

Etruscan Adventure Ride

Horse riding, feasting and... history!

On Sunday afternoon, I arrive punctually by train in Orvieto, where I am picked up by our partner, along with a fellow rider from Switzerland. Travelling by train from Switzerland is quite convenient; some trains even go all the way through to Florence. From Orvieto, it's about a 50-minute ride along a winding route through a secluded wooded area. Somewhere in the middle of it all lies our destination, a lovely little agriturismo. After an aperitif, we both have a bit of time to look around. However, it's raining and the muddy paths all disappear into the fields. Our four fellow riders are due to arrive at 7 pm. Shortly after 7, they ring. As there had been terrible thunderstorms over Florence for hours, they eventually had to land in Pisa. There they are now trying to find a taxi, but nobody really wants to take on the long journey. So they take the airport bus to Florence. By the time they finally get a taxi there, it is already past 9.00 pm. Meanwhile, the three of us are enjoying our multi-course, typically Italian dinner. Unfortunately, the television, which is on in every restaurant here, is also typically Italian. Why one needs tasteless entertainment shows to accompany a delicious dinner is a mystery even to our riding guide Duska, and as we sit alone in the restaurant, we secretly switch the thing off.

At 11 o'clock, we slowly head to bed; the others are still out and about and are already having their first adventure on a drive through the lonely darkness. They encounter only a single porcupine along the way. Finally, they ring at midnight. They are now standing in front of a house somewhere in the middle of the forest and there is no light to be seen anywhere... I go downstairs and sure enough, there's a taxi outside in the darkness. Relieved, they settle into their rooms and we go back to sleep. Instead of a rooster, we're woken here by a donkey, and at last the sun is shining again. After a light Italian breakfast of cake and cappuccino, Duska picks us up and takes us to the horses, which are already saddled and ready to go. At first, he used to let the guests help themselves, but there were often difficulties with the saddles and it took ages for everyone to be ready. We have no objection to this service at all, as it means we can take our time in the morning. Breakfast is at 8.30 am, with a pick-up service at 9.45 am – you can't complain about that.



Once the horses have been allocated and everyone is in the saddle, we're ready to go. I'm given the little white Andalusian mare Esperia, who doesn't have much trailer experience yet. What causes my horse a bit of difficulty are the other horses' long strides. Her strides are simply shorter, which is why we're mostly trotting along. As that isn't to everyone's taste, Esperia isn't usually ridden by guests. But after a short settling-in period, we get on well together. Some of the others are old hands; the smallest mare is 18 years old, but she keeps up nimbly at the front and is also the leader of the pack. Annette from Switzerland has been given a fine young Arabian gelding, a real beauty who can't get enough of galloping. We therefore enjoy plenty of long gallops. The horses are truly remarkably tough and enduring. The daily schedule involves up to 40 km a day, which is quite a fair amount.

On the first day, we ride mainly through the woods. After an unexpectedly long gallop, during which I ride comfortably behind on Esperia, we catch sight of our destination for the day, Proceno. To get there, we take our first adventurous path through dense undergrowth, taking care not to get caught on the overhanging thorns. (At first I thought they were vines...). As it has rained heavily here recently, the bushes have grown considerably since our last tour and we will have to contend with bramble-lined paths a few more times. Duska rides ahead with his machete, trying to clear the undergrowth. And yet we had expected cypress-lined avenues in Tuscany. If only the blackberries were ripe already... Instead, a little later we enjoy juicy cherries straight from the tree. Soon after, we reach the medieval town of Proceno. Below the town walls, we find two large, well-tended paddocks, neatly fenced in with wood. We're happy to leave the horses here. We ourselves are treated to a night's stay in a castle today. At the Castello di Proceno, we receive a warm welcome from the 'lady-in-waiting', who invites us on a short tour of her private chambers and up the impressive castle tower. We

are impressed by the many treasures of paintings, robes and much more, as well as by the view from the tower over the picturesque little town. And we even spot our horses in the meadow far below. After finding the hidden castle restaurant, we are personally served by the elderly hosts, and the food is simply the finest! These days, it seems the nobility live off tourism, and serfs have long since ceased to exist.

In return, however, they seem to have a rather comfortable, secure income. We enjoy breakfast in the quaint enoteca, with a view of Etruscan granaries. The whole room is dark, with typical tiny windows; everything fits together perfectly, and you feel as though you're in the Middle Ages. Over breakfast, we're treated to a brief history lesson on the Etruscans. Told by the lady of the castle and in such a fitting setting, the whole thing is suddenly far more interesting than it ever was in history lessons. We now learn that the Etruscans, who were driven out by the Romans in around the 4th century, had a highly developed culture, complete with carriages, ships, roads and cities. However, not much has survived. On the one hand, the Romans built their own structures over all the Etruscan cities; on the other, the Etruscans themselves lived mainly in wooden buildings. Only the dead were buried in tuff caves, as we shall see later. The Etruscans had a very strong belief in life after death; it was only then that real life began.



