

Spain – Conquistadors' Ride in Extremadura

In the footsteps of the conquistadors Pizarro and

Orellana A travelogue by Sybille Röder

Extremadura – where exactly is this region? I was asked this question more than once before my riding tour – the 'Conquistadores Ride'. Relatively unknown in Germany, but highly appealing for riding holidays, Extremadura lies in south-western Spain and borders Portugal. The name Extremadura comes from 'extremos del Duero', which means 'beyond the River Duero'.

After our flight to Madrid, Mamen – our host for the next few days – picks me and my six fellow riders up. From Madrid, we drive for about three hours to our first accommodation, a former olive oil mill near Trujillo. We're delighted with this quirky country hotel. Every room is truly unique and a surprise hidden behind ancient stone walls! The horses are in a pasture with olive trees next to the hotel. We get to know each other for the first time.

We participants have also got to know each other a little by now. It's a colourful, international mix. Peter and Lesley are with us – an older but young-at-heart couple from England – and then there are five young women: Gillian from Ireland, Kate from Malta, Eve from Belgium, Lisa-Marie from Germany and yours truly.

After a refreshing shower and a quick rest, Mamen and her partner Emilio pick us up and we drive together to nearby Trujillo. The small town boasts pretty narrow alleyways and a beautiful Plaza Mayor with medieval churches and palaces. Trujillo is the birthplace of Francisco Pizarro, the conqueror of Peru, and of the explorer Francisco de Orellana, who was the first to sail down the Amazon. That's why our horse-riding tour is called the 'Conquistadors' Ride', as it starts here.

We have dinner at a restaurant on the Plaza Mayor. We struggle with the starter, main course and dessert, and the huge portions. But it tastes delicious!! Emilio gives us an overview of the upcoming tour using a map. We can't really picture it yet... we'll just have to experience it for ourselves.

The next morning, we meet our equine companions for the week. Emilio assigns me Batik (with the emphasis on the 'i'). He is a P.R.E. gelding (Pura Raza Española – pure Spanish breed). A gentle, strong grey with big, friendly eyes. I think we'll get on well and I'm looking forward to finally getting into the saddle!

After grooming and saddling up, the time has come. Mamen helps us mount. Here, they always make sure the rider mounts from a raised position to protect the horse's back. It takes a bit of getting used to at first, but it certainly makes sense. In fact, Emilio takes extremely good care of his horses. You can tell he loves them.



Then we're off! After a short while, we reach a steep descent towards the little village of Herguijuela. For the first time, we're treated to a magnificent panorama. The view stretches far across the plain below us, over fields, meadows and olive groves. After passing through the little village, we ride through a landscape known locally as 'Dehesa'. These are wooded pastures – meadows dotted with scattered trees, mostly oaks. Cattle, horses and sheep graze here and there.

We ride uphill, cross a hill, briefly enjoy the view before heading downhill again. We find ourselves in a completely rural, idyllic area with extensive oak forests and hidden valleys featuring small streams and vast flower-filled meadows. We don't come across a single soul here. We love it!



Today and over the next few days, we meet up with Mamen from time to time, who spoils us with tapas and a delicious picnic lunch. After lunch, we take a siesta under oak or olive trees before riding on to our respective destinations for the day.

We spend the first night in a lovely hotel in Aldeacentenera, then in Berzocana at the foot of the Sierra de las Villuercas – a mountain range that has been listed as a UNESCO Natural Park for several years. From there, our route climbs up to the mountain ridge and the view is simply breathtaking! We take endless photos and the horses are very well-behaved.

After that, it's downhill. We lead the horses, as the descent consists of a narrow and rather stony path. A little later, the next highlight awaits us: we pass the 'Embalse del Cancho del Fresno' reservoir. Under pine trees, we gallop along the shore of the shimmering turquoise lake, with the mountains in the background.

In Cañamero, we're back in civilisation. We ride through the little village on horseback. Here and there, the locals wave to us and the horses refresh themselves at the village well. Tonight, riders and horses are staying at a country estate just outside Cañamero.

Over the next two days of riding, we leave the mountains behind and ride through the dehesa, along old cattle tracks and green railway lines, past Logrosán and Zorita and through Conquista de la Sierra. In Herguajela, we come full circle, and you can tell the horses are looking forward to the pasture and their well-deserved rest for the evening. We are greeted by the horses that stayed behind, who welcome their companions with loud neighs.



A wonderful, varied week of riding in Extremadura draws to a close. Thanks to the comfortable saddles, we've had no aching muscles or injuries – even though we spent five to seven hours in the saddle every day. Over the course of the week, all the participants have got to know each other quite well, and it may well be that new friendships for life have been forged. An adventure like this, shared together, brings people closer, and the odd 'running gag' has started doing the rounds. For instance, Kate from Malta keeps shouting 'gorgeous!', and soon we're all saying it...

Our final dinner together awaits us at our lovely 3* hotel in Trujillo, and it's with a touch of wistfulness that we travel back to Madrid the next day with Mamen and Emilio. We'll be reliving the memories of this fantastic riding tour for a long time to come!

Information about the riding tour and booking: www.equitour.com/con008.htm