Horseback trek through Sicily to Mount Etna

I've been looking forward to this trip for a long time; I've been to many parts of Italy, but Sicily was still missing from my list. My flight lands in Catania, and from there I continue by bus to Palermo. The journey takes over two hours, but it gives me the chance to see quite a bit of the island straight away. We travel through the mountains in glorious sunshine. You soon realise you're in Italy, as friendly conversations quickly spring up among the passengers, with everyone exchanging a few words with the person sitting next to them. The bus journey passes quickly and we're soon there. Franco, one of the two riding guides, picks me up at the bus station, from where it's another good hour's drive into the mountains to the starting point of the riding tour. The landscape is barren in early July; the grain fields have been harvested, the grass is dry, and the endless mountains glow yellow in the evening sun. Franco explains to me that Sicily was once covered in forest, but the Romans felled a large part of the island's oak forests to build Rome. In between, we see scattered historic villages nestled against the mountain slopes. The country hotel in Terravecchia enjoys a splendid secluded location. From the terrace, you can look out over the mighty, solitary mountains. A wonderful place to relax. A large pool, hammocks and numerous seating areas invite you to linger. But we have come to explore the island on horseback, and so we set off the very next morning on our first leisurely ride through the surrounding countryside. There are 12 guests in total on the ride, a large group comprising Germans, French, Welsh and Americans – ten women and two men. I am given my dream horse, a dainty Arabian gelding named Dago, a former endurance horse of the 'runs until he drops' variety, with whom I fall in love immediately. We ride through cattle pastures and soon stop at a shepherd's hut, where around 20 family members are already gathered. The shepherds live on the mountain pastures with their cattle, sheep and goats throughout the summer and mainly produce cheese during this time, such as ricotta and the typical Sicilian hard cheese 'Cacciocavallo'. After sampling the cheese and grilled specialities, we ride along a wide path that winds its way ever higher until we reach a small former monastery. The panorama along the way is breathtaking. The slopes of the Madonie stretch on endlessly, and hardly a village or a road is to be seen. As we arrive at the monastery, a huge wall of fog rolls in, enveloping the small wood on the other side of the mountain. We now make our way back down through it. A narrow path leads through the thicket before we reach a wide panoramic path again. We make our way back to the riding hotel through rocky terrain.

The following day, the actual riding tour begins, which will take us from the Madonie Nature Park to Mount Etna. We leave the characteristic limestone cliffs of the Madonie (also
known as the 'Sicilian Dolomites') and ride along well-maintained forest paths lined with stone walls. Here we encounter large groups of forest workers, both men and women, who are building stone walls, maintaining paths and clearing the forest floor of needles and leaves. The latter is intended to prevent fires. The
"Forrestale", the forestry service, is one of the most important employers in Sicily. After a picnic lunch in the forest, we reach an area that is very reminiscent of Tuscany. Golden fields of grain and wild artichokes in bloom with their violet flowers characterise the landscape. We enjoy a long afternoon ride in the glorious sunshine. Near Gangi, we reach our country hotel, Villa Raino, a very stylishly renovated manor house with a large terrace and pool. The horses

share a huge meadow today with the farm owner's sheep. He welcomes us with a selection of sweet aperitifs, which we are happy to enjoy.
After an evening swim in the pool, a multi-course dinner is served. A variety of grilled vegetables and fried pastries make up the delicious starters. I'm glad I don't eat meat, as I would have struggled to find room for the main course. The evening draws to a cosy close with some fine Sicilian wine.

The next morning we set off towards Capizzi. First, we continue through 'Sicilian Tuscany'. After a long gallop, we reach the plateau and pass windmills. The landscape changes abruptly at this pass and we reach the forest. First, we take a long lunch break up here in the shade of the trees. We then continue along a very well-maintained, wide forest track through the fragrant mixed woodland. The shade is very welcome, as the sun is particularly intense today. At the edge of the forest, we have to follow a stretch of road, as the pastures are fenced off and privately owned. Around Capizzi there are numerous cattle pastures, and we also come across mares with their foals. The horses in Sicily are very beautiful; there are various breeds that are extremely noble, and their Oriental ancestry is clearly recognisable.
In their grace, they easily rival Andalusians. Among our own horses, too, there are several genuine Sicilian horses. Just before Capizzi, the riding guide, an acquaintance of ours, spontaneously invites us for a glass of wine. As the afternoon ride was very long and, in the warm weather, quite exhausting, I cannot really enjoy it, but out of politeness I drink my cup dry. We continue through Capizzi and finally reach a small farm where the horses stay. The farm owner breeds Sicilian pigs on a small scale; they look like little wild boars. The piglets make use of the holes in the fence and escape into the yard, much to our amusement. The horses don't seem to mind. One of the piglets is later served up for dinner, grilled whole.

