Saddling up to Haleakalā

THE CORSO SISTERS EYE THEIR MOUNTS APPROVINGLY. LINDA FROM Chicago has drawn the big copper gelding Waiulu; Susan swings up onto the high-stepping Arabian G.W.

Pony Express wrangler Nate Holmes cinches saddles while the sisters and six other riders survey Haleakalā's 10,000-foot summit. There's not much to see at the top this morning: chill, swirling clouds cloak the mountain. As the horses are led to the hitching rail, they part the mist like phantoms, snorts of steam puffing from their nostrils.

When it comes to horses, the Corso sisters know their stock. Reared in Texas back when tobacco-spitting cowhands rode the fence lines, the sisters make riding a part of every vacation.

"We tend to seek out a riding adventure wherever we go," Susan explains. "Last year we rode for a week over the Andes from Argentina to Chile.

"You couldn't swing a dead cat without hitting a beautiful waterfall," Linda puts in. "We've done the Cape Hatteras ride along the beach in North Carolina. That was the worst—almost non-stop trotting; an hour of trotting!"

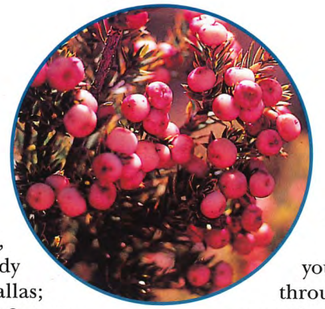
For the uninitiated—and I was one—trotting is perhaps the least favorite of equine gaits. Horses walk, trot, canter, lope and gallop. Humans can walk and lope…but we don't trot well.

There are exceptions. Today's 15-mile, 7-hour ride through Haleakalā has drawn from Wailea's Kealani Hotel newlyweds Tony and Suzy Kerwood of Toronto. He races "sulkies"—standard-breed harness pacers that can rip off a quarter mile in the time it takes to hand-roll a cigarette. Suzy trains those steeds.

The Kerwoods sit their horses well: Tony astride the spirited roan gelding Kimo; Suzy on the big bay mare Inca. They're as easy in the saddle as pudding on a plate.

Story by Tom Stevens
Photos by Ron Dahlquist

Pūkiawe



So are Randy and Lisa Beckman, young honeymooners from Philadelphia who are staying at the Maui Prince Hotel in Makena. Granted, Philly is not the Old West, but Randy was raised in Dallas; Lisa rode in Oregon three years ago. Still the trail boss takes no chances.

"Don't jam 'em up like the L.A. freeway. And please stay on the trail."

"Any beginning riders here this morning?" Nate asks, tugging his battered calf roper's hat down over one eye. I raise my hand. Nate has been riding in and out of Haleakalā Crater for 16 years. I've been here 16 minutes. I reckon I'm a greenhorn.

Nate sizes me up, nods. "You'll be on Ozzie. He's got a sensitive mouth, so go lightly on the reins. But don't worry—Ozzie's been through the crater 400 times. Just give him his head and you'll be fine."

"Nice Ozzie," I soothe, leaning forward to pat the big gelding on his cannon-size neck. "Easy, big fella!"

You forget how tall horses are until you're on one. I've hiked and backpacked through Haleakalā at least 20 times over the years, but I've never seen the crater from this perspective. Usually I'm breathing boot dust. Today, up high on horseback, I breathe drizzle.

"Bit misty here at the summit today," Nate chuckles, "but don't worry—this should burn off a thousand or two thousand feet in. If not, we'll take a vote down there whether to call it a half-day trip or keep going."

As the park brochure politely puts it, "Weather near the summit varies considerably." Riders who have left comfy hotel rooms at dawn and laid out $150 apiece for a dazzling crater experience may not want to spend all day cocooned in sleet.

That said, and hold harmless agreements signed, we clop forward. The horses know the way. They pick their feet up cleanly, step carefully, push off powerfully. The cinder trail crunches beneath their hooves; loose rocks chunk and clack. Soon the nine-horse line reaches the trailhead.

Haleakalā basin, as viewed from the rim at White Rock, Haleakalā National Park.

Down Sliding Sands we go, away from trucks and cars and buses into the cool, gently swirling cauldron of vapor that makes the crater rim surreal. Gusts of mist from Koolau Gap stream past, smelling faintly of the sea. Clouds steam up like ghosts from the black cinder fields and drift skyward against the cliffs. Dewdrops form on my eyelashes and Ozzie's mane. We're in this together.

The trail loops out like a lariat, leading us down past exotic silversword plants, around sharp switchbacks, across ancient lava flows as twisty as frozen ropes. Vast cinder fields fan off below us into the mist, some red, some gray, others pocked with half-ton "lava bombs" that once shot hundreds of feet into fiery air before thudding back to earth.

