

From WINE to WAVES In The Willamette Valley

Justin and Lindley Leahy are realizing a dream for themselves and their guests with a unique, three-pronged Oregon equestrian adventure.

Story and photos BY BETH RASIN

Thirteen years ago, Justin Leahy stood on the Oregon coast—overlooking the quiet, unspoiled beaches and enjoying the mild climate—and an idea began to percolate. As the son of Willie Leahy, founder of Ireland's famous Connemara Trail, riding tours were in his blood, and on that August day more than a decade ago, as he and his wife Lindley vacationed in the Northwest, he had a vision.

"I tell people that largely this has been Justin's idea and dream, and that I have been the person who has pushed him and given him the courage to go for it," said Lindley. "If he's the brains, I'm the guts."

When the vacation ended, they returned to their home in Arizona, where Lindley was raised but where the Irish tend not to thrive.

"We went back to Arizona thinking we could make Oregon home one day, but we didn't really know how," said Lindley.

Yet the seed was planted.

Fast forward to the summer of 2014, and that vision finally became a reality when the couple opened the Willamette Coast Ride at their ranch in Carlton, Ore.





Putting The Pieces Together

The Leahys knew the elements that needed to be in place for a top-notch experience for their guests, and the pieces came together one at a time: a ranch that would support their horses (they grow their own hay and wanted space for the horses to live outside), the horses themselves, and the scenic yet challenging trails and vineyards to ride across.

Most importantly, they needed access to the coast; Oregon allows horses and dogs on all its sands (call it a beach, and you stamp yourself a tourist; it's a "coast" here).

"We had this dream of being able to do a multi-day ride with experienced riders in beautiful country that you wouldn't otherwise get to," said Lindley, who was simultaneously answering my questions, preparing lunch for the trail, watching her three children, and packing up their beach condo. "It was a matter of finding a perfect spot for the ranch that was near a town that welcomed tourists. So we discovered the wine country, which was wonderful—they love tourists, and it's just burgeoning."

They had a few other concepts for their ride: They wanted to pack lunches for the trail, not meet up with a delivered lunch, so that they could access the most beautiful spots, and they wanted to ride from point to point. And perhaps most importantly, they chose to limit the size of their groups, with a maximum of around eight riders.

In this year, their second season offering rides, they booked 12 six-day tours with two to eight riders each, and next year they expect to offer 15 to 18 trips, running from May to early October.

At the beginning and end of the season they also offer three-day trips in the mountains and vineyards. But missing the ocean ride would be a terrible shame—more on that later.

The best way to see the Willamette Valley of Oregon? On a horse's back!

From Southwest To Midwest To Northwest

Often your experiences teach you as much about what you *don't* want to do as what you want to do, and this was the case for the Leahys when they left a thriving business at the Shenandoah Riding Center in Galena, Ill., where they'd landed after leaving Arizona (see sidebar). Much of their routine there had involved short trail rides—as many as 4,000 per year—for abject beginners. They offered instruction to tourists and lessons, as well as boarded horses and trained their own.

But when their lease on the riding center was up, they knew what their next enterprise would involve, and it wasn't first-time equestrians. If you sign up for the Coast Ride, you'll get a good vetting on your riding ability over the phone to ensure you're at least an intermediate rider, comfortable cantering in the open and on a variety of footings.

Riders are grouped in like company, creating an experience where no one is pushed, no one is held back, and a synergy develops among the group not only on the trail but across the dinner table as well.

The Leahys now live in a red farmhouse that was once the bunkhouse of Foothills Farm, dating back to 1915, with their three children—Osian, 12; Ryder, 5; and Catalina, 3. Add to that their dogs Henry and Hank, plus chickens and cats, and 20 horses used for the riding tour.

Justin is willing to find a quality horse in almost any packaging.

"Just like a dog, I think a mixed breed is the healthiest and soundest," he said.

Those mixes include Appendix Quarter Horses, Thoroughbred crosses (with Connemara and Standardbred), mustangs, an Appaloosa cross, an Azteca (Quarter Horse-Andalusian cross), as well as a Haflinger, Irish Sport Horse and Connemara—and each of them behave flawlessly, whether they arrived as a jumper who was too strong for his rider or as a 2-year-old unbroken mustang.

The Leahys put a high priority on safety, with



Lindley and Justin Leahy with *(from left)* Osian, 12; Catalina, 3; Ryan, 5; and Harry the dog.



The line of riders serpentines through the dunes at Bob Straub State Park.