Over the next few days, we head deep into the Nebrodi Nature Park, which has its own unique charm with its rustic oak and beech forests and alpine meadows. We ride up and down from one lake to another. We are at altitudes of around 1,000 metres above sea level. Whilst we spend the night at the entrance to the nature park in a pretty country hotel, we spend the following night near Lake Tre Arie in a simple country house that otherwise serves as accommodation for the forest rangers. This means we can stay right next to the horses and don't have to drive to a distant hotel first. Our riding guide Paolo used to work as a chef and is now lending a hand with dinner himself. By the crackling open fire, we enjoy gnocchi with pistachio sauce and, for dessert, cream slices called 'Testa del Turco' (Head of the Turk), a reference to the Normans' victory over the Turks. In Sicily, you see, a great many different peoples have invaded over the years. Romans, Arabs, Turks, Normans, Germans, Greeks and Carthaginians – all have occupied the island and left their mark. But everyone is very friendly towards us tourists; wherever we go, we are welcomed and feted. We hardly encounter any other tourists at all.
It seems that not much is done to promote tourism; there aren't even any postcards in the guesthouses and country hotels, and at Catania airport there are practically only a few images of the city and the haunting Mount Etna. Of course, the famous volcano doesn't need much advertising, but the other nature parks are also well worth a visit. For anyone who loves solitude and mountains, it is a paradise.

From the Nebrodi Nature Park, we finally reach the Etna Nature Park. From the forest ranger station, the path first leads over a high pass with magnificent views down into the valley. Gradually, we come across traces of the volcano: circular craters filled with water, lava rocks and purple sand. The typical stone walls are now also made of lava rocks. Mount Etna is a bit cloudy on this day, so unfortunately we don't have a direct view of it, but the lava traces are becoming more and more frequent. The sandy lava trails offer ideal riding conditions. After lunch, we ride steeply uphill through vineyards and orchards into a forest and on and on until we finally emerge from the forest to be greeted by a stunning panorama. We are now on Mount Etna, surrounded by lava rock and

a magnificent view over the valley below us and towards the Nebrodi Nature Park. We pass lush yellow broom and low trees along a wide sandy track. Then we follow a narrow path right through a huge lava field from 1991, where the only vegetation consists of small fiery-red bushes. They are the first to grow on the lava fields after the eruption.Otherwise, the area, now at over 1,700 metres above sea level, resembles a lunar landscape. After a cheerful up-and-down trek through the lava field, we reach a wide high-altitude trail with a fantastic view. We follow this through the surreal-looking purple landscape and into the forest. It is already dusk by now, and today's stage turns out to be particularly long.But in the end, everyone arrives at the guesthouse in the forest and particularly enjoys the sumptuous dinner. The next morning, two local riders join us, who will be riding alongside us on two particularly fine Anglo-Arabians. As it turns out, the horses belong to the younger of the two, just 14 years old, who proves to be an excellent rider. His riding companion, aged around 60, guides us today through the dense forest, whose ground consists of black lava sand. A dream for riding. We ride up and down narrow paths. Once again we ride across a large lava field and, in glorious sunshine, enjoy an excellent view of the smoking volcano. It's like a bottle of sparkling wine without a cork, say the locals. Etna is constantly active, always bubbling away before spewing out its ash every few years. Fortunately, this isn't too dangerous, as the lava flows have long followed the same paths to the sea. Nevertheless: just as we have warning signs saying '50 in wet conditions', here there are signs bearing the words '20 in volcanic ash'. And this ash is indeed still lying on all the roads and on the roofs of Milo, our destination. Like a specially created hard shoulder for riders, the black sand runs alongside the roads.

On the way to Milos, however, something special awaits us: in the forest, we tie up the horses and visit the extremely well-hidden cave of former bandits. It is a natural crater with two narrow entrances, but the extent of the underground space is considerable. Here, we finally meet the first other tourists. Equipped with mining helmets, they explore the cave. A riding helmet does the job just as well, though, and so we join them in the pitch blackness. The rear passage was once created for the horses – an extremely steep and narrow path with steps. It must have been a challenge to lead the horses down here into the darkness! We continue along wide black sandy paths through the broom hedges down to Milo. Soon the view opens up to the sea.
After just under four hours in the saddle, we finally arrive in Milo, where we say goodbye to the horses at a donkey farm. We refuel first ourselves before taking a short tour of the farm. Michele, the farm owner, has a good 200 donkeys. The milk is processed into cosmetics on the mainland, but also serves as a substitute for cow's milk for people with allergies. A female donkey produces only around 6 litres of milk a day, half of which is consumed by the donkey foal. Apparently, the donkeys would immediately stop producing milk without their foals, which prevents the mother and foal from being separated. After checking into our accommodation, a very luxurious private guesthouse in the village, we meet up again at Michele's for dinner. Paolo once again demonstrates his culinary skills and surprises us with delicious wood-fired pizza. And so the final evening slowly draws to a close and it's time to say goodbye. The night is short; we're off to Catania as early as 6:00 am. Franco drives us in his minibus and entertains us one last time

with his incredible knowledge of Sicily's history, culture and horses. With a kilo of caciocavallo, a litre of donkey's milk and a large packet of ground pistachios in my luggage, I set off on the journey home. The farewell to our lovely riding guides Paolo and Franco is warm, and they invite us to join them on the Madonie circuit ride once more. Who knows – after all, this hospitable and beautiful island is just a short flight away and offers countless holiday delights.

Link to the programme: http://www.equitour.com/siz009.htm