

A brisk ride through the Cévennes in France

I pack my travel bag and wonder whether I'll need anything special for this challenging ride. This ride is one of the most challenging and fastest – if not THE fastest – in Europe. The very next morning, I meet up with Kirsten and Jürgen, two fellow riders, and together we head for France. We travel south through Alsace, including along the 'Autoroute du Soleil', the 'Sun Motorway'. The final few kilometres take us along country roads through a variety of villages and small towns up to Mont Lozère (approx. 1,000 metres above sea level), which is a ski resort in winter. Unfortunately, the weather isn't brilliant, so we're denied the panoramic view today. We check in and set off in search of the horses, as a large horse trailer tells us they're already there. Wrapped in blankets, they stand in the pasture, grazing peacefully.

They look athletic and in top form. At dinner around 7.30 pm, we get to know all the fellow riders, guides and helpers: Jean and Simon, who are leading this tour and show us the entire route on the map to get us started (it's going to be a long journey with plenty of uphill and downhill sections amidst wild and unspoilt nature), Clemence, the life and soul of the party, who spoils us with meals – especially at lunchtime – and always gets our luggage to the next accommodation before we arrive (important!), and the other guests: Katja and Tom, Gabi, Kirsten and Jürgen, Patricia and me. After dinner, it's off to bed to be fit for the first day's ride tomorrow.



A French breakfast of juice, coffee and tea, baguette and bread, along with jam and honey, gives us the energy we need for the ride ahead. Then we load our luggage into the car and head over to the horses. They've weathered the stormy night very well and are waiting to be ridden. Jean assigns us our horses, and then we groom them, apply talcum powder (to prevent chafing) and saddle them up. We lead the Arabian horses out in front of the accommodation and, one by one, mount them with Jean's help. The girths are checked straight away, as is the length of the stirrups. We wait until everyone

are mounted, and then we set off: the horses are definitely in good shape. They move forward at a steady pace and are sure-footed. We start by riding uphill for about 45 minutes. The start is a ski slope! We only come across the odd hiker here and there, wrapped up in bright rain jackets because of the rain. The landscape is green with scattered rocks before we come to paths leading through woods and fields. At the top of the

“Col de Finiels” (approx. 1,700 m), we even come across snowdrifts, which we ride over. A bit of a trot to start with, then we keep moving forward at a gallop – after all, that’s quicker than walking. We ride down a path and reach Lake Barandon, where Clemence is already waiting for us. The horses are tied up and looked after before we take our seats at the table under a tent with a fan heater. Unfortunately, the rain hasn’t let up, so everyone tries to dry their things a little. We appreciate the lunch right from the very first day: an aperitif and ‘canapés’ or nuts etc., then the main course – usually grilled meat, salad and dessert such as fruit or chocolate pudding – before coffee or tea is served.

Feeling about 5 kg heavier, I climb back onto OÙ vas-tu, my grey Arabian with the pretty head. He’s already competed in endurance races of up to 200 km – a real pro! The other horses are all already active in endurance riding too, and depending on their age, they compete over specific distances (this is regulated for the horses’ protection). These horses hardly ever get spooked; they stand relaxed when tied up and are easy to handle. There’s no need for much urging; moving forward is in their blood. In the afternoon, we continue at a brisk pace towards the Tarn Gorge, sometimes over narrower and steeper sections. As soon as the going becomes a gentle downhill slope, we gallop; the horses are absolutely reliable and sure-footed – it’s fascinating. We enjoy a few more views down into the valley before reaching our accommodation near Florac. The horses are taken to their quarters at a campsite, where they have three donkeys for company in the neighbouring pasture. Everyone looks after their own horse and all are fed before we can settle into our rooms and have a hot shower. One thing’s for sure: for this riding tour, you should bring at least two pairs of riding breeches; I’m very happy with my three. Our wet clothes are hung up to dry over all the radiators, and over a drink at the bar we swap stories about the first day’s adventures before tucking into a delicious dinner. Naturally, it’s always a three-course meal, with an aperitif for those who fancy one – as is typical in France. Afterwards, we collapse into bed and dream of the next gallop!

