

The Pyrenees – Lakes – Horse ride

Travelling through the French Pyrenees



At the end of July, I'm setting off with a friend and my mum for France – the Pyrenees, to be precise. I've often seen them from the aeroplane, and now I'm looking forward to exploring these mighty mountains on horseback along the Pyrenees Lakes Trail.

The first hurdle this time is the journey itself: no sooner have we arrived at the airport than we learn that our flight to Toulouse is three hours late. We've barely checked in when we receive the news that the flight has been cancelled – the plane is stuck in a storm – and the next flight to Toulouse isn't until Thursday!

The staff at the counter are very helpful and, luckily, we're able to rebook all our flights and the hire car to Montpellier. We spend the rest of the day at the airport, practising the art of waiting. We finally arrive in Montpellier at 9 pm. Now we head along the coast towards Spain and, just before the border, up into the mountains. By now it's pitch black; the stars are twinkling above us and at one point a deer crosses our path. Otherwise, it's very quiet at night and, after many bends in the road, we finally arrive at the riding centre at 1 am! We're given a warm welcome here – the ladies of the house also speak German – and shown to our rooms.

After a short night's sleep, we're sitting at the breakfast table at 8 am, where we get to know our fellow riders: a Swiss woman, two Germans and a pair of 16-year-old twins from the Netherlands. A young group, and all of them experienced riders. Yesterday they'd already been on a day's ride into the mountains and are raving about the riding, the horses and the picnic. My friend and I are about to set off on our 5-day ride. I'm assigned a small, compact Appaloosa gelding. An 'old hand' and apparently a joy to ride. The horses are fitted with Western trekking saddles, thick pads and are all ridden with hackamores. We're instructed to use the reins carefully and to ride more using our weight, legs and voice. At last, everyone is ready; the rainwear and

lunch picnic are stowed away in the sturdy leather saddlebags, and we're ready to go! After a short walk, we mount up and follow our guide Matthieu across a meadow to the first lake. Soon the path leads into the forest, where we come across the first herds of cattle. The cattle watch us with interest, whilst the mighty breeding bull pays us no mind. After the climb through the forest, we're rewarded with a magnificent view of the mountains. Following another ascent, we pass a pretty little mountain lake and finally reach our picnic spot on an idyllic alpine meadow overlooking Lake Bouillouse. At midday, the horses are fitted with leather straps around their front legs and then simply left to graze. This allows them to eat without straying too far. They graze peacefully in the meadow and some even roll about. For us, there's a delicious salad, baguette, cheese and sausage, as well as yoghurt for dessert. Water is carried along in metal bottles for all guests. The salad changes daily and consists of all sorts of ingredients; even kiwis are used – creative and delicious! After the meal, we take time for a little siesta in the sun.



We continue down to the lake and along a challenging path by the shore to our lodge. The horses navigate the roots and boulders with ease; they've grown up in the mountains and are incredibly sure-footed. The horses spend the night in a large paddock, whilst we stay in shared rooms at the mountain hotel. Matthieu likes to set off early in the morning, so that we arrive at our accommodation by the afternoon, leaving us plenty of time for our own explorations or simply to relax. We play cards on the sun terrace overlooking the lake and enjoy a local beer. Dinner consists of three courses and is excellent. Full and content, we fall into bed.

The next morning, we follow the lakeshore once more to a river delta, where we come across free-roaming cows and a small herd of horses again. Many such herds live freely in the mountains, but belong to farmers and are reared for meat. The horses are correspondingly sturdy and resemble Black Forest chests. We pass another two or three lakes and descend over a pass into a picturesque river valley. The day is quite misty, but the spot is once again

is extremely idyllic. Nearby, a family is taking a break; they're on a hike with two pack donkeys. There's a donkey hire service in the area, so we'll come across the long-eared creatures and their entourage a few more times along the way. In the afternoon, we follow a narrow path along a mountain ridge, though because of the mist we can only vaguely guess how steep the drop is at the side of the path. We ride through flowering plants and shrubs and finally descend the last hill on foot. In the valley, a typical village on the edge of the forest awaits us, where we spend the night in a newly renovated 'Gîte d'Étape'.



As it is a bit chilly and misty, we are delighted with the cosy accommodation and its lounge. The food was highly praised by Matthieu, and so in the evening we enjoy an exquisite three-course meal featuring ratatouille and other delicacies. Breakfast turns into a jam tasting session with at least six different homemade varieties.

