

≈ MORGAN PEOPLE ≈

CHRIS MACLUCKIE

—5000 MILES OF HOPE—

Riding the length of the continent on a Morgan mare.

By Kim Oplotnik



What makes a beginner horseman seek out equine transportation to embark upon a 5,000-mile, 375-day journey through four countries?

Yup. You are thinking the same thing I did. Who travels 5,000 miles on horseback? Most everyone reading this article has swung their leg over a horse. There are risks. There are physical demands for the most seasoned rider, let alone a beginner.

For a year, *The Morgan Horse* followed Chris MacLuckie on his equine trek from Ontario, Canada, to San Andres Itzapa, Guatemala, via social media and an internet blog as he promoted a passion for “managing and nurturing living systems.” In particular, the motivation for Chris’s expedition was to fundraise for *Maya Pedal*, a Guatemalan NGO (non-governmental organization) that makes bicycle/pedal powered machines as an alternative for creating electrical power within impoverished communities.

Initially, *TMH* learned about Chris through that never-ending source of information, the internet, in August of 2017. We corresponded via Facebook Messenger and email throughout his travels with this cumulative feature in mind. When it came time to gather information and piece together his story, international phone calls with Chris and his blog provided the needed details. Throughout the following pages, many quotes were gathered from

those blog entries and graciously released by Chris.

Chris describes himself as a humanitarian, environmentalist, author, farmer, and animal lover. According to his website, “Animals have always been a part of my life. Riding horses, however, is relatively new.” But in 2014 while working for a competitive dog sled kennel in Alberta, Chris decided to take the nonconventional route to return to his former winter home of Guatemala. Considering alternatives to the traditional gas-powered method of transportation, Chris quickly found himself the owner of a Morab and a Morgan mare by July of 2014. The plan was in motion.

Now, before anyone starts to worry that Chris just tacked up and headed south, two years of careful preparation and conditioning were the prerequisite. Jingles, the Morab, and “Roxy” the Morgan, listed in the Canadian registry as OTR She Roxs, were chosen to be on the short list to accompany Chris. The threesome spent hours ponying and exploring traveling methods in an effort to regulate everyone’s speed and endurance. Even though Jingles was the ying to Roxy’s yang, Jingles was ultimately eliminated from the trip after it was decided that managing one horse would be easier.

The route from Canada to Guatemala was chosen to maintain a 30 to 50-mile proximity to large cities and with a preference for the less traveled, back roads. As Chris detailed on his blog, the trip

ABOVE: Individual markers of Chris's journey from Canada to Guatemala; OTR She Roxs grazing on day five.

RIGHT PAGE: Chris MacLuckie and Roxy on the first day of their 375 day expedition.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Maya Pedal promotional materials in Guatemala; Maya Pedal manufactured bike power blender; One of Chris's many saddle bags was a hand-tooled leather bag with the Maya Pedal logo; Day 252: Chris promoting Maya Pedal on his travels.

was outlined to follow a path, “from just west of the Ottawa Valley along the United States border, travel was mapped along the east side of Lake Ontario, down the west side of the Finger Lakes, into Pennsylvania, then West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas, then south across Mexico. From Mexico along the Madre Orientales, east of Mexico City, then into Oaxaca and Chiapas, south across into Guatemala.” There would be constant hills, steep mountain sides, days without shade or sun, and unplanned events; Chris’s departure for the Fall of 2017 was calculated but the exact route was flexible.

“I approached the 5,000-mile, solo horse ride as a serious expedition based upon my work with animals and years as a bicycle racer, not just a casual adventure,” Chris shared. The two years preparing were consumed with training, studying, talking to other “long riders,” buying saddles, tack, and gear, and living off of the grid in a remote forest east of Algonquin Park. Chris adapted to life on a small homestead without electricity, running water, phone, internet, and having only, literal horse power. Snow lasts until April in Canada and once it melts the bugs arrive. (The Fall departure was determined to avoid traveling with those Canadian summer bugs.) A constant test of survival prepared Chris and Roxy.

