

Catalonia – between the Pyrenees and the beach. Vamos a la playa!

And they flow, wet and wetter still... what dreadful waters... oh, and a hundred rivers rush towards me...

At times, I felt like Goethe's Sorcerer's Apprentice on my ride through the hills and plains of Catalonia: the water didn't just come from below, nor was it confined to the rivers and the sea as it usually is. As early as the first two days of riding, a strong wind heralded the change in the weather. After weeks of drought, we could finally



finally expect rain in Catalonia. So, in early November, whilst on the Costa Brava Trail, we were caught in the outlying effects of the low-pressure system aptly named 'Blas', which had been battering the Mediterranean islands with several days of storms and rain.

First, however, we arrived safely at our beautiful accommodation, about 70 km north of Girona. Just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the conversion of the manor house (Spanish: 'Masia') into an extremely charming guesthouse had been completed. Masias are large stone country houses, and some have been

converted into wonderful guesthouses and hotels. As our hostess, Anne, used to work as a successful architect, she has a real flair for style. The seven guest rooms are all individually designed, and the lounge and dining room with its open fire have been furnished with just as much care. Plenty of wood has been used, and old pieces of furniture have been restored. We are absolutely delighted! There is also a swimming pool. From the balcony, we can see the paddocks where the Anglo-Arabians and Spanish crossbreeds are kept in small herds of mares and geldings. The mild climate all year round is ideal for this.

Our small riding group consists of two Germans, a Dutchwoman and a Frenchwoman. Everyone is very easy-going and a capable rider, and the horses are perfectly trained too. So nothing stands in the way of a brisk ride. Riding guide Luzy, like founder Ramon, is hooked on endurance riding, so the pace on our rides in Catalonia is quite brisk. To begin with, however, we head into the mountains for two days. With a maximum of 25 km each day, the first few days are relatively short and fairly leisurely. With a bit of sunshine and light cloud, we ride

across a patchwork of farmland (famous for its magnificent spring flowers) and through dense oak and pine forests to a lovely 4-star hotel on the banks of the Fluvia. Along the way, we stop for a picnic and a siesta under the pines, amongst fragrant rosemary bushes, and time and again the view opens up to the Pyrenees. The high mountain ranges in the background are covered in snow – a magnificent panorama!

At the picnic, good Catalan red wine, several delicious cheeses and traditional salamis are always a must. Although I've never been a fan of red wine, I'm won over by the light Catalan wine, which here doesn't cost much

more than water and is a staple at every meal. In the afternoon, we make ourselves comfortable in the lounge before being thoroughly pampered in the evening at the Landhotels' Michelin-starred restaurant. Meanwhile, the horses brave the increasingly strong wind in specially erected paddocks at Alpha Alpha, fed on concentrated feed.



We spend our third night back at the riding centre and are already looking forward to the next day, when we'll be heading to the beach. When we set off in the morning, the weather is still reasonably pleasant. We ride through the undulating landscape of fields and mixed woodland down into the plain. Here, we pick up speed along perfect sandy paths through vast, autumnal deciduous forests and finally along the reed-lined banks of the River Ter to its delta. We decide to skip the view of the beach on this particular day, however. For as soon as we reach the plain in the morning, a gale brings the forecast rain. Just in time for our lunch break, a strong wind also picks up, and after half an hour we set off again in a hurry. At a trot and a canter