Well fed and well informed, we set off again, though initially in the rain. I curse my stupid rain chaps – they might be stylish, but what's the point of them if you climb onto a wet saddle and your bum gets soaked?! Well, luckily it stops soon enough, and besides, it's warm; the forest has a proper tropical climate and everything smells lovely. We ride along what are actually

beautiful, wide paths, which are, however, under water after the night's heavy rain. So the gallop is off the cards for now, but luckily there'll be another chance later on. After roaming through the private estate of a nephew of Mussolini, we reach the Selva del Lamone in the afternoon, a picturesque forest. Huge lava stones lie scattered everywhere here, dating back to volcanic eruptions hundreds of thousands of years ago. Lake Bolsena was also formed during this period as a result of volcanic activity. At the edge of the forest, we leave the horses in a lovely large paddock and drive to Farnese for the night. We could have stayed at an agriturismo on Lake Mezzano, but our guide felt we absolutely had to see Farnese. It is a pretty, ancient town that was once very important. Among the town's famous residents was Napoleon's brother.

Farnese boasts an imposing city wall, around which numerous swifts circle. The narrow, rather gloomy alleyways once again give us a sense of the Middle Ages. But it is probably quite pleasant to live amongst the stone houses in the height of summer. There isn't much going on here today and some of the houses are a bit run-down; we are in a rather poor part of Italy and Farnese is nowhere near as well-known as, say, Montepulciano. Our centrally located hotel doesn't have much to offer. We are pleasantly surprised, however, when the cook spoils us with a heavenly dinner. That more than makes up for the basic accommodation.

The next morning, we continue through the mysterious Selva del Lamone. We follow the infamous 'Sentiero dei Briganti' (Bandits' Path), and in this rugged forest it is easy to imagine the highwaymen's raids on passing carriages. In fact, we soon come across a supposed highwayman, but fortunately he turns out to be a friendly Buttero (the Butteri are the cowboys of the Maremma). He will accompany us today in traditional attire. His saddle is particularly impressive; they rightly call it a 'Poltrona' (armchair): a huge, thickly padded leather frame, which we gaze at with some envy. Certain similarities to a leather armchair are obvious. At the edge of the forest, an information board commemorates two particularly vicious bandits, who were quickly photographed before their hanging. The old black-and-white photograph serves as an excellent deterrent.

After the gloomy forest, the Bandits' Trail now leads through sunny olive groves and cornfields, with views of the mountains of Castro. At midday we reach the ruins of the once-important town of Castro, which was completely destroyed in the 17th century on the Pope's orders. Apparently, the Prince of Castro had little desire to collect taxes for the Pope, and this, combined with other rivalries between the noble families, greatly provoked the Pope. As the only route to Castro was a hidden, well-guarded Etruscan road, it took the papal troops three months to devise a strategy for the city's destruction. From a distant hill, they finally bombarded Castro so relentlessly that only a few remnants remain to remind us of the town. After so much history, we have truly earned our lunch break. Our buttero demonstrates his horsemanship to us, and we are all allowed to have a go sitting on the 'Poltrona'. In the afternoon, we encounter the typical cattle of the Maremma, which are mostly white and have huge, curved horns. We ride once more through the private estate of a nobleman, then enjoy long stretches of trotting and galloping again, and finally arrive at a pretty

little castle, the Castello dell'Abbadia. Here we cross the so-called Devil's Bridge, which spans the idyllic River Fiora. Anyone who is afraid of heights should close their eyes here; it really does drop a long way down, and the arched, cobbled bridge is not much more than a metre wide. However, it did not get its name because numerous riders fell off their horses here, but because in the Middle Ages people could not understand how the Etruscans had managed to build such a bridge. We now leave the horses in a huge meadow right next to the bridge. We are amazed that, after six hours of work, they still have enough energy to gallop wildly across the pasture.

We riders are actually quite glad to have a break. Tonight we'll be staying in a lovely, simple guesthouse with a pool. In the on-site restaurant, we're treated to stone-baked pizzas and tiramisu. We're even assigned our own German-speaking waiter.

The next day, we set off on a shorter ride through the archaeological park of Vulci. Vulci was once one of the largest Etruscan cities in Italy and covered an area of around 80 hectares. Today we are accompanied by a specialist guide who rides his handsome Maremmano in a matching butter-coloured outfit. When we are about 100 metres from the stables, a white goat suddenly dashes past us. It turns out to be the Maremmano's girlfriend, and she clearly never misses a tour. She accompanies us through the park for the next three hours and doesn't leave her boyfriend's side for a moment. Even when we stop at the restaurant later, the goat stands tethered next to the horse until we set off again. We are all delighted. The ride first takes us past the Etruscan Gate and along the Roman road to the ruins of the Roman temple and a huge Roman villa. We spend a good while exploring these before following the road across the river to the Etruscan burial sites. The largest and most famous is the Tomba Francois (rediscovered by a Frenchman in 1857). The wall paintings were secured by the landowner at the time and are privately owned. Using illustrated panels, our friendly guide explains the special features of the tomb to us. We are amazed that the images mainly depict scenes from Greek mythology. Back on dry land, we continue to a little natural gem: at one point, the Fiora forms a pretty little lake with a waterfall. The horses splash happily in the shallow water. As we are about to leave, I persuade my fellow riders to take a group photo, and everyone steps back into the water.

