

## Costa Verde Riding Trail in wild northern Portugal

At last, I'm off to northern Portugal! I'm full of anticipation and looking forward to the countryside, wild horses – let's see if we actually spot any in the wild – and lots of new experiences.

My flight to Porto leaves shortly after 6.00 am. Carlos, the riding guide and stable owner, picks me up in person. During the journey, which takes a good hour, I get my first impressions of northern Portugal, a region I've never visited before: everything is so green! The mountains rise up in the background, and on the other side you catch glimpses of the sea every now and then. The newly built motorway winds its way further and further north until we turn off into the mountains and drive through small villages on our way to Arcos de Valdevez. Just beyond that, we turn into the driveway of a typical Portuguese-style country house. Lovely rooms with en-suite bathrooms and, in some cases, balconies offer unobstructed views of the mountains we'll be exploring. A swimming pool and a tennis court are also available, but most importantly: the stables are right next door.



The horses are out in a herd, enjoying themselves here. Carlos introduces them to me one by one; he knows them all well and assigns them according to riding ability. I can't wait to set off on the trail tomorrow. Over dinner, we discuss the route – accompanied, of course, by Portuguese cuisine. It's delicious and always a multi-course meal. Within the next few days, I'll become a fan of

Caldo Verde (a regional soup) and, above all, Portuguese tiramisu! Absolutely divine.

Today we're finally off: I'm given Negrita, a beautiful black mare, who I take an instant liking to. We ride through the village for a while before turning off into the mountains. The sure-footed horses climb them effortlessly, taking us into a green landscape dotted with rocks. And suddenly they're right in front of us: a whole herd of wild horses. They eye us sceptically, especially the stallion, who wants to protect his herd. When he sees that we're riding on, he turns his attention back to his herd.

We come across some 'Cacheños' – free-roaming cows – before stopping for lunch at a rustic restaurant (after feeding the horses first, of course). As it's Sunday, huge tables have been laid for the whole village, and everyone is eating together here. Tourists are a rarity here, but thanks to Carlos we quickly strike up a conversation. For most people, a horse-riding tour is unimaginable. Almost everyone owns at least one horse, though it is ridden at most once a year. After a pleasant chat, we head to the entrance of the Peneda Gerês National Park, home to wolves. After a coffee break, we ride a final short stretch to a pasture where the horses spend the night. We tend to them and head back to our accommodation. In the evening, we have dinner at a small restaurant in the national park, so we can say goodnight to the horses before returning to our accommodation.

After a delicious breakfast – I feel as though I'm eating far too much, but it really is delicious – we head over to the horses. Whilst they're having their breakfast, we're invited for a coffee with some locals. Carlos's contacts and his knowledge of the flora and fauna are inexhaustible.

Today we're heading for the mountain peaks of the national park. Trees, an idyllic river and wonderful little paths lead us into unspoilt nature.

Apart from several herds of wild horses and cows, we don't meet a soul, and the view up there is fantastic. Our lunch break, with a picnic from our saddlebags, tastes twice as good up here! Like mountain goats, the horses wind their way up and down the narrow paths. And time and again I'm amazed by this green and varied landscape: first through the forest, then up on the mountains – and always green.

Today's longer ride ends at a small stable, where we leave the horses for the night. After dinner, we enjoy a fire in the living room fireplace and relax.

The sun greets us with a smile, so we set off to the horses. The first part of the ride takes us gradually back down the mountain to a fantastic lunch spot. Idyllically situated by a river, we enjoy a long siesta after our meal. We also play table football and billiards before the second part of the ride takes us through the village: riding right through the old town is a very special experience and is met with amazement and admiration from the locals.

The horses remain completely unfazed by everything – simply marvellous! Time and again, children wave and marvel at the horses – not an everyday sight in the small, tranquil village of Valdevez. Back at the finca, there's a great commotion as the herd greets us. In the evening, two more guests from Russia arrive, and what better way to welcome guests than with a traditional

Portuguese dinner: starters such as smoked ham and olives, soup, a seafood platter and salad are just some of the delicacies on offer this evening. Portuguese wine is served to accompany the meal. A short stroll through the old town takes us to a quaint vaulted cellar, where we not only sample authentic red port but also hear the owners recount legendary tales from the region. What a day!



After a delicious breakfast, we set off refreshed for the second part of our trail: towards the Corno de Bico forest area. This lies on the opposite side of the Peneda-Gerês National Park, but once again the ride begins with a climb into the mountains. The horses are well-trained and stride briskly uphill. Here, the landscape is different again: sandy paths wind through woodland, interspersed with valleys dotted with quaint little villages. We stop for lunch in one of them. We dine al fresco; the sun is shining, and word quickly spreads that 'people on horseback' are in the village. After lunch, we've got to know almost all the villagers, and after a short siesta we head back into the wooded hills, where it's wonderful to gallop. Negrita seems to be really enjoying it and has become a reliable partner to me.

After this splendid ride, we reach our second accommodation: a Portuguese country house that captivates with its attention to detail. Charming rooms with en-suite bathrooms, a large lounge with a fireplace and even a swimming pool invite us to linger. The horses spend the night in an adjacent pasture. At around 8.00 pm, we find ourselves standing by the car, refreshed and hungry, and drive to a nearby village. This is exactly how I imagine a Portuguese restaurant: stone walls with vaulted ceilings, a small bar and long, laid tables. Here, too, the meal consists

no fewer than three courses, accompanied by excellent wine and my favourite dish: Portuguese tiramisu! At the neighbouring table, a gathering of friends is taking place, complete with games and entertainment. We're immediately drawn into the group and get a taste of how the locals spend their evenings.

After a magnificent breakfast, we fetch the horses from the pasture and ride into the mountains of the 'Corne de Bico'. A long ride along a mountain ridge treats us to stunning views of the surrounding countryside. Here, too, we come across only a few cows and wild horses.

At a viewpoint, we enjoy a picnic from our saddlebags before riding through the forest and back down to our accommodation. We happily release the horses back into the pasture and enjoy some free time until we head back to the same restaurant as the previous evening. Everyone had been keen to return because of the delicious food and the incredibly warm hospitality of the Portuguese.

After another magnificent breakfast, we saddle the horses one last time. Today we're in for a longer ride: up into the mountains with stunning panoramic views. A few brisk gallops later, we reach our lunch spot, once again in the tiny village. This time we're greeted by the mayor himself, who regularly pops in here for a coffee and a chat. The sun is shining down on us, so we ride on through villages and woodland down to the finca. As always, the horses are greeted by the rest of the herd and enjoy their well-deserved rest. Thank you, Negrita – you were a reliable partner on this wonderful tour! Over our final dinner, we share the experiences and impressions of the past few days over a glass of wine.

We chat enthusiastically until late into the night.

Very early the next morning, it's time for me to say goodbye and head to the airport. The journey there feels like a little trip back to urban civilisation: at first green and unspoilt, then passing through more and more villages until we reach the motorway and head towards Porto. On the plane, I reflect on what a fantastic trail I've been lucky enough to experience: stunning nature, areas untouched by tourism, hospitality, a very knowledgeable and funny riding guide, and, of course, the wonderful horses – as calm as they are sure-footed.

Conclusion: Portugal, I'll be back!

Link to the programme: \_

<https://www.equitour.com/pegasus/d/reisen/europa/portugal/qdf008.htm>