Chris’s invaluable resources for training and studying came

from the *Long Riders Guild* website (Chris accessed the site on the days he traveled by horseback to his friend’s cabin which had internet service), *The Horse Travel Handbook*, and *The Cavalry Horse and His Pack*. “One gets an idea of what is to come once one leaves the comfort of home. Some of the many things that need to be considered before leaving on a long ride are compiled in these foremost equestrian travel guides,” Chris stressed. (As described by Chris, a long ride is a technical term created by The Long Riders Guild to describe a ride more than 1,000 consecutive miles without returning home.)

Hours upon hours, turned into years that were devoted to trail riding. And Roxy excelled at the go, one of the main reasons she was chosen. Chris went into detail on his blog about Roxy. “While choosing my trip horse, it was very important for me to have a forward, easy keeper with great feet. Those were my top three qualities. I totally lucked out in getting these qualities and more with Roxy. I had studied up on the Morgan breed beforehand, and knew they were super easy keepers and had been used extensively in the past as cavalry horses, as well as presently by the Amish for buggies and riding.” Roxy could do 20 miles a day, feet had never been shod, and she was solid. She was a green broke horse but had no experience with distance riding. And in true Morgan fashion,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Roxy enjoying the view approximately 10 kilometers from Bucareli, Mexico; Guatemala from Roxy's point of view; Roxy coming up on a tunnel in West Virginia; Chris and OTR She Roxs stopping for a water break.

she had to be in front no matter the equine company.

In order to condition Roxy, Chris initially started with a pattern of riding two days on, one day off, then another two days on. He would load her with a set up of 50 pounds of saddle and gear, plus himself, to total 230 pounds to build strength. For two weeks, stamina building rides would consist of eight or more miles a day through steep up and down hills. In the two years of owning Roxy before the journey, she never got tired. "Even when I ride her hard over 20-30 miles, she just wants to run," says Chris. Chris would let Roxy pick the pace. "In the beginning, she would start out at a hard trot, canter, and gallop, and settle after about three miles, but on the way home she would go as hard as she could. If I didn't let her go, she would toss her head. She would only let up to catch her breath."

On his website, Chris went on to compare Roxy's style to that of interval training. "For those who interval train, that's how it is riding Roxy, except she wants to set the tempo. I never have to coax her. This interval style training may be unorthodox for long ride horse preparation, but if top endurance athletes do it, and Roxy wants to, that's what we did. Furthermore, before feeling secure that I could take her on the trip, I needed to see what it was like once she settled down. I needed to feel what it was like to ride her when she's tired, when she's not yanking on the bit, and how she would react to fatigue." Every two sessions Chris and Roxy would go slightly further to try to get her to slow without the use of reins but rather through the build-up of the lactic acid in her legs.

In addition to the physical aspects of training, Chris spent



ALL IN A DAY

By Chris MacLuckie

Chris's routine during the day was crucial for longevity. The following is an abbreviated listing found on his blog of a day's activities.

1. Water, hay/grass and feed in the morning for 1.5/2 hours before leaving.
2. Leave early.
3. During the day, walk beside horse, ride horse, switch back and forth throughout the day.
4. Where there is water, you always give an opportunity for horse to drink. At any store/resting spot, ask for water.
5. If there is grass on the side of the road, get off and let horse graze while you walk.
6. Up and down steep hill, walk beside the horse, EVERY TIME.
7. Don't waste time online chatting or telling everyone where you are. Focus on the road, you aren't a live feed for your followers. You are doing something dangerous that requires all of your attention.
8. Start looking for a place to stay around noon, if you don't have a place lined up yet.
9. Eat a big meal before getting to your destination so you don't get hungry while settling in with your new hosts in an unfamiliar place.
10. After settling in, take a nap if possible while horse is eating and drinking water. Save the grain for an hour after arrival.
11. Review horse, give more food, and feed. Then enjoy your hosts company and generosity.

