

A guide to riding the Kidman Trail with backup support

by Pam Brookman

Riding all or parts of the Kidman Trail is a fantastic experience, as you get to ride along quiet back roads, across private property and on forest tracks with spectacular views that normally you wouldn't see. As with most things though, it is essential to do some planning so the trip runs smoothly. The first step is to buy two sets of the Kidman Trail maps from Horse SA (one for you and one for your back-up crew) and also check out the Kidman Trail website for any updates. Maps can be bought online and all the information about the Kidman Trail is on www.kidmantrail.org.au Do not just rely on the markers along the trail as on occasions they have been removed by persons unknown!

Next study the maps carefully; noting distances between trailheads and also which map the trail head is on. For example the Nairne trailhead is on the Echunga/Nairne map and not on the Nairne/Mt Crawford map. Distance from Ram's Head to Mt Crawford trailhead is about 40km, where as Echunga to Macclesfield trail head distance is about 19km.

If you haven't done any full day rides before, gather together the others riding with you, work out a 25 km or more loop somewhere with some hills, a water crossing and where you are likely to come in contact with some traffic, take a packed lunch and ride it, noting the time it takes at the pace the group wants to travel, the time it takes for everyone to saddle and unsaddle, plus the time you take for a comfortable lunchbreak. 25kms will give you a good idea if your gear makes your horse sore, if you can cope with the number of hours in the saddle, if the horses you are all planning to take get on OK and if the group dynamics will make for a happy group of riders on a longer trip. This pre-ride should give you a good basis to assess the ability of your group to undertake a longer ride and you can plan according to the group's ability.

If you haven't camped overnight with your horse before, having a trial run will be invaluable, so book one of the trail heads and see how you and your horse cope. At all trailheads there are at least 4 yards that are approximately 4m x 4m. However there is not a campsite established at Stockwell yet, so most people contact the pub and get permission to camp in their back yard. If you do this, you will have to provide your own yards, either portable or electric, so make sure your horse is OK with this type of confinement before setting out from home. Some trail heads need to be booked and others you need a permit from council, so organise this well in advance. Check the Kidman Trail website for those details. There are a group of landholders who are happy to have small groups or Kidman Trail horse trekkers stay at their place for a night or two. Contact Horse SA for details if you wish to make use of some of these places. Generally you will have to provide your own yards and also a porta-potti, but a secure paddock to put your horse yards up in and horse water is provided.

As there are generally only 4 yards at each trail head, limiting the size of the group to four horses is a good idea. Most trailheads have room to erect two more horse yards so a group of six is OK, but I would not advise a bigger group. Always check when booking trail heads if it is possible to erect two extra yards as different conditions apply for each facility. All yards must be left clean of manure and excess feed so make sure you take a quite a few bags to put the manure in to remove it from the site to where you can dispose of it in an environmentally sound manner.

Your backup crew is a very important part of your trip. A good backup crew is worth their weight in gold if you have been caught out in a severe rainstorm. To arrive at camp and find your yards ready to just put the horse in and a hot Irish coffee waiting for you on the mud guard of the float totally changes your experience of the day. It is obvious then, that your backup crew must have a copy of

the maps so they can find you and have an estimated time of your arrival so they can get there well before you do. You will also have to work out with them at the start of each day's ride, what happens if either of you have a problem meeting those arrangements. Remember, there are quite a few dead spots along the trail for mobile phone coverage.

You will need to provide all your own horse feed. For a horse, walking and a little trotting 20 -40 kms a day does not use much more energy than just if it is in the paddock at home, so do not feed them up with high energy feed. Generally just feed what you do at home and maybe add a kg or two of concentrated feed a few days into the trip. I work on 1/3 -1/2 bale of good quality meadow hay a day (depends on the horse size) and 1-2 kg of concentrate feed introduced slowly from day 3 onwards. Don't fall into the trap of thinking your horse is going to do a lot of exercise, therefore feed him up before you go. If you do, he/she will do a lot of exercise on day 1 and 2, mostly up and down on the spot or sideways, or backwards or forwards when you don't want him/her to!

When long distance trail riding, it is much better to get away as early as you can in the morning and get to camp early, than the other way around. This gives both you and the your horse time to relax, eat and sleep ready for the next day, plus if you do run into a problem you have more daylight to deal with it and get to camp than if you left late. As a general rule I try to get up when the magpies start signing and hope to leave by 9.00am,

Try to take as little gear as possible, but there are some essentials when riding and when in camp. When riding, pommel saddle bags with your lunch and snacks, ½-1L of water, sunscreen, emergency first aid kit, mobile phone with back up crew's numbers and vet's numbers, camera and most importantly your maps in them, plus your wet weather gear and an easy boot tied on the back. It is a good idea to have at least one canvas bucket with you in the group to get water from places you may not be able to get your horse down to. I do not recommend carrying your lunch on your back as it can become quite tiring on your shoulders and if you do fall off, any hard items in your back pack could be a hazard.

Essential items for your horse in camp is, a big bucket for water, a small bucket to fill the big bucket and another big bucket to put the feed in, the feed, a rug, a pooper scooper to collect the manure and a bag to put it in. I do not rug my horses at home, but unless it is quite warm I will rug my horse in the yard as it is harder for them to keep warm in a confined area. I do not wash my horses down when they get to camp, although I may sponge a bit of sweat off, but I do give them a thorough brush down which is good for them and allows me to check for any sore spots or rubs.

Essential items for yourself are a great back up crew, a chair, a comfortable warm swag, your favourite beverage, plus a change of clothes and some money to go to the local pub for dinner.

Each of the trail heads can accommodate four cars and floats easily and six with careful parking. Some can accommodate a lot more. Most riders and crew camp in their floats, or just put up a small tent to sleep in but use their floats for storage, cooking and sheltering out of any bad weather.

Although the Kidman Trail is available all year, the forest sections are closed on fire ban days. The best time to ride the trail is autumn or spring. You will probably get calmer weather in autumn, but there is very little feed or water available along the trail itself. Spring has more grass and water along the trail, but it is likely the weather will change a lot quicker and you have a much greater chance of getting soaking wet which is not much fun. I would not plan to do the whole trail in one hit after early November to before mid March, or in the months of June, July and August, but you can choose sections of the trail during these times, match them to the weather at the time, and then experience some great riding on the Kidman Trail during those months.