We get up and the first thing we do is look out of the window – thank goodness it’s dry! We have breakfast in high spirits and then head off to the horses. We saddle up and set off on foot, leading the horses for the first stretch to Florac. This town is the starting point of a 40 km-long, deeply carved gorge system. The rivers Tarn and Tarnon converge here and flow through the gorge. Florac is also the starting point for the famous endurance race, the ‘160 km from Florac’, which has previously served as the route for the European Championships. We’ll be riding some sections of the route too; in the race, however, this distance must be covered in a single day – an absolute challenge and only suitable for riders in peak physical condition. In Florac, we mount up and ride through the town; people wave to us and are delighted to see us. We reach a path running parallel to the river, and our first extended gallop follows: several kilometres through idyllic and unspoilt countryside. We pass the little village of Barre de Cévennes and then tackle a few mountain passes: the Col de Salidés, the Can de l’Hospitalet and the Col des Faisses, where we’ve already set up our lunch spot

. What a lovely ride it has been so far. We refuel and enjoy the view down into the valley before continuing briskly through the countryside. After several stretches of trotting and galloping, we reach the second-highest mountain, l'Aigoual (approx. 1,600 m), and our comfortable mountain accommodation. The horses are happily let out to graze in the pastures, whilst the riders enjoy a relaxing beer in the sun. Just a few metres from the lodge is a viewpoint offering a spectacular panorama: you can even see as far as Mont Blanc in the neighbouring Alps. It feels as though you're above the clouds. In the evening, a typical regional meal awaits us, which immediately becomes one of my new favourite dishes: oreilles d'anes (donkey's ears). A sort of casserole made with crêpes and spinach, with a touch of cream – delicious. What a way to round off such a day!



Fortified by breakfast, we groom the horses and saddle up. Today, our first major challenge awaits us: an approximately 11 km trot, which climbs gently. But as is usually the case at the start, we lead the horses for a bit, which loosens up the muscles – including those of the riders! At the start of the path leading to the summit, we mount up and, after a short walk, set off at a trot. I'm completely amazed when we come to a halt and realise the stretch is already over. It was easy, and the horses mastered the route without any problems too. Every day we cover total distances of between 45 and around 60 km, with ascents and descents, all at the 'fastest possible pace'. It's quite a workout, and quite a few riders adopt a 'cowboy gait'.

At a hairpin bend, we take a brilliant group photo with a panoramic view in the sunshine, before continuing along paths through fields at the top.

Then it's downhill until we reach our lunch stop at Bramabiau. Straight after lunch, we're given a guided tour of this gorge. A river flows

underground through a cave system – yet another impressive natural formation. About two hours later, we catch sight of the sun again and carry on riding. We ride down through the forest paths of the Cévennes Arboretum and then along a small road for a short stretch to our next accommodation. The horses enjoy themselves in the pasture whilst we have a drink in the sunshine. The accommodation is a gîte d'étape with rustic rooms and seating on a meadow in front of the house. Truly idyllic. All the innkeepers give us a warm welcome, even though we're turning up in our riding gear. Freshly showered, dinner awaits us at a long table in the fireside room. After the meal, this room invites us to linger and chat before everyone gradually goes to bed.

Today also holds a challenge in store for us: an approximately 14 km-long gallop. But to begin with, the horses are led for a short stretch, then we set off along tracks and paths through the Gorges de la Jonte. Several brisk kilometres later, we reach 'the path'. Everyone can cover the distance at their own pace, but ultimately we stay together. We set off at a relaxed canter and follow the winding, gently downhill path. To our right, we're treated to fantastic views of the gorges and valleys time and again. After an estimated 8 km, Simon reins in and says we've cantered 16 km. It's great fun and the horses simply don't tire. A short stretch at a walk, and towards the end we lead the horses for a bit to stretch the legs of both horse and rider, until we reach Clemence and the lunch spot near the small town of Meyruies. Unfortunately, it has rained a little again, but even now we eat in the dry whilst the horses enjoy their rest wrapped in blankets.

