

# Saddle Up for Success

T.J. Jackson

**W**hat do you get when you combine Outward Bound, gourmet meals and horseback rides through Big Basin State Park? Western Explorations, that's what!

Western Explorations and Big Basin Stables opened last June to offer guided horseback tours through Big Basin two years after partners Gay and Pat Williams and Bill Graves purchased 30 acres on Highway 236, a quarter mile from the entrance to Big Basin. From May to October, Wednesday through Sunday, they offer day and overnight trips as well as wilderness seminars for business management teams. They plan to be there at least through 1997.

"We signed a 10-year contract with the park," says Gay Williams. "It's the first time the park has had an equestrian center. We put the proposal to them and began negotiations with the state two years ago.

"The park has been extremely cooperative," she adds. "The rangers have been great, I can't say enough about them."

The park rangers have filled the guides in on the natural history of the park, which contains large stands of virgin redwoods. While most of the area around Big Basin and the Santa Cruz Mountains was logged during the late 1800s, the trees in Big Basin were saved when a group

of far-sighted conservationists, the Sempervirens, fought to protect them. Their efforts led to the establishment of the California Redwood Park, the first state park in California. The original park included 3,800 acres and was eventually expanded to its present size of 12,000 acres and renamed Big Basin State Park. Along with more than 40 miles of hiking and equestrian trails, the park includes campgrounds and picnic sites.

Western Explorations leads two 3-hour guided rides through the park five days a week. The morning group leaves at 9am, while the afternoon group departs at 1pm. The cost is \$30 per person, reservations are required, and previous riding experience is not necessary.

**"W**e've taken out a lot of people who have never been on a horse before," says Williams. "With a little instruction in the ring and our guides watching out for the riders, just about anyone can do it."

Williams encourages customers to show up at the stables a little early, so she and the guides can match horses with customers. At least two guides accompany each group and the pace is determined by the ability of the riders.

"We're extremely safety con-

scious," says Williams. "We inspect all our tack thoroughly once a week," adds Della Stevens, one of the guides. "To date, our safety record is unblemished."

"Our day rides are more of a public service to the park," Williams explained. "We also conduct overnight camping trips. Three wilderness campsites (in Big Basin) have been set aside for our exclusive use."

The overnight camping trips include gourmet meals and beverages, all the camping equipment, horses and tack, and a guide. All the customer has to do is show up and sit on the horse.

"The food is great," says Judy Thorberg, another guide. "We have 18 different items on the menu."

"We're proud of our menus," adds Williams, who prepares all the food in a specially converted chuckwagon that can be hauled into camp or left at the stables as a base kitchen.

A minimum of eight people is required, and the group can comprise either friends or corporate colleagues. Western Explorations also conducts wilderness seminars for management professionals on horseback. The Williamses, by profession, are management consultants with 18 years' experience conducting seminars. They are still operating their consulting practice, in addition to working at Western Explorations



Guided horseback ride through Big Basin State Park

and Big Basin Stables.

"There are a lot of wilderness training programs around," says Williams. "But we're the first people to offer it on horseback."

**P**atrick Williams has 20 years' experience breeding and training trail horses, and Graves used to own and operate a pack station in the Sierras. In 1981 they started leading a few of their professional colleagues on an expedition along the Pacific Crest Trail, from Mexico to Canada.

"We found we naturally started seminarizing around the campfire at night," says Williams. "Everything has a different meaning out in the wilderness. You get a clear picture of what you want to do with your life."

To ensure that the clients make

the experience transferable back into the workplace, Western Explorations has a follow-up program.

"We end each three- to four-day seminar with commitment to action plans," says Williams. "Then we check back three to four weeks later to see if they've lived up to their commitment deadlines."

The trips are a sort of "outward bound" on horseback, and groups learn to cooperate together as a team. They also get an opportunity to get away from the office and the distractions of phones, TVs and radios. The outdoor environment gives people an opportunity to relax and explore themselves and, at best, bring a fresh perspective into the workplace.

For more information, call Western Explorations, 438-4226.