From One Riding Holiday To Another

When Rhonda Waddington of Tucson, Ariz., planned her trip on Willie Leahy's Connemara Trail in Ireland about 15 years ago, little did she realize what she was setting in motion.

She loved the Irish horses she met so much that she imported several–as well as Leahy's son, Justin, who competed the horses for her at the Trojan-Horse Horse Trials (Ariz.), where he also met Waddington's daughter, Lindley.

Justin helped Waddington sell the Irish horses (one became one of Will Faudree's first upper-level horses) and married Lindley in 2002. The pair spent 1½ years in Ireland before Justin gave up his organic sheep farming business, and they returned to Arizona.

Before long, Justin's cousin, Tony Leahy, a vice president of the Masters of Foxhounds Association and a huntsman for the Massbach Hounds and Fox River Valley Hunt (Ill.), suggested they move to Illinois to train horses for one of the huntsmen.

Justin and Lindley were soon running the Shenandoah Riding Center, 2½ hours outside Chicago, turning it around from near closure to a thriving business–then setting off to start their own enterprise, which you can now enjoy on the Willamette Coast Ride.

helmets required and a constant awareness of each horse and rider. When we went for a gallop after lunch in a beautiful meadow one day, our Austrian guest let out a yodel of joy, and Justin, leading the group, stopped his horse immediately, checking to see if she was OK. Afterwards we would joke before each canter, knowing Eva-Maria was enjoying herself—not in distress.

The horses aren't dull but are all trained on the aids. Justin and Lindley spend the off season searching for mounts and training them, so when you want to get your horse's feet in the ocean, you can take a feel and ask him to step a few feet sideways, and he moves right over, even as the icy water splashes his hocks.

"When horses are interactive, they're less bored," said Lindley, as she checked on the progress of the tamale casserole in the oven. "And it's nicer to ride a well-trained horse."

Most of the horses jump, popping over logs on

Riders enjoy a canter up a hill on the backside of the Carlton Hill Vineyard.

the beach, in the woods, or even jumping out of a sea cave, for riders who are so inclined.

Not only will you enjoy the schooling the Leahys have instilled in the horses, but Justin enjoys sharing all kinds of horsemanship tips as you ride along or drive to the trail, from how to school a horse over a ditch, Irish-style, to a different kind of knot for tying your horse in the stable, to feeding hints, things to keep in mind when buying and trying horses, and training philosophies.

Hitting The Trail

When you show up for your first day at Foothills Farm, you can leave your hairnet at home; there are no pretensions here. But if you're not used to five hours a day in the saddle, you might want to bring padded bike shorts (and they recommend baby powder).

The ride offers time to not only enjoy your fellow riders and your horse but also to interact with the environment, as we heard about spotted owls living in the valley, saw red-tailed hawks and black-tailed deer. Blackberries grow everywhere, and we snagged the ones within reach and sampled yellow and red sweet plums right off the trees, perfect to grab from a horse's back and most plentiful on the first day's ride around Foothills Farm and to Carlton Hill Vineyard.

Justin also shoes the horses, carrying his tools for rides where a shoe can't be lost, sometimes tightening a shoe before riders mount up for a rocky forest ride. Coming from the grass of Virginia, I was amazed at the ability of the horses to handle the rocks on the forest trails—and then trot sound enough to pass an FEI inspection on the roads going down the hill.

Steep climbs and descents are the norm here, but the rewards are the solitude of vast BLM or National Forest Service land, where we never saw another person during the two days we traversed the Coastal Range mountains. Lindley packed inspired lunches for the saddle bags, and when we arrived at a meadow after a couple hours of riding, we tied the horses to trees and unpacked delicious wraps, her mother's potato salad recipe, marinated chicken, fresh fruits and chocolates.

On our second day in the woods, we climbed Mt. Gauldy, ascending from 80 to 2,222 feet and back down to 70 feet on the other side, observing



Mac Magee jumps her horse out of a sea cave.



On our trip to Carlton Hill's tasting room, we sample their pinot noir, which won two Double Gold awards at the 2012 Oregon Wine Awards.



The terrain of the Coastal Range is never dull.

If You Go

Fly into Portland, and Lindley Leahy can help arrange transportation to the ranch in Carlton, where the ride begins.

The trip is all-inclusive, with top-notch lodging and memorable meals ranging from delicious and healthy homemade lunches to an exquisite tapas restaurant with unending courses, to upscale Italian or regional fare, with guests only paying for any alcoholic drinks (exclusive of the wine tastings, which are included).

