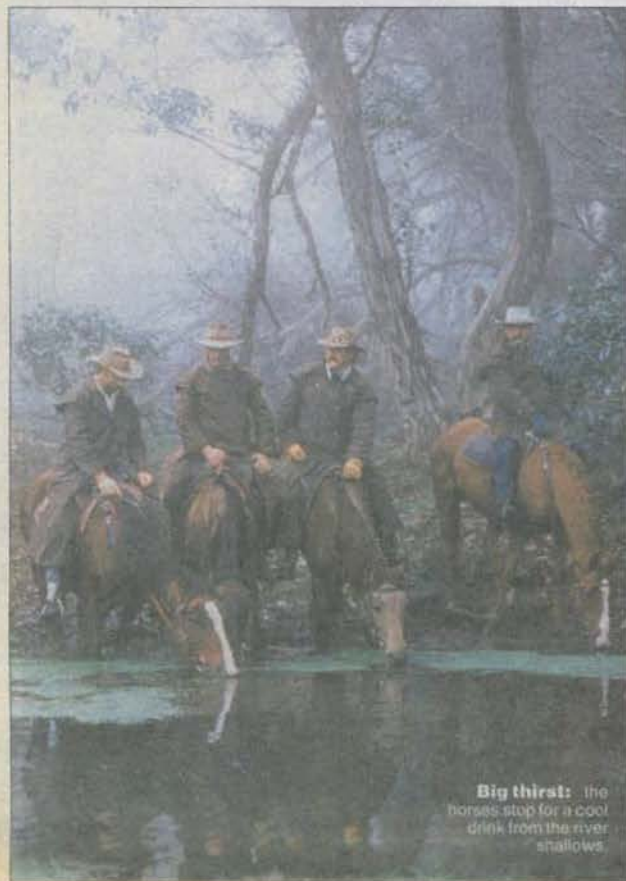


VICTORIA: Howqua Valley

# The ride of your life



**Big thirst:** the horses stop for a cool drink from the river shallows.

*Peter Hannemann follows a legend on horseback through the high country*

**R**ESPLENDENT in jodhpurs, elastic-sided boots and Drizabone, I'm with 20 others at Stockyard Creek on the banks of the Howqua River, deep in the high country beyond Mansfield.

We are quietly saddling our horses which, over the next two days, we will ride through the rugged *The Man* from Snowy River country.

Leading the way is third-generation mountain cattleman Chris Stoney and his mate, Marty Myers.

Stoney, 32, made history as four-times winner of the Great Mountain Race of Victoria.

Held at the Howqua each November, the 4km race starts with 12 riders throwing a swag over their saddles and galloping across the river, through the bush, over the hills and, for those still in the saddle, back to the river.

In allocating horses, Marty "matches our personalities".

"Do you like cantering, jumping logs, a fiery and responsive horse?" he asks. I say yes and he points to Applejack, a 16-hand grey gelding.

I mount and with little encouragement Applejack is off in a smooth canter as we follow the original bridle tracks blazed by the area's first cattlemen in 1839.

We pass wombats and lyrebirds and startle two grazing deer, the buck sporting huge antlers.

Hooves churn the water as we ride through the Howqua, and shafts of sunlight spear the forest.

About three hours later we round a bend and come upon a most welcome sight: Angie the cook has lunch set out and the billy is boiling.

But before we don the nosebag we water our horses.

Applejack takes deep draughts of the cool, clear river. I hitch him to a tree and loosen his girth straps so he can browse the carpet of blue, red,

yellow and purple wildflowers, then I jump into the Howqua, letting the fast-flowing water wash over and soothe muscles I haven't used for years.

After feasting on tacos, hamburgers, chicken and salad, washed down with hot billy tea, we canter home along narrow, twisting trails, jumping fallen logs and racing each other through clearings as the horses smell home. We cross the river at least 20 times.

Back at Stockyard Creek base we unsaddle and feed our horses.

Marty then welcomes us to the roaring fire with his favorite line from *The Man*:

*A mate can be hard to find in the mountains. You're welcome at my fire anytime.*

The night is so clear we dine at a table outside: cold beer, dips and high-country wines, mountain-bred steaks and jacket potatoes, followed by apple-and-rhubarb crumble and cream.

Many horsey yarns later, some of us unroll our swags and sleep under the stars. Others choose the bunk rooms.

After a huge country breakfast we saddle up and head for an open meadow high above the river and through forest so dense the first rider is concealed from the last.

We climb past huge 3m ferns and 70m mountain ash, the horses sleek with sweat, hooves crashing.

On the steep sections we grab a handful of mane, stand tall in the stirrups and lean forward, taking the weight off the horse's back.

At the top, Marty points out rugged Mt Magdala, Mt Buller and The Bluff. Below, the Howqua slices through range upon range of blue mountains.

This was undoubtedly the most exciting ride of my life. Riding the "low country" will never be the same.



**At the top:** time for a breather in the warm sun and soft grasses.



**Last crossing:** riders and horses scent home and a feed.



## TRAVELLER'S CHECKS

**Getting there:** Stockyard Creek is near Mansfield off the Maroondah Highway.

**Activities:** Stoney's Bluff and Beyond weekend ride is \$250 plus GST after July 1. The ride is suitable for everyone, from those who have spent many hours in the saddle to those who prefer to go at a steady pace, who Chris fondly calls "The Bush Appreciation Society". There is a range of other rides available. Call Chris or Helen Stoney on 5775 2212 or e-mail stoney@mansfield.net.au

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