

Riding holidays



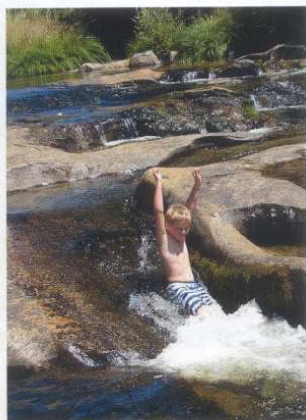
Taking up the reins in Spain

You don't need to go as far as Africa or India for an exotic riding experience—Spain's unspoilt Gredos mountains are only a weekend break away, as Rupert Uloth discovered, with eagle sightings, river swimming and vampire dogs

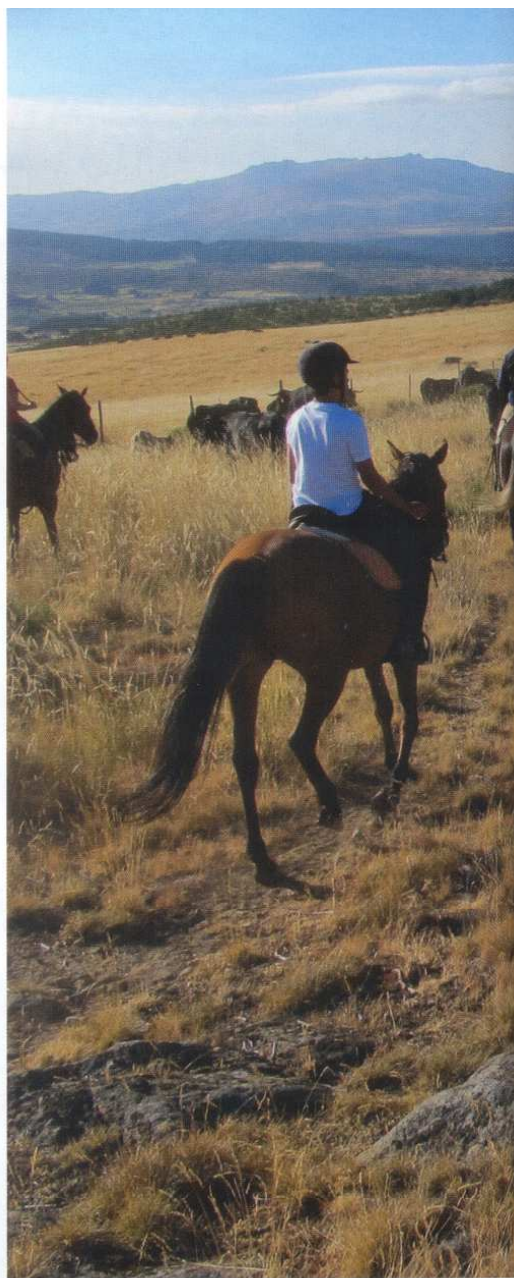
WHEN the different political parties were trying to thrash out Spain's new constitution in the late 1970s, it was to the Gredos mountains, a couple of hours' drive west of Madrid, that the Communists, Nationalists, Uncle Juan Copley and all retired to soothe their politically contrary brows. The stately Parador de Gredos still has a Consti-

tution Room in recognition of its contribution to the modern Hispanic state, but I wonder if the country would be in such a pickle now if the various parties had also saddled up their steeds and ridden off into the sunset like we did.

'María Elena has a stable full of beautiful mounts that she has bred and trained herself'



We were based at this monument to modern Spanish history, Alphonso XIII's old hunting lodge, built in 1926, for our equine forays into the hilly, broom-covered terrain with its secret river valleys on horses so safe an eight year old could have ridden them. In fact, on our trip our eight year old son did ride them, Rufus becoming best friends with 15hh Rifeño, as we meandered along, sometimes walking as we wondered at the landscape, sometimes cantering through pine wood glades, for up to 18 miles a day.



Top Ready for the off: María Elena flanked by Rufus, Honor and Nonie. Left Rufus cools off in a crystal-clear mountain stream

Our eclectic group all shared a love of horses. As well as my wife and three hunting-mad children aged 12, 10 and eight, I was joined by two Masters of Foxhounds, a royal artist, a Cayman Islands resident and Conor, a polo-playing pupil from Summer Fields.

