

Lavender Blossom Trail in Provence

Lavender Riding Tour in Provence – Vive la France!
France Riding Tour 23 June–29 June 2013

Sunday, 23 June

What a brilliant way to start the day – plenty of sunshine, a steel-blue sky that seemed even bluer to us than back home, and a sumptuous, delicious brunch on the terrace of a gourmet cheese shop in Aix-en-Provence – living like a king in France! Simone and I had already travelled to Aix-en-Provence by TGV the day before to get a taste of that southern flair and get in the mood for the rest of our holiday. After all, Aix-en-Provence is one of the French people's favourite cities! We strolled through the pretty alleyways, along the picturesque Cours Mirabeau with its ancient plane trees, and took the opportunity to do some shopping. Laden down with our purchases, we made our way to the station, where we were picked up at around 6 pm by Didier himself and taken by minibus to Lauris in just 30 minutes.



The farmstead was idyllically situated amidst vast vineyards and horse paddocks, set against the backdrop of the impressively towering Luberon mountains. There was a relaxed, family-like atmosphere here, and after settling into our room (the simple, rustic and cosy guest rooms are located in the former stables, surrounded by mulberry trees laden with sweet fruit), we naturally went straight to see the horses to spot a favourite. Then came the

obligatory French aperitif at the bar, where we also got to know our fellow riders and the team. We were a lovely group of seven riders: two couples who were friends from Germany, Claudia and Andreas, and Ingrid and Jakob, who had already been on several riding holidays together; Jenna from Finland, who is originally from Russia; Simone from Switzerland and myself; plus our guide, Paul, a qualified French riding instructor; his two-month-old puppy, Bamboleo, who provided plenty of entertainment on the tour; and Fifi, the driver of our support vehicle. For dinner at the long table, we were joined by a few French guests who weren't riding but were simply staying overnight at the farm, and after a few glasses of the good house wine, the atmosphere quickly became cheerful and relaxed, with a colourful mix of voices: Snippets of German, English and French flew across the table amid much laughter until late into the night, accompanied by delicious dishes: tomato and mozzarella, lamb steak, a cheese platter and the finest chocolate cake with vanilla sauce – the French certainly know how to cook; you have to give them that! Tired and round as balls, we rolled into our beds beneath the mulberry trees and the glowing full moon, still nibbling on the odd berry or two that had practically grown right into our mouths!

Monday, 24 June

At 9.00 am, we had a typical French breakfast – with plenty of café au lait! The horse allocation had already been discussed the previous evening, taking into account everyone's preferences and riding ability, so today everyone was able to fetch their own little horse from the paddock. I was given Gypsy, a gorgeous 7-year-old Hispano-Arabian grey mare – sure-footed as an Andalusian mountain goat, with a friendly nature, sensitive, yet possessing Arabian temperament and stamina – a very successful combination, as was to become apparent over the course of the week!

After grooming and saddling up, we set off straight away. Under intense sunshine, a strong mistral was blowing – the typical, powerful wind of Provence, which sweeps down as a downslope wind through the Rhône Valley and creates the particularly clear, radiant colours that have inspired countless painters. It wasn't just the riders who were a little nervous on the first day, but the horses too, who, as Paul explained to us, were deprived of one of their senses – their sense of hearing – in such strong winds. However, as a group, everyone settled down after the first stretch through a wild and romantic gorge, lined with white limestone cliffs and bright yellow broom. We rode steeply uphill through dense holm oak forests to the Claparèdes plateau. After the climb, the horses were already a little calmer and the riders enjoyed the fantastic views over the foothills of the Luberon, which kept unfolding before us.

After about two hours, Fifi was waiting for us with a picnic – the lavishly laid table featured not only a colourful cheese platter, a delicious tomato quiche, salad, red wine, white wine and coffee, but also steaks and a fruit tart for dessert – one thing quickly became clear: we certainly wouldn't be losing any weight on this riding tour in Provence! You can hardly call such a four-course lunch a 'picnic'... poor horses! Fortunately, after a break, some concentrated feed and water, they were fit enough once more to carry their riders through the three-hour afternoon stage. Part of this route took us along a few kilometres of tarmac roads, but in return we passed an abundance of lavender fields. The route of the tour had been changed this year to take in even more lavender. Unfortunately, due to the cold spring, the vegetation was

weeks behind schedule, so the lavender was only just beginning to bloom... On the other hand, the broom was still in full bloom – so ‘all yellow instead of all purple’ was our motto for the week! To avoid some of the road, we also followed a narrow footpath through dense woodland for a while – wildly romantic, but it required the riders to pay close attention to where they were putting their heads and knees! For one of our fellow riders, this unfortunately meant two bruised knees, which were quite painful.