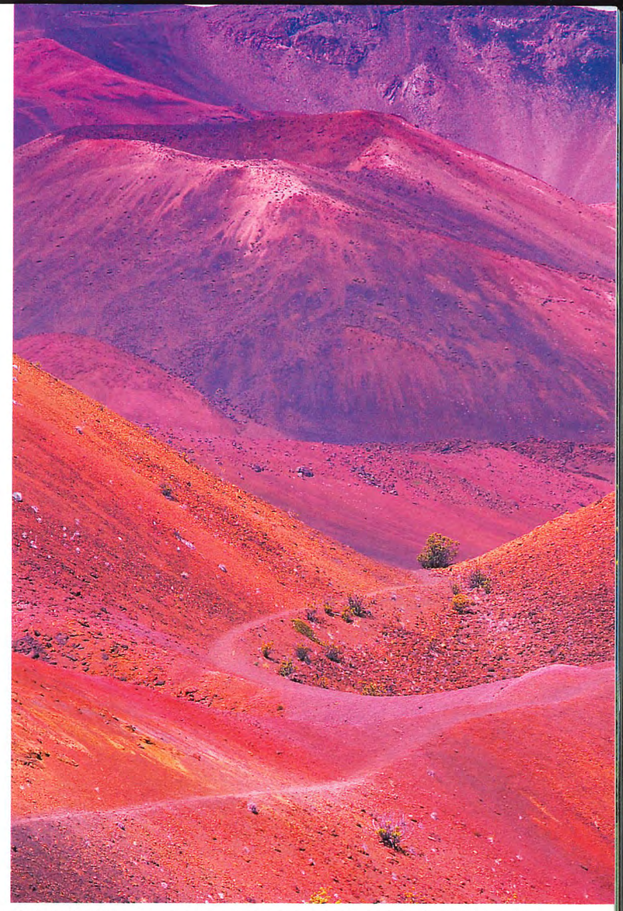
At intervals the clouds part like sails or theater curtains, revealing the vast sunlit bowl of the crater. It's 10 miles long, three miles across, 3,000 feet deep and "big enough to hold Manhattan Island," as Nate puts it. As ragged patches of blue sky race overhead, the crater lights up like a stained glass window—the cinder cones carmine, gold and brown, the distant rain forest at Paliku fading from deep emerald into the lighter greens of the ranger's pastures.

Then, as quickly as they opened, the clouds fold us again into their moist embrace. This is classic crater weather—startling contrasts, brilliance and shadow, clarity and fog, peel-off-the-jackets and put-'em-on-again. All day drizzle can be miserable; all day sun too intense. This is perfect.

At length the crater works its magic, and the "half-day" vote is forgotten. We all want to press on. At the bottom of Sliding Sands, we reach a cinder plain as broad and flat as a black sand beach. The horses pick up the pace and we trot jauntily past John Wayne buttes and mesas to our lunch stop at Kapalaoa Cabin.

Built by Civilian Conservation Corps workers in the 1930s, Kapalaoa is one of three solid, serviceable rental cabins on the crater floor. Each is equipped with kitchen gear, a red-hot cast iron cook stove, a dozen bunk beds and a big plank table for games, meals and day's end tall tales. A water tank, outdoor picnic area and hitching rails complete the tableau.

The horses ride us up to the hitching rails and stand patiently while we dismount. Nate ties them up.



Down Sliding Sands trail through brilliant, painted cinder cones.

"My knees are dead!" Linda Corso laughs. She and her sister tramp stiffly around the cabin lawn until feeling returns to their legs. The young honeymooners vault off their horses like gymnasts, seemingly none the worse for wear. My photographer and I stump along after the Corsos, reeling and staggering like peg-leg sailors. It will be good to recline for a while.

Nate serves lunch with the charm and alacrity of a headwaiter, regaling us with 20 years of Maui cowboy lore. He even shows us his hand-made portable ferrier's kit, in case one of the horses throws a shoe mid-crater. An hour-long blast of sunshine and blue sky perfects our lunch break.

As we eat, a lonesome nene goose wanders up to moan softly for handouts ("Don't do it," Nate advises), and a covey of plump chukars scurry through the brush at our backs. In the distance, the pyramid-shaped mountain "Cloudmaker" radiates reds, greens and golds as the sun wheels over it. All too soon, the meal ends and we have to head back out.

On our return ride, Nate takes us on a three-mile loop through the cone-studded "middle" of the crater,

a region as silent and mesmerizing as the moon. We traverse the flanks of cinder cones hundreds of feet tall, passing the dazzling spray of color at "Pele's Paint Pot" and the dark eerie chasm called "Bottomless Pit."

"Woman and her child lost their way in a storm in there one time," Nate tell us. "Had to climb down into the pit for shelter. Luckily, they were rescued after a day and a half."

Passing a circular rock formation a quarter mile further up the trail, the trail boss explains: "This is where Madame Pele (Hawaii's storied volcano goddess) kept her pigs." In that vale of ghosts and mists, there seems no reason to doubt him.

At length we link up with the Sliding Sands trail and start our long ascent back to the crater rim. As the horses climb, clouds sweep in around us once again, erasing the terrain we've just crossed as if it had never existed. Where magical appearances and disappearances are concerned, Brigadoon has nothing on this place.

Finally we crest the last switchback and ride to the visitor center parking lot, each of us having fallen silent before the mystery and immensity of the crater. We dismount stiffly—no vaulting this time—and try to determine if we can still walk.

"I'm glad we didn't get faint-hearted and turn back," Linda Corso says. "It was like nothing I've ever seen before."

"As soon as the blood flows back into my legs, I'll be ready to go again," laughs Susan, bending over to massage her calves.

As Nate walks the mounts up the ramp and into the big yellow Pony Express truck, I watch our little band disperse across the parking lot.

This morning we were a journalist, a photographer, a foot doctor, a court reporter, a public relations gal, a human potential counselor, a sulky racer and a racehorse trainer. Now we're all Haleakalā trail riders. It's been an adventure.

We'll all go back home, talk it up, show the snapshots. But for wrangler Nate Holmes, Ozzie and the other Pony Express horses, it's just another day at work. Tomorrow they'll saddle up and do it all over again.

Hiking the ridge between Pāliku cabin and Kīpahulu valley, Haleakalā National Park.

Silversword in full bloom.