Autumn mist rides in the Vosges

Right up until the last minute, we were worried about our planned riding weekend in the Vosges (programme
“Horse riding in beautiful Alsace”), as almost all of France is back on the red COVID list. But it works out! So, in mid-October, I set off with a few friends through the Rhine Valley to the riding centre at an altitude of 1,000 metres. When we arrive, it is just getting dark and it is also very chilly. But it’s lovely to relax in the large fireplace room with its cosy sofas, a bar, billiards and table football. Before dinner, there’s an aperitif of your choice; the generous selection ranges from various liqueurs, through beer and cider, to home-distilled schnapps and excellent wines. Over dinner, we get to know our fellow riders from Germany and Switzerland. The highlights of the evening are the delicious cream of mushroom soup and the homemade chocolate mousse, as well as the fine Gewürztraminer. Afterwards, the music is turned up a notch and the atmosphere is fantastic – quite unusual in this ‘Corona year’. By midnight, we’re in bed.

The next morning we head to the stables. It’s quite a large group with a mix of riding experience. But the riding centre has a huge selection of horses, ranging from thoroughbreds to ‘Icelandic Cobs’. Never heard of them? They are the centre’s own
“Hausrasse”, a cross between an Icelandic horse and an Irish Cob, all of which are home-bred. These small but sturdy horses win us over immediately. Although we ride Arabians at home, we are delighted by these hard-working, friendly horses. Perfect for enjoying the countryside at a leisurely pace. The Arabians and Thoroughbreds lead the way, but our Cobs keep up well. The horses are extremely reliable and, at least mine, always waits patiently for my commands. Very commendable, considering they are constantly ridden in the stables with different riders! On the often narrow paths, it’s not possible to ride side by side, so we usually form a very long line. The first ride

lasts a good two hours and goes smoothly. The slightly less experienced riders initially have their own guide, but with the well-behaved horses, they manage to trot and gallop with the group in the afternoon without any trouble. Our guide Morgan has everything under control – with 12 riders in tow!
The rides take us mainly through the misty autumn forest. The atmosphere is brilliant: ferns, mosses and bright red toadstools line the path. The trees are covered in lichen and huge mushrooms. A real fairytale forest!
At lunch at the farm, we're asked if we'd like to swap horses, and so some of us do swap, more out of curiosity.

The afternoon ride, lasting around three hours, takes you to two beautiful vantage points offering unobstructed views stretching as far as the Haute Königsburg, with the Black Forest visible in the distance. On the way back, the sun comes out at first, but later a strong wind picks up, making it a relief to be in the forest – and a relief too that there are regular stretches where we can gallop. Even in October, a winter jacket, softshell trousers and warm boots are essential at these altitudes. But then you can really enjoy the magical autumn atmosphere.
In the evening, we're treated to authentic Alsatian tarte flambée for a bite to eat – first savoury, then sweet – accompanied by a fine Riesling. Full and content, we head to our rooms a little earlier than usual; all that fresh air makes us sleepy.
The next morning, the view from the window doesn't bode well: just 3 degrees above zero, topped off with heavy rain. You can't see a thing of the landscape. We linger over breakfast a bit, but it's no use. We gather the horses from the open stable and find a tie-up spot under the roof. Kitted out in full rain gear, we set off on our third ride. Morgan spontaneously changes the route, as there's no point in riding the panoramic circuit. The roughly two-hour ride turns out to be brilliant, though! We ride along numerous hidden paths through the forest, past huge, legendary boulders

and jump over a tree trunk. We eventually make our way back to the stables across country. The heavy rain has even spared us and only picks up again during the lunch break. After another chocolate mousse, we set off on the final ride with a slightly different group. This time we have three teenagers with us, who have travelled here with their parents. The youngest is given a well-behaved horse called Isi and so she completes the brisk ride with ease. The rain eases off just in time and we ride past a sprawling ski resort. Only a few fir trees stand out against the mist, and we come across a huge flock of sheep, complete with a shepherd and sheepdogs. From the fields, we turn onto a narrow, particularly beautiful forest path at the hilltop. This leads us steadily and gently downhill to a remarkable waterfall in the middle of the colourful mixed woodland. Here we meet a few hikers from France and Germany. Otherwise, we meet few people. It is probably the end of the summer season, and it is only with the first snow that the tourists return in greater numbers. Then the farm offers a riding and skiing weekend.
On the way back, there are a few more exciting stretches for galloping, a particularly spirited gallop across the meadow and once more through the woods. Once again, we turn onto a narrow footpath that takes us back to the plateau and the ski slopes. In better weather, the view from here is fantastic…
Nevertheless: ultimately, we were lucky and were able to really enjoy the mystical autumn atmosphere on the wonderful horses and thanks to our competent and friendly riding guide. Perhaps we'll come back again at a different time of year – here, high up in the rustic Vosges, every season certainly has its own special charms. Au revoir!

Jessica Kiefer
October 2020
Link to the programme: www.equitour.com/elssta.htm