Our destination for the night was a dreamlike Gîte de Charme: a 17th-century stone house, nestled against the rock face like a swallow’s nest, spread over many storeys, full of nooks and crannies where you could easily get lost, with numerous staircases both inside and out, plus spacious grounds, terraces and huge paddocks – a veritable maze, or perhaps the Garden of Eden? Inside, it was quaint and cosy, filled with paintings and art objects, as a painter had lived there for many years and painting courses are still offered there today. The sweeping panoramic view over the densely wooded valley and the mountains opposite was indescribable, and you felt light years away from any civilisation! The magnificent dinner at the festively laid table was, however, very civilised indeed: a salad lovingly decorated with colourful flowers, delicious risotto, a juicy steak, vegetables and a huge crème brûlée, surely 60 cm in diameter – the largest crème brûlée I’ve ever seen – garnished with melon balls. In France, it’s always a good idea to leave room for dessert! Herbal tea we’d picked ourselves from the finest Provençal mountain herbs, combined with the delicate red wine, made us feel even more sleepy, and so we retired to our rooms.



Tuesday, 25 June

At 8.30 am, we had breakfast in the sunshine on the terrace, with a sweeping view of the green valley and ‘Toast Provençal’ (after the innkeeper, whose forte

is surely more in the arts than in the culinary arts, had nearly set the kitchen alight – the undersides of the toast were rather badly burnt).

We set off at around 10.00. The morning's ride, lasting about 3½ hours, initially took us once again along narrow paths through dense undergrowth – meaning the riders had to tuck their heads and knees in once more. On horseback, we rode through the picturesque village of Saignon, where we watered the horses at the moss-covered village well, attracting quite a bit of attention in the process. Passing lush, flowering gardens, we made our way down the hill through narrow alleyways, alongside historic stone walls and, in places, along old cobbled Roman roads into the valley of Apt. Through fragrant pine and stone pine forests, our brave horses then scrambled steeply up the hill of Vaucluse. A magnificent panoramic trail led us along the edge of the slope above the Colorado de Rustrel: time and again, the broom bushes parted to reveal views of the vast valley, Rustrel with its ochre canyon, and the cliff-top village of Caseneuve. And wafting past our noses was not only the mistral but also a heady summer scent of coniferous forest, the Provençal garrigue with all its herbs, and the honey-sweet broom – a truly intoxicating blend! The weather was pleasant at 25°C, with plenty of sunshine and a fresh breeze from time to time – perfect for riding! At the edge of a small copse, Fifi was already waiting for us with a lunch picnic featuring a large cheese platter, moist olive bread, a colourful salad and sugar-sweet honeydew melon – the horses were particularly delighted with the melon rinds! After a siesta in the shade, we continued for a good two hours in the afternoon until a path led us gently down into the valley – ahead of us, bathed in soft evening light, lay Simiane-la-Rotonde – a magnificent sight!

Another magnificent sight was our destination for the day, the 'La Fontaine' stud farm, where guest rooms full of southern French charm and, above all, 'equestrian flair', as the owners are passionate Arabian breeders. Consequently, we not only enjoyed beautiful, stylish accommodation with every comfort, but also had full access to the stud farm's facilities – perfect for our horses, who were each accommodated in pairs in the corrals and were delighted with the fresh hay.

Meanwhile, the riders enjoyed the pool and, afterwards, a sumptuous dinner (we'd by now got used to the generous portions).

Our evening group was particularly large today, as a second riding group was spending the night here – so the atmosphere was twice as good!