Remember, these are The Rules:

1. Your horse first.
2. Then you.
3. Then your host and the parties.
4. Social media time last.

I am my horse's caretaker, guide, and custodian. Without me in good health, energy and order, I can't give the best attention or make the best decisions regarding her perpetual need for the best care. ■

countless hours researching quality tack that would be comfortable, durable, and light. The clothing choices needed the same qualities with special consideration for below freezing nighttime temperatures during the first six months. Felt was packed for warmth because it is useful when wet, but it was abandoned in the Texas heat. As was the helmet traded out for a straw hat due to rising temperatures.

Route logistics and legalities were at the forefront. "Crossing borders is a negative experience for many, including famed long rider Felipe Leite," Chris says. Chris researched the procedures and paperwork needed to cross nations in a safe and timely manner. He cultivated relationships with border vets and customs agents. Everything was in preparation for Chris's expedition goals: to have a safe, healthy journey for him and Roxy, time to gather research material for future books, cultivation of contacts for future projects and friendships, a support system and re-discovered health for my middle age, and an exercise in dynamic and intentional minimalism.

On September 4th, 2017 Chris MacLuckie and OTR She Roxs embarked on their 5,000 miles of hope.

Chris's plan for getting down the road was as follows; travel two to four days, then take one to two days off. Repeat this cycle, but at every six-week mark take five to ten days off to rest. The daily distance goals were 12 to 30 miles. "We averaged around 18 miles per day ridden and 11 miles per day when including all our rest days. We rode 20 days a month. Our shortest day was three miles and our longest was 34 miles."

Chris and Roxy traveled their first 1,000 miles in a little over 90 days. "The first month I took easy on purpose, but then we kicked it up a notch. We ended up averaging 349 miles per month over the yearlong journey," said Chris. Chris developed a walk and ride strategy that kept Roxy fresh while still pounding out very high mileage.

But all the walking on varied surfaces and the constant changes in footing from pavement, to grass, snow, dirt, gravel, and mud required proactive hoof care and protection. The number one, horse issue that Chris encountered along his travels was overrun hooves, either shod or barefoot. "It was obvious wherever I went that most horse owners were not shoeing their horses every six to eight weeks." Before the trip, Roxy was ridden barefoot in all conditions. The increased mileage of a long ride called for some kind of safeguard. Wanting to avoid relying on farriers and not being able to afford the weight of farrier tools, Chris made the decision to use hoof boots. Over the 4,000 miles ridden, Roxy went through seven full sets of EasyCare Original hoof boots. Chris preferred the original version for long distance walking. Chris trims Roxy's feet himself on a 15-25-day cycle usually making only small adjustments. The natural trimming combined with hoof boots was "the best of both worlds, barefoot and protection when needed."

Throughout the trip, walking and hand grazing during the day mimicked a horse's all-day feeding habit creating less chance for colic and ulcers. This method made for a willing and able horse for the duration of the trip. "But ultimately a horse with a good digestive system is your best ally," Chris urges. Proper feeding techniques will not make up for the horse with poor digestion



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Close up of the custom Orthoflex saddle loaded with saddle bags and supplies; Roxy's Myler Combination bit and a set of EasyCare hoof boots; Eli Miller inserting panels to suspend the Orthoflex saddle's interior; The Myler Combination bit functions as a curb and a snaffle; Finished "custom" Orthoflex saddle; EasyCare hoof boots provided extra support and protection on the varied surfaces.

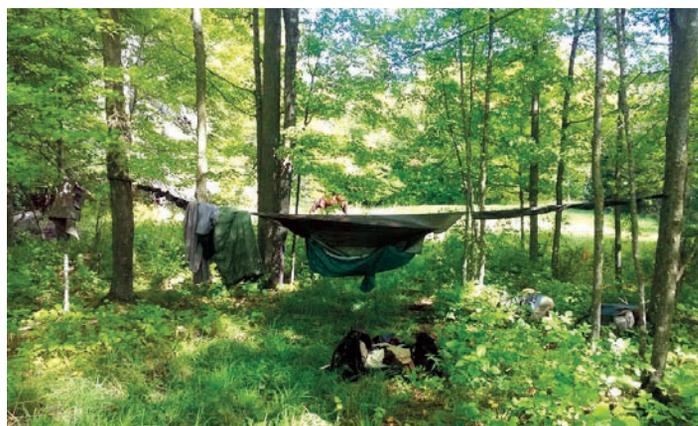
while on the road." Chris and Roxy were at the mercy of the environment and timing. Luckily, both were very adaptable to the edible offerings along the way.