In the sunshine, we fetch the horses from the pasture and leave the idyllic village. On our way across the fields to the next village, we spot a marmot and several roe deer. Soon we're heading back up into the mountains with stunning panoramic views. Some of the paths are quite challenging, with rocks and branches, but Matthieu is very careful and gives clear instructions. At midday, we reach a mountain hut in a stunning vantage point. The sun is shining, whilst down in the valley the mist has spread out once more. We enjoy our picnic and a siesta before heading back down. We lead the horses down a steep path through the forest. Later, we reach wide forest tracks where some lovely gallops await us. Towards the end of the stage, the alpine fir forest gives way to a dense beech forest – which must be particularly beautiful in autumn. We follow a narrow path alongside a stone wall – the old pass road. Our destination is a slightly larger village, Mijanes, idyllically situated between the mountains and a river. The houses are typically built of grey stone. We spend the night in the village's only hotel, where time seems to have stood still since the 1960s. The landlady's mother, who is about 80 years old, helps out in the kitchen; unfortunately, we cannot understand her dialect – Catalan is spoken in the Pyrenees. It is clearly only a matter of time before this quaint 'village hotel' closes down...



The next day, we continue through the beautiful beech forest with its stone walls, streams and rock faces. We pass the lowest point of our riding tour at a good 900 metres above sea level, where the blackberries are already ripening, and ride higher up into the mountains again. Wide forest tracks with fantastic views over the mountains await us. In the afternoon, we reach the Col de Sansa at 1,179 metres. From here, the route leads through flowering meadows and down into the valley with a magnificent view to the village of Sansa, where we spend the night. Another sleepy mountain village with its typical grey stone houses and no fewer than two churches. The older one dates from around 1200; our hosts give us the huge church keys so we can have a look inside both. The village mayor also drops by in the evening and in the morning. In the narrow streets we also meet other residents, all a bit older; there are 11 permanent villagers in Sansa. It's about a 40-minute drive to the nearest supermarket. Another family travelling with donkeys is staying at the gîte alongside us. Matthieu explains the best routes to them. For dinner, there's a variety of local meat on the barbecue. But the vegetarians get their money's worth too.



For the final day's ride, we're given the choice of whether we'd prefer to take the standard route or the earlier one, which might be a bit of an adventure as he hasn't ridden it for a long time. We opt for the adventure! Most of the paths are easy to ride along, taking us across cattle pastures and through a picturesque village. But we also ride along a few narrow forest tracks that are quite challenging, with streams, bridges and rocks; at one point, the path has been washed away on the slope, so the horses have to step over the gap. On another occasion, we and the horses wait patiently whilst Matthieu clears the path of branches. So it's certainly a bit of an adventure, but also very beautiful! The horses master all the difficulties with the utmost composure and sure-footedness. As we ride across the pastures, a mighty stallion suddenly comes trotting towards us from a small copse. He clearly wants to protect his herd of mares. Our lead horse, a small Appaloosa mare, bravely trots towards the colossus under Matthieu's guidance, whilst we slowly move away. The presence of the two of them and Matthieu's shouts drive the stallion back to his herd.

Shortly afterwards, we enjoy our final lunchtime picnic in the mountains. We then gallop along soft, wide meadow paths. Later, we begin the descent to Lake Matemale, leading the horses for part of the way. On the way, we come across two female deer. We cross the lake via the dam in glorious sunshine. A narrow, level path then leads through the forest and across a meadow back to the riding stables.

The other horses are already waiting here for their friends. We also pay a visit to the older horses, two of whom are around 30 and retired, but still look in fine fettle. Those over 20 are still used for trail rides. Other horses are still in training. The farm buys its horses as weanlings and then lets them grow up in herds in huge paddocks. Training as trail riding horses begins at the age of 4 or 5. Particular attention is paid to their composure and sure-footedness. All the horses are a joy to handle and can be ridden in any position. What's more, they're all in absolutely perfect condition. Not a single shoe is lost along the way, and they ride with great vigour. The season in the mountains isn't all that long; from mid-October through to May, all the horses live together on endless pastures and enjoy their free life in the herd, which is why they're also extremely well-balanced.



By the way: as well as trail rides, you can also spend a holiday at the riding centre, which is ideal for families, beginners and non-riders alike. Beginners and children go on shorter rides in the surrounding area. Non-riders, like my mum, have plenty of options for day trips: there are lots of castles, historic villages, huge stalactite caves and, of course, you can go hiking or mountain biking in the stunning mountain scenery. You can swim in some of the lakes, and the larger ones also offer boat hire. Andorra and Spain aren't far away either. The little town of Puicerda in Spain is also well worth a visit.

The next morning, we drive back to Montpellier. On the way, we visit a huge castle. Very impressive! We're not at all disappointed with our weekend in Montpellier, as it's absolutely lovely! First, we explore the old town with its narrow streets and cafés, and to round things off, we head to the beach for a swim. A fitting reward for the long journey...

Jessica Kiefer, August 2019

Link to the programme: www.reiterreisen.com/cap007.htm