

A rider's paradise on the Atlantic coast

Eat, sleep, ride, repeat – horse riding the French way between pine forests and the beach

After spending 75 minutes watching the beginners' lesson, I start glancing at my watch regularly, expecting the session to end soon – but I couldn't be more wrong: a riding session lasts two hours, whether in the riding arena or out in the countryside, and riding instructor Michel, 67, isn't quite satisfied with the horse-rider pairings yet. So let's get one thing straight from the outset: If you're simply looking to relax, this riding centre on the Atlantic coast isn't quite the right place for you, even if the additional offerings of massages, yoga and the pool might suggest otherwise. It's all about athletic riding here, and a lot is demanded of both horses and riders – simply letting the horse carry you along at a leisurely pace isn't looked upon favourably here. Riding fitness and technique are essential – but let's start from the very beginning:

Together with my niece, I'm spending a week at the riding centre on the French Atlantic coast this summer. Normally, travelling to Bordeaux by train would be the obvious choice, but because of the Olympic Games, we've opted for a flight. The minibus from the airport is packed to the brim as we set off on the roughly two-hour journey towards the Atlantic. Soon we see a sign for the 'Les Landes' nature park, characterised by vast pine forests and a few lakes. Once we arrive at the centre, we settle into our nicely furnished room by the pool and then head off to a get-to-know-you session with all the guests. Apart from us, there are two teenage riders from Switzerland, accompanied by their non-riding parents, as well as a couple who have booked the beginners' course. Three adult guests from France have also arrived, with intermediate to advanced riding skills. This isn't their first visit.



There's also a course for teenagers who've booked riding and English lessons. For them, the programme combines show jumping training with two beach rides. The show jumping course can also be booked on its own. The rest of us, however, are split into two groups – beginners and 'intermediates'. The focus is primarily on cross-country riding, but not without constantly honing our riding skills along the way. As my niece is still a beginner, I'm joining the beginners' course for now. It's very interesting, after 30 years of riding experience. Having watched the first exercises in the arena in the morning, we head straight out into the countryside in the afternoon. Right from the start, the emphasis is on the riders' independence. The horses are fetched from a large herd in a huge paddock and then prepared by the riders themselves. Even on the very first ride, we practise maintaining balance at a trot. The riding instructor explains very clearly what's important and has each of us trot past the group individually, stop, ride on, and so on. We start straight away with a light trot and ride in a light seat. The horses are absolutely reliable and do a brilliant job all week long. Every horse, from the beginner's horse to the trail horse, can be ridden completely independently. We don't

. I, too, enjoy these special rides with their numerous exercises. My French trotter mare is a bit on the large side, but she's a joy to ride, and we enjoy the beautiful countryside with its flowering heather, pine trees and soft sandy paths – perfect riding terrain!



After spending three days accompanying the beginners' rides through the shady pine forest, on Thursday I'm off to the beach with the teenagers and the 'intermediates'! In the height of summer, you can't ride everywhere on the beach, but there are still large stretches where horses are always welcome. We prepare the horses and load them into the large horsebox. After a drive of no more than 20 minutes, we reach a car park in the pine forest. Here we saddle up our horses and set off towards the Atlantic! Today I'm riding my fourth horse; like the previous ones, he's a French trotter – a large-framed bay with a silky-soft coat and a gentle disposition. His name, 'Fun', certainly lives up to its promise: The gelding is eager to run but easy to control, and very friendly too. Only after the pair gallop, when everyone else is already allowed to gallop back, does he get a little impatient. But as soon as he's allowed to gallop, he's very content again. Great importance is placed on giving the correct aids, which are slightly different from what I'm used to in Germany. Once you've got the hang of it, even the well-trained trail horses with plenty of forward drive are a joy to handle. So we enjoy brisk gallops up and down the wide sandy beach until we head back to the car park along a narrow, winding forest path, accompanied by the loud chirping of the cicadas.

The next day, I take a break and watch the beginners, who are being put through their paces today on the riding arena for two sessions of two hours each! The beginners are already fetching their horses from the paddock themselves and saddling them up. This can still be quite a challenge at times. Today, for instance, our fellow rider struggles in vain to put the bridle on his horse. The horse simply won't cooperate, even though it hadn't been a problem before. Eventually, my niece and her friend manage it after all. However, the bridle is still very tight, so they adjust it to be a bit looser. At last, everyone is ready. The riding instructor is waiting in the arena and casts a scrutinising glance at his pupils. Everything is in place and everyone is sitting perfectly on their horses – though not everyone is on the right one! Our fellow rider has ended up on the wrong horse – essentially the younger version of the 'old-timer' he usually rides. There's a great deal of laughter. The riding instructor decides, however, that since the big bay is already saddled up, he might as well join in. Now the horses' good training comes to the fore once more: 'Fevrier', at 9 years old, is strong and lively – not really a beginner's horse, but a trail horse. Yet it works out surprisingly well, and the rider keeps the gelding right to the end, even for the beach ride at the end of the week. My niece also rides one of the younger horses from time to time, which I welcome, as we have quite spirited horses at home, so learning to rein them in is the most important thing. It goes quite well and she immediately takes the spirited chestnut horse to her heart.

On the last day, the beginners and 'intermediates' set off on a day's ride to the beach, where they also venture to try their first beach canter. Riding through the idyllic pine forest and across the sandy dunes, it takes them about two hours to reach the riding beach. We advanced riders head off once more with

the trailer for a few lively beach gallops, during which I get to ride Fun again. Afterwards, I take the minibus to the picnic spot by the riverbank, where the other riders are taking a break. We pen the horses in a large meadow and enjoy a delicious picnic with cheese, baguette, spreads, cake and plenty of sunshine. The weather on the Atlantic coast is very pleasant even in the height of summer; it usually only gets up to around 25 degrees. In winter, the location is particularly well-suited to intensive training, with temperatures generally around 15 degrees or above.



Horse riding is the main focus all week, and I'm very pleased with the progress my 14-year-old niece is making. I'm certainly underestimating her capabilities; in France, riding is wonderfully relaxed and fear-free – it's no coincidence that the French are renowned for their show riders and wild endurance rides. My niece is also thoroughly enjoying our holiday. I myself feel a bit like I used to at the pony farm – only the horses and riders are considerably larger, and the accommodation in the charming guesthouse offers far more comforts. We're using the pool and the table tennis table less often than we'd expected, though; the days are well filled with eating, sleeping and riding! The teenagers have a particularly demanding schedule: as well as training twice a day with Michel, they also have English lessons twice a day with André, who is every bit as ambitious as Michel. At least when it comes to riding, however, they're clearly having fun, especially when galloping along the beach. The 'Intermediates', with their flexible riding week, have a bit more time to enjoy the pool and massages. Instead, on the day of departure, we hop onto motorised bikes, which take us on a wild ride to the stunning beach – a lovely way to round off this eventful and educational riding week with a swim, collecting shells and lunch at the beach bar.

Also worth mentioning is the delicious French cuisine, featuring salads, cheese platters, gratins, regional wine and, of course, a selection of desserts ranging from tarts to chocolate mousse – even at lunchtime. We're glad we booked full board, as it means we're always well-fuelled and ready to get back in the saddle in the afternoons. Thanks to the varied menu, nobody loses any weight despite the active programme – quite the opposite, in fact.

Conclusion: An all-round successful summer holiday with warm-hearted people and lovely horses. We'd love to come back!!

Jessica Kiefer, August 2024