Wednesday, 26 June

After breakfast at 8.30 am, we drove to Simiane-la-Rotonde, where we had an hour to explore the picturesque mountain village, one of Provence's 'hanging villages'. The harmonious character of the village, built entirely of natural stone and barely distinguishable from the surrounding rock faces, has remained intact to this day, making it a real pleasure to stroll through the narrow streets, past the castle and the impressive church. From the village terrace, you also have a magnificent view, including of Mont Ventoux, the 'Giant of Provence'.

Back at the stud farm, we groomed and saddled our horses. We rode through flower-filled meadows and fields, partly along very narrow footpaths and 'secret paths' to Simiane-la-Rotonde, which we then rode through on horseback. We continued along beautiful, reddish-shimmering forest tracks, which allowed for the odd trot or gallop, to the Albion plateau – lavender grows here too! Along the way, my horse had to negotiate the odd

'dangerous' puddles to master – after the initial startle, Gypsy handled

brilliantly! Right in the middle of the forest, the other riding group was already waiting for us at the lavishly laid picnic table. We were tucking in eagerly when I suddenly heard a snort behind me – my horse had broken free and was now standing by our picnic table, waiting for a slice of honeydew melon! Of course, Gypsy got one too, but first I tied her back to the tree – this time with extra care! There was plenty of fruit on offer, providing a lovely refreshment: melon, kiwis, apricots, peaches, along with salad, cheese, ham and much more. In the afternoon, we rode across the high plateau through vast fields and picturesque chestnut woods with lovely galloping trails, passing extensive lavender fields time and again, on to St Trinit, where we reached our comfortable accommodation – once again at an equestrian centre – at around 5 pm. The unique location on a hilltop offered a fantastic panoramic view, and the panoramic swimming pool, surrounded by huge paddocks, was the absolute highlight! So both horses and riders were absolutely delighted!

We met for an aperitif at 7.30 pm, after a refreshing dip in the pool followed by a hot shower. Dinner within the rustic walls of the estate was, once again, excellent French fare: an aromatic porcini mushroom omelette, roast veal with spelt, and a creamy chocolate fondant for dessert – as Simone couldn't finish her portion, I ended up with two. The dinner was accompanied by a particularly full-bodied red wine from the Côte Ventoux (the night before it had been a Côte du Luberon). Whilst we were busy eating, Bamboleo stole my flip-flops from under the table...



Thursday, 27 June

Simone and I slept soundly in our cosy 'cave' (a room without windows, but with a large glass door, in front of which we'd drawn the curtain). I opened the door and was overwhelmed by the sudden sweeping view across the green hills of the Luberon and the huge paddock, where two grey Arabian horses were grazing peacefully in the

silver morning light – every morning could start like this! Pure freedom! And, as always, a steel-blue sky, plenty of sunshine and – would you believe it – no wind today, absolute tranquillity, interrupted only by the chirping of crickets! At breakfast, homemade apricot jam with flaked almonds and a dash of Amaretto ensured a great start to the day, accompanied by a large bowl of café au lait – vive la France! In the morning, a visit to Sault was on the agenda (about a 20-minute drive). The ‘lavender capital’ charmed us with its pretty alleyways, a large terrace with old plane trees – in whose shade the men play the popular game of pétanque – and a magnificent panoramic view over the surrounding lavender fields – when they’re in bloom, that is... As we weren’t very lucky in that respect, we tried our luck with a spot of shopping – no, not a case of ‘retail therapy’ – but we did end up with plenty of lavender after all: lavender honey, lavender-filled scented sachets, lavender soap, oil, lotion, tea, sweets, etc. – as long as it was lavender! And so, on the return journey to the stud farm, my shopping smelled just like an entire lavender field in full bloom!

Back at the farm, we quickly got the horses ready and off we went, through the woods and along lovely, gorse-lined country lanes for about two hours to our midday picnic in the heart of the forest, near a horse racing track. Delicious salmon, tomatoes with onions, a generous selection of sausages and other delicacies awaited us.