The long ride feeding program is divided into two parts: feed content and feeding schedule and order. "It's important to know ahead of your ride what your feed options are going to be, so you can custom tailor a program, especially when only traveling with one horse and you don't have much room to bring feed with you." Chris summarized the variety of feed encountered along the trip in a particular blog post. "Until crossing the Mississippi, the hay was satisfactory but nothing fancy. Sweet feed was available as we got into West Virginia and the South. From Arkansas to central Texas Bermuda grass was abundant along with sweet feed. As we traveled from central to southern Texas and along the border, alfalfa was prevalent as was Bermuda. Northern and central Mexico offer primarily alfalfa and regular hay. Upon entering southern Mexico, the feed changes to corn leaves, dry or fresh, sorghum, tall grasses, and hay which is reserved for serious horse people or the wealthy.

Corn is often used for feed. Guatemala is predominantly the same except the local, naturally growing greenery changes."

When talking to Chris about the care for himself and Roxy along the way, the gratefulness in his voice is easily detected. Many people fed Roxy and Chris. He never asked. "The people I stayed with graciously gave food. On most occasions in the states, no one charged for a hay bale and they offered food to me." Roxy ate well and Chris was always prepared with his own meal. He calls himself an "easy keeper," too, preferring food that makes him feel good in the moment. The abundance of Dollar General type stores throughout northern America made it easy for Chris to find sustenance. So much that he got rid of a little cooker in Tennessee and lived off of trail mix and pork rinds. Not recommended for the waistline but definitely satisfying!

The people Chris encountered along those less traveled backroads either welcomed him or they judged everything he was doing. Overnight arrangements were attempted ahead of time and by chance, sometimes an entire week of lodging would be lined



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Mennonite family near Quetzaltenango, Guatemala; Chris and Roxy in Pennsylvania; Setting up camp in Ontario; Roxy soaking up the hospitality in Ontario.

up. If not, Chris would begin the hunt for a stopping point around noon so he could be settled by six in the evening.

Not every stop was set in stone. The element of adventure was still a part of Chris's motivation. In Pennsylvania, Morgan families opened their residences to the pair. "I stayed with a lot of Amish. They all wanted to buy Roxy! Loretta Lynn's son invited me in, but I did not realize it until after the fact. I met people in Ontario who used their Belgian horses to gather maple syrup. In West Virginia, there were eventing, carriage, and team penning folks and the gaited scene in Kentucky and Tennessee was popular. I stayed with some Rocky Mountain Horse people but started to see a change to Quarter Horses in Tennessee. Mississippi had many walking horses for traveling the plantations and once I hit Texas, the cattle horses dominated," observed Chris.

When faced without an established homestead to layover, Chris would set up his own. If resting in an open pasture, Roxy was always tied. Chris preferred a 14-hand horse because of her mobility and the simple fact that she could turn around easily. This came in handy when tied. Chris always made sure Roxy could lay down, turn around, and go around the tree she was tied to. "She could not get her legs stuck. I figured out the proper length of rope

myself from trial and error," Chris shared.

Getting from place to place, Chris's horseback travel was dependent on two things, his saddle and Roxy's head gear. After talking to Dale Myler in July of 2017, Chris made the decision to use the Myler Combination Bit. The structure of the bit acts like a curb and a snaffle at the same time, while giving the feel of being bit less, which made for easy grazing.

Finding the perfect saddle was more of a challenge. It had to follow the big, three rules for travel; durable, light, and comfortable. For the first 950 miles, Chris rode in a used Big Horn Endurance 120. "The stitch down caused so many problems that I did not even sit in the saddle. I just sort of hovered out of it. Eventually the pommel started hitting her neck as she lost fat around her withers," Chris said. "But like many Morgans, Roxy runs wide in the shoulders. Her shoulders stick out while moving. So, I needed a saddle with lots of tip flaring to avoid pinching. But if you run a saddle too loose at the front, to compensate for that big shoulder movement, then it slides forward when going downhill." A gifted, used Orthoflex solved the problems, as did a visit with Eli Miller in Kentucky, maker of Buena Vista Saddles. A round about trip through Kentucky, and many people pulling strings, connected

Chris with Eli. In no time, Eli modified the Orthoflex with a suspended ground seat and flex panels that is so comfortable Chris has nicknamed it “The Hypnotizer” because sleep is induced while riding in it.