We were in the capable and highly experienced hands of María Elena Dendaluce, a former marketing professional, who gave up the rat race to follow her dream. Now, she has a stable full of beautiful mounts, Hispano-Arabs and Andalusians that she has bred and trained herself. The Arab



blood gives them stamina and speed and their Spanish genes good bone and ability to take weight. Well-behaved, fit and sure-footed, they proved to be perfectly suited to the terrain. In the winter, she leads riding holidays in Andalusia, but in the summer, the temperature in the Gredos hovers round the mid 20s centigrade, perfect for this kind of activity.

If we'd been there for longer, we could have done a trip going down the valley staying at different places each night, but for our long weekend, we were able to enjoy varied routes from

the stables each day. The horses are presented in immaculate condition and, after Rufus and Conor had completed their daily routine with 'Vampire Dog'—a mastiff of enormous proportions, so-named by them because of his impressive but benign ability to swallow their arms to the elbow—we mounted up for our day of exploration.

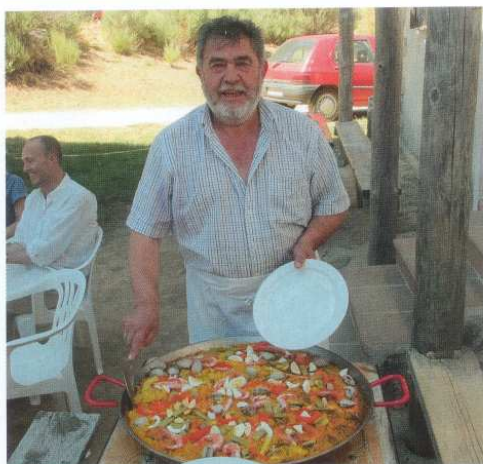
The profusion of butterflies fluttering like a psychedelic magic carpet in the wooded glades was immediately obvious and, whenever we crossed a river, dragonflies were flitting over the water as if trying to keep below

Above The finest view in Europe: spend leisurely days exploring the completely unspoilt Gredos mountains

enemy radar. This is the land that fertilisers forgot, natural grassland and wildlife thriving unhindered by man. It was rare not to see a golden, short-toed or booted eagle patrolling the skies and the storks searching for frogs in the marshy areas became a familiar sight. This is still a big beef-producing area—*carne Avileña* being a particular delicacy—and one morning, we rose early and helped drive the Avilian cattle from the high pastures down into the village for a local *fiesta*.

We were never far from good food, even when seemingly in the middle ➤

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of nowhere. *Aperitivos* appeared miraculously on white-clothed tables by dusty tracks, the *jamón*, *chorizo*, Gredos beer and *manzanilla* mere precursors to what was to come later during long leisurely lunches of *paella* or a gourmet picnic of cured sardines, Iberian pork, guacamole and cheese.

And once you've worked up an appetite after hours in the saddle, a delicious *paella* appears even in the middle of nowhere

'Nonie, a well-travelled 10 year old confided: "I think that's the best holiday I've ever had'

The rivers were perfect. No wider than the Test, their smooth boulders created perfect swimming pools of gin-clear water, welcoming hollows for a siesta, and mini waterfalls for natural hydrotherapy massages. Well off the foreign tourist trail, the Gredos are a well-kept secret. It's an official dark-sky area and we were amazed to see Saturn's rings through a local enthusiast's high-powered telescope.

At the end of it all, Rufus wished he could take Rifeño home in a 15hh suitcase and Nonie, a well-travelled 10 year old, confided: 'I think that's the best holiday I've ever had.' Older seasoned travellers in the party found it difficult to disagree. 🐾

Fact box

Rides are run between April and October from set dates; private rides possible on request for groups. From £1,625 per person including all riding, seven nights' twin-bed-room hotel accommodation, meals, drinks and transfers from/to Madrid airport with the group. Excludes flights to Madrid. Contact Ride World Wide (01837 82544; www.rideworldwide.com)