Well fortified, we rode past a car park filled with numerous coaches, in front of which large groups of pensioners were picnicking and waving cheerfully at us, on to Aurel, a medieval village whose picturesque setting we could already admire from afar. We led the horses a short way along the steep streets through the village. Afterwards, the landscape was somewhat reminiscent of Tuscany, with cypress-lined paths and golden fields, flanked as always by bright yellow broom. A profusion of flowers also accompanied us on our ride: red poppies, blue cornflowers, daisies and many more, swarmed by colourful butterflies. After that, the path became steeper and more adventurous. Passing a wild gorge with castle ruins, we made our way through the forest and the mountains to Montbrun-les-Bains, one of the most beautiful villages in France, nestled amongst green hills and vast fields. After another climb, we reached our lodge, situated in a secluded spot in the mountains, with the most beautiful paddock I have ever seen – though the horses were less impressed by the panorama than I was; they preferred to tuck into the lush grass and enjoy the pleasant breeze, which kept the insects at bay. The lovingly prepared dinner delighted us once again, as did the homemade goat’s cheese and the banana cake for dessert.

Friday, 28 June

For a change, the morning in the mountains was cool and cloudy. Nevertheless, I applied my SPF 70 sun cream again, which would prove its worth later on. We led the horses a short way, past – or rather through – a large flock of sheep and goats, before we began our ascent. Once we’d rounded the mountain, an unexpectedly impressive panorama suddenly came into view: the giant of Provence up close! Over the past few days, we’d been ‘circling’ Mont Ventoux (1,909 m) and getting ever closer to the mighty mountain. Now it suddenly loomed before us like a wall, and we were able to enjoy the backdrop for the whole day’s ride. It was to be a particularly long and challenging day in the saddle – and on foot. Through the wild and romantic scrubland of the garrigue, with its typical Provençal herbs, including thyme, sage, lavender and rosemary, as well as dense

oak forests, we made our way along stony paths, steeply uphill and downhill, through the secluded Luberon mountains, where we didn't encounter a single soul. At times, we also led the horses for a stretch, whilst the short-toed eagles circled above us. The scent of broom enchanted us just as much as that of the lime blossoms overhead. Today we were able to admire our horses' stamina and sure-footedness to great effect. As a shoe had come loose on Ingrid's horse, we stopped for a break in a beautiful flower-filled meadow with a view of Mont Ventoux – everyone kept themselves occupied in their own way: some picked flowers and decorated their horses, others caught grasshoppers, the horses revelled in the abundance of food, whilst our guide Paul re-shod the horse.

After this unscheduled stop, which had taken us just under an hour, we continued on to the charming little village of Savoillans and, after another mountain stretch, up a winding road to Brantes, a picturesque mountain village set against the Mont Ventoux massif. We were overtaken by a road cyclist who kept stopping to take enthusiastic photos of us and wave – it's lovely when a group of riders sparks so much enthusiasm! Once past the village, we ventured into the bushes and tried a footpath, which, however, turned out to be quite an adventure – the route here will certainly be changed for the next tour. Fortunately, with our sure-footed horses, the steep sections were no problem. Riding over a mountain ridge, we reached a secluded valley and followed the path, always with a view of Mont Ventoux. By now we were really hungry and were already looking forward to our picnic, though it was still a little while away. Fifi met us with the support vehicle and some well-chilled beer at a particularly beautiful spot with a panoramic view stretching from a pretty mountain chapel all the way across to the Ventoux massif. That made our food taste twice as good! We also had cherries fresh from the tree!



In the afternoon, the final stage of our ride took us once again through spectacular countryside, past a mountain monastery and through Plaisians – home to the imposing rocky ridge of La Nible, whose rugged, steeply arched shape was reminiscent of an armoured dinosaur's back – all the way to Buis-les-Baronies. In the little town, we headed for a large car park and it was time to unsaddle the horses one last time. Then our horses were loaded up and we set off on the roughly 1½-hour journey via Orange back to the riding centre – the riders travelling by minibus. No sooner had we arrived than the horses, which had taken a different route, turned up too, and it was a real joy to bring them back to their home paddocks! The riders were delighted with the hot shower, aperitif and delicious dinner, which was to last well into the night.

Saturday, 29 June

After breakfast, it was sadly time to say goodbye. Simone and I had a little more time at the farm to wind down and write in our diaries until our TGV left for Basel in the early afternoon. With plenty of lavender in our luggage and an incredible wealth of colourful impressions of this fantastic landscape, we set off on our journey home – but this was certainly not our last riding tour in Provence! For full details on the Lavender Blossom Trail and horse riding tours in Provence, visit:
www.equitour.com/pro007.htm

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