Suddenly, Biondo collapses. But fortunately, he was probably just trying to cool himself and his startled rider down a little. With the camera in hand, I capture this amusing scene too.

After tending to the horses, we have the choice of staying in the park or relaxing by the pool at the guesthouse. Without further ado, we decide on a trip to the sea, just 12 km away. Unfortunately, we can't find a taxi. Eventually, Duska drives us there and our lovely host from the guesthouse picks us up again later. The long black sandy beach is really pretty, and we all happily enjoy a huge, delicious ice cream.

After a good night's sleep, the next day we set off along a road through vast fields of stubble. We follow the course of the River Fiora, initially through pastures where we come across donkeys, yapping hunting dogs and many beautiful horses. We also pass a meadow with brood mares and newborn foals. The pretty little brown ponies are in good condition.

Duska tells us that a three-year-old can be bought here for just €500. Horses aren't worth very much in this area, which unfortunately often means they end up in less knowledgeable hands. After a few lovely gallops and a picnic in the shade of the woods, we continue towards Castro. As the water level of the Fiora is currently 1.50 m, which is too high to cross, we are forced to ride a good distance along a road. Soon afterwards we reach Castro again, riding once more along the adventurous Etruscan road. As it has rained, the narrow path, parts of which are still paved with Roman cobblestones, is quite slippery, but the horses master the difficult route wonderfully. Tuff stone walls rise up on either side and it is cool and dark on the narrow path, even though the sun is shining 'outside'. After a long, beautiful ride through meadows, fields and olive groves, we return to the Bandit's Path, where our horses are once again stabled in the large forest meadow – and we stay in Farnese.



The final day's ride takes us out of the Selva del Lamone across meadows and fields to Vitozza. Here, however, we stop for a rest at the castle ruins, below which some 200 tuff caves dating from Etruscan times can be seen. They are dark and damp, yet people still lived in them well into the 20th century. The walls are blackened by fire, and in one cave I discover a niche carved into the wall with a crucifix. Of all times, it rains during our lunch break, so we move our tables under the eaves of a church. On this final afternoon, the horse ride was to live up to its name (Etruscan Adventure Ride). From here on, anyone with military experience has a clear advantage – in our group, there is only one such participant. The descent over the slippery, narrow

and there's not much left of the Etruscan path, which has been washed out by the recent heavy rain. After the first few metres, I let everyone go ahead so that at least no one hears the quiet curses I inevitably let slip during the slippery ride with the horse. The path has been washed out so badly that it now has huge steps; in some places we let the horses go ahead on their own for a bit, or rather slide ahead. It's a shame that such historic paths can't be restored; this one is in desperate need of it! Fortunately, though, everyone makes it down safely. Now we continue along a muddy path above the little river Lente. Compared to the Etruscan Trail, this is now a piece of cake despite the puddles, uneven ground and undergrowth – until suddenly everyone stops. Apparently, the thunderstorm on the first night brought down a tree here, which is now completely blocking the narrow path. In 15 minutes of manual labour, Duska clears an alternative route across the embankment with the help of a machete and a hand saw – the adventure can continue. In one leap, we make our way up the slippery and uneven slope into the undergrowth and from there, finally, through the river back onto our actual path. It very rarely rains or storms in this area in June, but when it does, it clearly does so properly. After these adventures, a lovely stretch of route awaits us, along which lies the medieval town of Sorano. The town perches high on the rock above us and offers a magnificent view. We follow another Etruscan road up through a forest scented with Mediterranean flora and past flowering broom hedges until we reach the stables again. Here we leave the horses behind and drive to our final accommodation, a pretty, idyllic country house where monks once lived. Even today, on Sunday mornings, people go to the church next door – though this time for breakfast. The farm owner's dog is quite thin and scurries back and forth. We learn that he is a dog-wolf crossbreed, constantly on the move and a poor eater. Wolves are quite common in the area, particularly on the nearby Monte Amiata, and so it happens that they sometimes interbreed with dogs. The second farm dog, by contrast, lies fat and lazy under the table, hoping that we'll have a hand free for a stroke whilst we're having our aperitif. After today's adventurous ride, we round off the evening cosily in an excellent pizzeria, before setting off for the airport bright and early the next day. It's a shame, as we could easily have stayed another day or two at the idyllic guesthouse. My summary of the riding tour: the wild Maremma is ideal for adventurous riders who don't mind occasionally making their way through the undergrowth or riding along narrow Etruscan paths and bumpy Roman roads. The whole experience is very varied, however, as the majority of the route takes you along beautiful, wide field and forest paths where you can enjoy really long gallops. In any case, now that I'm back home, no terrain will rattle me whilst riding! Apart from the overnight stay at the castle, this ride isn't particularly luxurious, but of course you always dine like royalty, as befits a holiday in Italy. Enjoyment, adventure and history await riders on this trek. Slightly easier to ride, as there are fewer Etruscan and Roman roads along the route, is the Castles and Fortresses Trek, which leads through the area south of Siena and thus into the typical Tuscan countryside.

Jessica Kiefer, June 2011

Link to the programme: <http://www.equitour.com/etr008.htm>