

Adventure in North Macedonia

Galloping over hills and through valleys

“This will be a very emotional journey,” says our riding guide Vasko, preparing us for our 6-day adventure ride through the mountains of Macedonia. This is followed by an introduction to the Miyak, an ancient Macedonian tribe, in whose footsteps we will be following over the coming days – fittingly, on horseback. For the Miyak, who are primarily dedicated to livestock farming, have always had a close bond with horses. As riding and pack animals, they have rendered great service to the people in the remote mountains. Although life is not entirely without danger due to wolves and bears, Vasko’s approximately 40 horses live freely in a herd. At least in summer; they spend the winter near the capital, Skopje, in stables and large paddocks with plentiful feed, as they would lose too much weight in the mountains and would be virtually unusable before mid-June. The touring season runs from May to the end of October, and it’s hard to say which is the best time of year. We opted for July. As well as mirabelle plums, raspberries and strawberries lining the path, this month brings us pleasantly warm temperatures, and we don’t have to worry about getting cold during our two nights in tents either.



Our group consists of ten riders from Belgium, Germany, Denmark and France, and we get on straight away. The horses are allocated after a trial round in the round pen. I’m given a gorgeous light-brown Arber gelding, which I like straight away. The staff at the ranch immediately assure me that ‘Sandokan’ is the fastest horse on the ranch – a piece of information that seems rather irrelevant to me on a mountain trail. My previous mountain trails had mostly involved riding at a walk, with just one or two organised gallops a day. I’m soon to learn this week that things can be quite different. For on the very second day, it’s “Heida” – off we go, off to a race across vast mountain meadows. Everyone is immediately raring to go. However, as I’m a fan of controlled gallops, I ride relaxed behind on my fastest horse, which Sandokan goes along with without any trouble. He won’t win a single race this week, so the other horses also get a chance at the

title. I also let the young Backguide, who's riding an athletic, spirited grey, take the lead, as the two of them are only too happy to throw themselves into the races.

The Miyak's horses do not belong to any specific breed; there are simply different types: the stocky mountain pony with a straight head, sturdy build and luxuriant mane and tail; the slightly more refined type with Arabian influences; and the athletic, long-legged types resembling the Akhal-Teke, such as the one ridden by Backguide Sheip. We also have a horse in the group that immediately reminds me of the Turkish Ravan horses, and indeed, he also walks in the pas.



As the horses – all geldings – live in a herd, we hardly need to worry about keeping our distance, which makes riding in such a large group very relaxed. Furthermore, it is expressly requested that we do not simply ride in single file across open terrain. Vasko wants to see active riding; anyone who just wants to chill out isn't quite in the right place here. As well as the numerous and fast gallops, all the riding days are exceptionally long, often around 40 km. Although we spend up to 8 hours in the saddle, we don't have to lift a finger otherwise: the horses are saddled and unsaddled for us, the tents are already fully pitched and ready when we arrive, and of course we have a cook with us who takes excellent care of our meals. Vasko's organisation is flawless: Team A – riding guides, Team B – catering, Team C – grooms, and at the ranch the list apparently goes on all the way to Team X – that's how many people he employs. And everyone is always in high spirits and constantly striving to fulfil our every wish. The whole team around Vasko feels like one big family; you simply can't help but feel at home here. During our two nights in tents, everything is provided for us – a top-class adventure ride!



The long days' riding take us up to 2,600 metres to breathtaking vantage points overlooking deep valleys and endless, remote mountain ranges, where you can clearly see the tree line. The view sometimes stretches as far as Bulgaria and Albania. Vast expanses and solitude as far as the eye can see – North Macedonia is an absolute dream destination for an adventure ride!



This beautiful natural landscape is home to many wild animals, including eagles, chamois, bears, wolves and even wild horses.

Twice we spot a chamois on a stony mountainside, and two eagles are also circling between the mountains. Unfortunately, the wild horses don't make an appearance, but we do occasionally come across herders' horses roaming freely, including some cute foals that are particularly curious.

