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Country-Wide National | Farm Community

On for the bucket list

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Vast plains, steep shingle screes, snow-encrusted tussock bushes and majestic mountain peaks - welcome to Lawrie O'Carroll's office.

The man with the firm handshake and a twinkle in his eye has turned a love of horses and a passion for the dramatic South Island high country into a successful trekking business, run alongside his farming operation at Hawarden in North Canterbury.

Lawrie and his wife, Jenny, make a formidable team. In the past 19 years they have introduced thousands to the magic of the high country, as well as farming at Waitohi Downs, a 932ha hill-country property.

Alpine Horse Safaris offers a range of trips, from two hours to 10-day adventures. The longest trek, a 12-day trip to Lake Tekapo, is 400km and reaches the dizzying height of 2133m. As far as they know, it is the longest commercial trek in New Zealand and the only one where packhorses carry all the gear and tucker boxes - no cushy equipment drops via vehicle with this outfit.

The trekking business is based at Waitohi Downs, the property Lawrie bought off his father John in 1981. O'Carrolls have owned the place since 1916, but John had to go to auction to buy it after the war, having missed out on ballot farms.

Lawrie never contemplated doing anything else and believes the pull of the high country is just something that's in your blood. "I've always loved mustering, dogs, horses."

Leaving school at the end of fifth form, he worked at home then spent 16 years working on a long list of high-country stations, many of which he treks over today. "Even though a lot of the owners and managers have changed they still know you've been there."

He and Jenny met on a blind date at the Hanmer Pub and although Jenny was originally a city girl from Christchurch she, too, grew up with ponies around - though it was more about showing than mustering. It is clear she would not be anywhere else either. "I think it's a love of the land, love of the horses, love of looking after people," she says.

Despite their father's insistence there would be no deer on Waitohi Downs, Lawrie and two of his brothers started out in 1977 by deer fencing dad's 12ha ram paddock. They later fenced off a further 120ha deer block, still used on the property today.

"To start deer farming we used to hire a helicopter. I'd jump out of the helicopter and bulldog fawns and Jenny would rear them."

They had certain properties they were allowed to catch deer on and capturing one hind would pay for the cost of the helicopter. Deer trading built up the herd and when they had enough money, the brothers went into partnership in a 65ha deer farm at Oxford. "Deer have been pretty good to us," Lawrie acknowledges.

They also built the first deer selling arena in the South Island and held auctions there. At the end of the partnership, Lawrie was able to buy Waitohi Downs.

Today the property is home to 2000 Corriedale sheep, 50 cows and 80 horses. There are no deer at the moment, but they would normally run about 400 hinds.

"The country was all coming away in scrub and matagouri so I got rid of them to spray it all. We will burn and seed and fertilise it and get back into deer."

The O'Carrolls organise their busy lives so they can do both trekking and farming. They don't employ any workers on the farm, but usually have someone helping with the horses.

"It does take a lot of planning; you can't leave home on a horse ride when there are still ewes to be shifted," Lawrie says.

This is where his father plays a huge role. He recently celebrated his 90th birthday, but John still rides a horse and has dogs.

Lawrie says: "He's really helpful to me; if the water stopped he'd know what to do. He feeds the dogs, he knows which paddocks are shut up for hay, he can shift stock. He's very important to allowing us to do both (trekking and farming)."

Aside from helping on the farm and taking the shorter treks, Jenny does all the accounts, bookings and cooking for trekkers. She brushes off the enormity of the task, but Lawrie is quick to point out otherwise. "All the cake, pies, and slices - she's baking for probably a good 10 days, day and night, before a long ride."

Meals are carefully planned according to the huts and the facilities available. "When we have only a fire we try to have something easy, a one-pot meal," Jenny says. At other places, they cook delicious roasts with the full works.

Jenny has collected recipes over the years, some from neighbours, some made up and adapted to suit the bulk requirements of catering for such large groups. She makes huge batches in giant trays, then freezes them.

The trekking "season" lasts from mid-October through to mid-May and long rides take up about 120 days of the year. "The shorter rides Jenny or whoever is working for us will take, but the long rides where there are major rivers to cross, I'm on," Lawrie says.

He hasn't worked out the exact figures, but thinks there is about a 60/40% split in income between trekking and farming - with trekking accounting for the larger percentage.

Commercial trekking began 19 years ago after someone asked to be taken on a ride through to the St James horse sale. "I don't own a motorbike and never will - I still do all my mustering on horseback ... we had the horses and a lot of the gear."

Lawrie has witnessed many changes over the years, particularly land development and more fencing. "There's been tenure review and



a few places have changed hands from original stations to DOC."

They have concessions to ride over DOC land throughout the south and he has also seen a shift towards diversification, with tourism and trophy hunting becoming more widespread. "It's something the high-country places can step into quite easily because it's all already there."

It is not surprising to hear they get a lot of repeat business - one woman on our trek is on her eighth trip.

Lawrie and Jenny are incredibly grateful to all the landowners: "It is a privilege to be able to ride through people's properties and show other New Zealanders the magnificent high country."

Like most of the other first-timers on the trip, I had no idea what to expect. The brochure states: "You're going to be in the high country on these rides - so pack accordingly. There aren't going to be any showers, electricity or flush toilets. Also the weather can be unpredictable in the mountains so on a fine day take a coat, on a wet day please yourself!"

Adds Lawrie on the second morning: "This isn't a holiday, this is an adventure. It's an experience." And he isn't kidding. Scrambling up bony peaks with loose metal under foot and inching your way down the other side leading your horse, riding through snow, bathing in freezing cold rivers, sleeping in tiny back-country musterer's huts on saddle blankets and cooking on an open fire, I can describe it only as an unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The spectacular countryside ranges from broken rugged mountains which look like someone has gouged huge hunks from the sides, to flat, vast alpine plains, shadowed by fast-moving clouds. Freshly blade-shorn Merino sheep dart among the tussock and the occasional cow with calf at foot is spotted in the distance.

The beauty of the high country needs to be seen to be believed and Lawrie reckons this is the main reason people trek with him. "They tell us they want to see the South Island high country." He estimates 80% of their clients are Kiwis; tourists are more likely to do the shorter two or three-day trips.

A trek with the O'Carrolls is like living inside a postcard, or one of those glossy scenic photography books.

Your horse becomes your best buddy and the other riders your new family. Of the team of 13 riders, only two were under 40 and most were over 60. Three of the men were over 70 - two had had double hip replacements. Several were cancer survivors, and one woman had not ridden a horse for more than 40 years. These people were inspirational and deserve a medal. They prove that age and ability are not barriers ... it's all about attitude.

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