The afternoon brings another highlight: after setting off through undulating mountain countryside, we head up onto the limestone plateau of Causse-Méjan in the Cévennes National Park. The plateau is vast and stretches for kilometres. The landscape is somewhat reminiscent of Ireland, with its green, lush meadows, a few sheep and small stone walls – absolutely beautiful. Here, too, we make good progress on horseback, with several long gallops taking us through the green countryside. Eventually, we arrive at a vast area where Przewalski's horses live. We're also lucky enough to catch a glimpse of some of these shy 'primitive horses'. A magnificent afternoon's riding, which sadly comes to an end as we reach our accommodation.

As always, the horses are fed, looked after and turned out to pasture before we sit together over a drink, then have a shower and gather for dinner. This takes place in the dining room, which has a vaulted ceiling and features a large fireplace at the far end. The food is fantastic and, of course, consists of several courses. Another brilliant day!

Refreshed by breakfast, we saddle up and set off. Today, too, we follow the Causse-Méjan plateau. After warming up – it's dry today – we reach an airfield. We circle round a few times at a trot and a light canter before we can let the horses run at a full canter. The only thing better is flying!

The horses are happy to finally be able to gallop at speed. After about 1.5 km, we reach the end of the straight and gradually slow down. A bit of walking to relax, then we carry on as usual. We pass the ruins of Castelbouc Castle. By now, we're looking at the path and thinking it would be perfect for a gallop too; Simon agrees, and off we go at a relaxed gallop.

We have lunch in a small town, as usual with an aperitif and food freshly prepared on the barbecue. Afterwards, we ride through the village, which is the cradle of French endurance riding and where the first Arabian stallion in endurance riding lived. Tom manages to take his written postcards to the postbox on horseback, but unfortunately has to dismount to pop them in, as the postbox slot isn't designed for riders.

We reach the end of this picturesque village, which looks even more quaint with its bridges, and ride a short distance along a road before turning onto a lovely path.

Once at the top, we enjoy some more lovely gallops before heading down a steeper stretch. At the bottom, we remount and cross a large river – riding over the bridge would be far too easy. We reach our destination and follow a road further and further uphill until we arrive at the gîte d'étape. The owners give us a very warm welcome and the horses are spread out across several pastures. The shower that follows is a real treat. Unfortunately, we were caught in a bit of rain in the afternoon, so Tom builds an improvised drying rack in front of the fireplace. This way, all our riding gear dries overnight. Dinner is served in our hosts' living room, with a panoramic view of the valley.

First, we're invited to sample some aperitifs and guess what they're made of – not as easy as it sounds. Then, alongside a salad, there's a huge paella, bread and a cheese platter, as well as a fresh fruit dessert. We round off the evening together with a short video report on the region's endurance race, in which we repeatedly recognise individual sections of the route that we've ridden ourselves. Then it's off to bed.



Unfortunately, today is already our final day of riding. After breakfast, we set off again and can let our gaze wander over the valley. We ride up the Col de Montmirat and across the Sauveterre limestone plateau (approx. 1,200 m). Lunch awaits us at the top before we mount up one last time. We ride back towards Mont Lozère and the starting point of the tour. There's even a little snow left to be found before we follow a path winding its way along the mountainside. This stretches for kilometres and gives us plenty of opportunity to gallop. Unfortunately, a bit of rain is joining us again, and the mud kicked up by the rider in front delights those behind, especially during the brisker galloping sections. Overjoyed and splattered with mud, we finally reach our accommodation from the first night. The horses roll about in the pasture whilst the riders enjoy a hot shower. The ski cellar is perfect for drying off, and one last dinner together awaits us. Afterwards, we sit together for a long time before, sadly, this day too comes to an end.

Breakfast gives us a boost before it's time to say goodbye and everyone sets off on the long journey home. What an incredibly brisk ride through unspoilt nature, which is extremely diverse and unspoilt. Thanks to the wonderful horses, whose stamina far surpasses our own! And to the lovely group and guides – perhaps we'll do it all again somewhere new.

Picture

Julia Wies

Mountain ride in the Cévennes, <http://www.reiterreisen.com/loz008.htm>