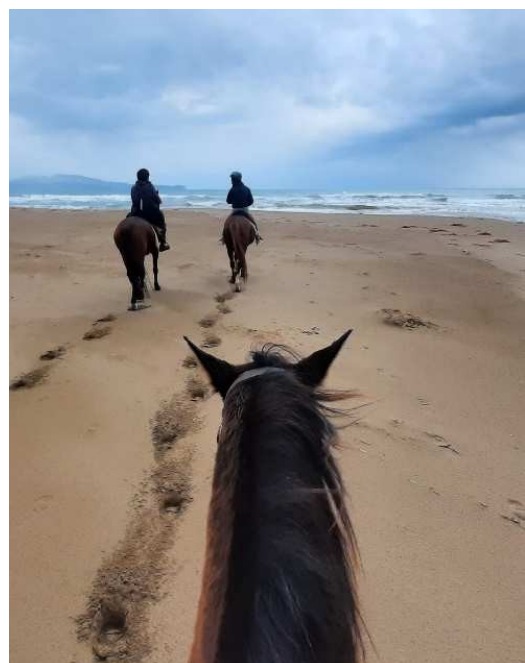
we now leave the vast apple orchards and the idyllic banks of the Ter behind us as quickly as possible. We're impressed by the horses' willingness to perform; even after the 40km-long route, they show no signs of significant tiredness. The ride was like an endurance ride, or rather a day's ride from 'Catalonia at a Gallop', a particularly brisk four-day programme for sporty riders. By the time we finally arrive at the hotel, we're completely soaked. I, for one, hadn't packed any rain trousers for my holiday in Spain, and my Softshell jacket was soaked through by the afternoon. Fortunately, the horses are sheltered under dense pine trees, and unlike in southern Spain, hotels in Catalonia have proper heating. This somewhat simpler hotel is renowned for its excellent paella, which we enjoy in the evening with a suitable white wine.

Later, given our wet clothes – who would have expected so much rain in Catalonia? – we discuss an alternative plan. For example, a trip to

er looks a little better and we decide to stick to the original plan, though we intend to ride the 25 km or so without a lunch break, as more rain is definitely expected – which, miraculously, fails to materialise! So today we take it easy on the horses and ride at a leisurely pace, first briefly to the beach, where interesting pointed rocks rise up, and then along the River Ter back inland to a picturesque olive grove and vineyards. Now we head up into a nature reserve, a sprawling pine forest. When we ride out on the other side at midday, we're even accompanied by the sun, and we enjoy a lovely ride with a bit of trotting and cantering all the way to the coastal town of Escala. The horses are put back into individual paddocks and can now rest until morning. Our driver Albert is waiting for us at a comfortable country hotel, a former mill, with a late but delicious lunch.

The next morning, one of the highlights of the riding tour awaits us: the 8-kilometre-long sandy beach at Roses.

First, however, we have to wade through water up to the horses' bellies at the mouth of a small canal – there's no other way in, and the rain has flooded everything. Due to the unusually stormy sea and the thick rain clouds visible ahead of us, hanging over the inland areas, we follow the beach at a walk. Normally, of course, this would offer great opportunities for a gallop, but we'd already had plenty of that. As we're about to leave the beach, the horses are in for another unexpected dip, as the sandy path leading inland resembles a water channel about 40 cm deep. After a cheerful splash about, we follow another stream into the hinterland. Our plan paid off, as the rain clouds now only graze the edge of our path and the sun briefly breaks through at midday. Albert had even strung up an extra-good rain canopy between the trees this time.



Finally, we make our way through typical villages back into the hills to our destination: two large, beautiful paddocks with a stunning view of the Pyrenees. Here, the horses enjoy their well-deserved evening rest as a group, whilst we ride back to the riding centre, where we'll be staying for two more nights. The following

day, the route takes us once more through the oak and pine forests, across fields and through lovely, typical villages. A highlight is the bank of the Fluvia, which we follow for a while. Here, the bank is lined with a maple forest, glowing in brilliant yellow as if in an Indian summer; the sun is kind to us today to round off the day! So we finally enjoy a proper, long lunch break by the ruins of an old church in the pine forest. With temperatures at 20 degrees, we can even manage an hour's siesta – absolutely marvellous! This is exactly how we'd imagined it, and exactly what you'd expect, even in November. The next morning, we treat ourselves



Anne's homemade jams, the fine Catalan olive oil and fresh orange juice, then it's time to say goodbye to our warm-hearted hosts and the lovely horses, which only avoided ending up in the luggage of one or two of our fellow riders because of their unwieldy size...

Jessica Kiefer November 2021

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