The trip was not without obstacles and set-backs. Each time Roxy showed a sign of weakness or struggle time was taken off. At the 3,000-mile mark, soreness was detected and the necessary time to recover was taken. Knowing Roxy so well, Chris recognized the warning signs before most experienced horse people. She did suffer a bout with subclinical laminitis due to extreme heat and poor feed. “I went 420 miles trying to get around the heat,” Chris stressed. “Thankfully, it was not a serious case and we took two weeks off. I did not trim her feet during that time to make sure the hooves stabilized.” Even the worst setbacks resulted in positive outcomes. After a treacherous fall in Guatemala, Chris learned one of the culture’s best practices. To keep a cut clean, a local vet used honey to seal and protect the wound. The cut healed perfectly.

All of the trials along the way have educated Chris as he prepares for his next trip. Yes, there will be another! The fact that he is even planning a second, long ride with the same horse is not understood by the locals. In fact, Roxy is considered aged by most in the country; she turns 11 this year. But there is no other breed Chris would recommend for this type of travel. The fast, flat Morgan walk, and short pasterns efficiently cover ground. The only draw-back mentioned was the fact that Roxy did not look down at the ground and would stumble. Morgan determination made up for the stumbles!

Now a long rider himself, Chris is sharing knowledge learned through a collection of eBooks he has written and compiled in *The Essential Guide to Solo Horse Travel*. Each one addresses selected topics, *Saddling the Solo Travel Horse*, *Feeding the Road Horse*, *Hoof Care for the Barefoot Travel Horse*, and *Getting Down the Road by Horse*. Within the manuals specialized conversations are explored and detailed. As described on Chris’s Facebook page, topics

include: “saddling up for comfort; essential gear to bring; what to leave behind; planning your route; choosing your horse; preparing for your expedition; how to find spots at night; feeding your horse, navigating traffic; how to use hoof boots and go barefoot; creating a support team; the rules for efficient and safe riding; mental exercises and routines; navigation tips, conserving energy so you can ride for months straight.” The eBooks launched in mid-April and will be available in Spanish and through his website. The considerable amount of work from compiling tens of thousands of photos, to editing, to teaching part time to earn the funds to publish his works, has kept Chris busy as he prepares for his next journey.

“Inspired by our first solo horse ride, 5000 Miles of Hope, it’s now time for 5,001 La Gran Cabalgata. After successfully completing our 13-month, 5,000-mile, international horse ride, we are heading back on the road, Roxy leading the way! This time the journey is the destination, and the journey is about sharing horse health, horse experiences, and horse stories with the communities of Mexico. My hunger is for horse knowledge,” Chris announced on his Facebook page.

“5000 Miles of Hope was 250 nights of staying in new, different, unknown places. 375 days of travel by horse through four countries and four seasons. Two out of three nights I stayed in new places, most of them with hosts. Hosts came in all colors and persuasions. Without generous hosts this journey just wouldn’t have been possible. I want to thank all of you for your assistance when we needed it,” says a gracious Chris.

Chris’s next long ride begins this Spring in the Guatemalan Highlands followed by a year-long tour through horse-loving Mexico. He will be riding for the purpose of raising funds for the Mexican Horse Therapy Group, “Grupo Ecuestre” <https://5000milesofhope.org/5001grupoeuestre/>. To keep up to date with Chris MacLuckie and



Chris on Roxy in Queretaro, Mexico; Chris’s next long ride will take him throughout Mexico.

OTR She Roxs on their next long ride, follow their 5000 Miles of Hope Facebook page and website, 5000milesofhope.org. The next adventure could be yours! ■