As we emerge from the forest, we hear a loud crack, perhaps 50 metres away in the undergrowth. A female bear is alerting us intruders to her presence by snapping off a branch. Unfortunately, we don't catch a glimpse of her, nor of her fellow bears. But as it had rained overnight, we discover fresh bear tracks on a forest path the following morning. It's fascinating to imagine how the bear had trotted along the path just before.

In the world of bears, the females each have a large territory for themselves and their cubs, whilst the males roam about. Bears are predominantly vegetarian and are therefore generally harmless to horses. We also spot a bear's den in a rock face; this is where the large animals hibernate through the snowy winter.



Other four-legged inhabitants include sheep and their accompanying sheepdogs, which roam the alpine pastures together during the day. At night, they are kept in pens on the farm for protection against wolves. The huge sheepdogs, ranging in colour from white to grey, defend the flocks with bared teeth and aggressive barking. Even on horseback, I don't always feel entirely at ease when we encounter the dogs with their shaggy, teddy-bear-like coats, which make them seem even bigger. Without them, however, traditional sheep farming in the mountains would be impossible, for North Macedonia, too, once protected wolves from being shot, with the result that they are now very numerous and pose a constant threat to grazing animals. Vasko, too, has lost a few horses – mainly foals – to wolves.



Sheep farming is on the decline today, as cheese-making and the sale of meat are not particularly lucrative businesses. The shepherds – all of whom are men – spend the summer on the mountain pastures in very simple huts, enveloped in the smell of the sheep, which in turn attracts thousands of flies. It takes quite some time to milk hundreds of sheep by hand in the morning and evening, and in between the men take care of the cheese-making. There is no spare time, and they hardly ever see their families. Vasko takes us to one of the sheep farms, where we are allowed to watch the milking and are then shown the process of making soft and hard cheeses. We also stop several times for lunch at the shepherds' huts with the hospitable herdsmen.



When we're not spending the night in tents, we stay in hotels and guesthouses in the tranquil Miyak villages. Here, too, we're always given a very warm welcome. Not too many tourists find their way up into the mountains. Vasko's riding centre is a major employer in the summer. In winter, however, you can come here to ski, and even the seemingly tireless Vasko then guides skiers off the slopes through his beautiful homeland.



Finally, we can experience the absolute silence and solitude on a sunrise ride. As early as 4.15 am, we mount our horses and set off from the tented camp. The route through the darkness leads cross-country up a steep mountain, offering a magnificent view over Lake Mavrovo and the mountains. The Miyak herdsmen used to ride to specific vantage points at sunrise to reflect and give thanks for their lives. It's a beautiful ritual with a very special atmosphere, as the horses and riders wait patiently until the sun very slowly bathes the mountains in soft shades of grey.



Vasko tries to show his guests absolutely everything in the space of a week, so he's absolutely delighted that the weather is on our side and that he can show us this special natural spectacle too. It's worth noting that this is the final day of riding, after he's spent two weeks in a row guiding the Miyak Trail. He's also come up with another treat for our return to the ranch that same day: in the afternoon, we're welcomed with 'great fanfare' by a traditional music group. It sounds as though he's called in a whole orchestra, but in the end there are just four men who delight us with their music for the next hour. At a traditional Miyak wedding, the sort that is still celebrated occasionally today, the band must sound wonderful, and it's easy to imagine the guests dancing to the music. Such a wedding is like a three-day festival, featuring dancing, music, ancestral rites and horse-riding. It must be a huge spectacle, which used to take place every May for all those wishing to marry at the same time. Traditionally, the bride's family presents the young couple with a horse as a good-luck charm for their new family.



With this special farm festival, our intensive week of horse riding in the Macedonian mountains comes to an end far too quickly. Alongside the stunning natural scenery of lush, dense beech forests, flowering alpine meadows, vast plateaus, cliffs, clear mountain streams, lakes and majestic mountains, we were also told quite a bit about the Miyak people. Of course, Vasko is also a true-blue Miyak, who shares his enthusiasm for the country, its people and the horses with the guests. His infectious manner regularly leads to guests throwing their arms round the horses or the team in tears on the final day, and quite a few of them don't want to go home at all. The week spent with Vasko and his wonderfully friendly team of two- and four-legged friends felt like two weeks, and, filled with impressions and emotions, we too finally bid farewell.

Jessica Kiefer, July 2022

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