Learn more at *WillametteCoastRide.com* or contact Lindley Leahy at *lindley@willamettecoastride.com.*



The Hawk Creek Café in Neskowin welcomes Willamette Coast riders.



There's no shortage of opportunities for gallops on the shore.

enormous strands of foxglove and sampling the salmonberries as we rode. We rode along the ridge and wound our way back down the other side, stopping to taste sour clover off the forest floor (surprisingly delicious) and eventually reaching the Little Nestucca River, where we watered the horses and turned them out in a meadow for the night.

A short drive took us into the seaside town of Neskowin, beside Highway 101, and when we arrived at our condos, overlooking a majestic beach, our Austrian friend was too stunned for any more yodeling, but she did shed some tears at the sight of the wide beaches and turbulent surf, the creek at one end of the shore running into the ocean beside Proposal Rock, and the cliffs behind them.

The romance of the place wasn't lost on anyone, and as we made our way down to the water, although the beach was nearly empty, we noticed "Will You Marry Me?" written out in the sand.

After a dinner within walking distance at Hawk Creek Café, we fell asleep to the sound of the waves.

Bring On The Beach!

Loaded with seven horses, the Leahys' red Ford dually and aluminum trailer turned out of Pacific City the next morning and into the 484 acres of Bob Straub State Park, which is a spit between the ocean and Little Nestucca River, known for 50-pound Chinook salmon, and possibly the most beautiful place on earth. Huge grassy dunes divide the ocean from the river, and undulating trails through sandy woods take you from the park entrance to the dune trails and water.

We spotted a bald eagle high on the cliff near the end of our ride. Seals sunned themselves on the peninsula point, although we sometimes caught a couple swimming or climbing their way back up to shore.

The cooler temperatures by the ocean enlivened the horses, who were easily game for the gallops we did on the mud flats or on the edge of the river and ocean. They've been acclimated to the water and willingly stepped in, even into the waves, as we followed Justin's lead to the safest areas, avoiding the steep dropoffs. All in a line, we walked up to their bellies, then turned left, going in deeper. As I focused on keeping my





horse in place, I missed the wave coming up behind me, which crashed over my mustang's rump and sent him scooting—so much fun!

Although I've spent my life riding horses, I'd never had an experience anything like this, between the sights you could never tire of seeing, the sound of the hooves squeaking on the sand, the smell of the salt air, the wildlife, the horses, the fun and supportive fellow riders. We never wanted the day to end as we went from river to dunes to ocean and back again like kids running from one favorite ride to another at a fair.

The second day at the ocean included walking through the town of Neskowin, fording the creek at Proposal Rock, and more gallops and forays into the water, this time on the coast in front of our condos.

From Proposal Rock, we went seven miles down to the other end of the beach, to Proposition Rock and beyond. We saw a live crab swimming back into the ocean, toured a small sea cave, allowed some beachgoers to pet the horses, and enjoyed another sunny day between sand and surf.

I don't think anyone was ready to leave the cozy town of Neskowin that afternoon as we loaded into vehicles to return to Carlton. But how could you complain when your next stop was back to wine country?

For our final day, we toured WillaKenzie vineyards, getting an early start due to the heat forecast for later in the day. We wound our way among the grapes of the Yamhill Valley, through woods, up and down hills, and through a pond beside which longhorn cattle grazed, before ending near the tasting room, where we had lunch and sampled eight varieties of WillaKenzie's pinot noir.

On the final day, we all exchanged contact information, and after we said our goodbyes, we headed back to "the real world" and our various jobs and responsibilities.

But whether we were a farmer from Iowa, a dentist from Vienna, an elementary art teacher from San Diego, an author, life coach and motivational speaker from Michigan and South Carolina, or a graduate student from Germany, the horses—and the hospitality of Justin and Lindley—brought us all together to experience a beautiful part of the world in an unforgettable way.



The Chelan oceanside condos in Neskowin, Ore., are a beautiful place to start and end your day of riding.



There's plenty of time for simply relaxing and enjoying the amazing views that surround you on the Willamette Coast Ride. The Carlton Hill Vineyard is certified salmon-safe and LIVE (low-input viticulture and enology), or operated with minimal pesticides and fertilizers.



The Coastal Range mountain trails feature Douglas firs as well as ferns and mosses, for a rainforest-like feel.



The young grapes at Carlton Hill Vineyard enjoy an eastern exposure to the sun, unlike most vineyards in Oregon, which are south-facing. Owner David Polite believes it allows the grapes to ripen gently, preserving the delicate, complex nature of their pinot noir.



Editorial Note
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