

Dordogne: Saddle up on the scenic route

Armed with a riding hat, Michael Kallenbach meanders through the rolling French countryside
Saturday, 24 July 2010



PHOTO: GEORGINA ERSKINE

Lazy days: the rides go through an idealised version of rural France

As I emerged from the terminal at Bergerac's tiny airport into the summer heat of south-west France, I was greeted by a woman with a crisp English accent inquiring who I was. She had my name right, too. "That's me," I said, "but how do you know?"

"It's pretty obvious," came the reply. "You're carrying a riding hat."

On my previous riding holidays – in Kenya or Jordan, for instance – no one had insisted on participants wearing a hard hat. Then again, the sun is so strong that a wide-brimmed soft hat is the best way of avoiding severe sunburn. Riding hats on this trip through the Dordogne are now compulsory, however – the result of EU health and safety regulations. I did as I was told and wore my hat every day.

Jane Hanslip bought Le Bourdil Blanc, an 18th-century manor house, in 1989, and around 10 years later left her life in London permanently to open a riding holiday business. Although there is stabling for about a dozen horses, they are not kept at Le Bourdil Blanc but brought in from a neighbouring stable.

The pretty manor house is set in bucolic grounds near the village of Saint Sauveur, 10 minutes outside Bergerac. The building is clad in green foliage, and there are eight en-suite bedrooms,

each furnished with antiques. There are extensive gardens where the visiting horses are able to graze freely overnight, while Jane's two Labradors, Ebony and Balthazar, demand as much attention as the horses.

It's always a risky business going on any sort of group holiday alone and then being committed to spending time with people with whom riding is the only common interest. On our first evening, our 10-strong group met on one of the terraces during drinks. Happily, Jane seemed to have the ability to encourage conversation, even though it wasn't necessarily about horses. Apart from a Singaporean, we were all from the UK, and the standards of riding varied quite a bit. I was pleased when they divided the group into two: those who wanted to go at a faster pace and those who were happy to ride half days only.

Our guide, Antoine, gave me Gaston, who preferred to be up front most of the time. He had a lovely canter and was easy to control. I felt safe and secure, and more than that I don't think any rider could wish for.

The countryside around Bergerac is dotted with picturesque villages, and what appears to be an endless number of chateaux and churches. Our rides took us through an idealised version of rural France – enchanting forests and rolling hills.

On our first day, we meandered through villages such as Lamonzie-Montastruc, which derives its name from an ancient monastery. Later we visited the village of Saint Marcel du Périgord and then rode on to Pressignac Vicq, where a local family kindly gave us, and our horses, some much-needed water.

Every lunchtime we looked forward to Jane being there to meet us, somewhere on the banks of the Dordogne, with provisions for a delicious French picnic, washed down with crisp local Bergerac wine.

On my final day, as we cantered through some dense forests, I could only think of the lashings of Camembert cheese and tarte Tatin we had tucked into. It was sad having to say goodbye to all this – and of course, to Gaston.

Essentials

Getting there

* Bergerac is served by Flybe (0871 700 2000; flybe.com) from Birmingham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Gatwick, Manchester and Southampton; by Ryanair (0871 246 0000; ryanair.com) from Bristol, Liverpool, Stansted and Nottingham; and by Jet2 (0871 226 1737; jet2.com) from Leeds Bradford.

Riding there

* Ride World Wide (01837 82544, rideworldwide.com) offers a seven-night stay at Le Bourdil Blanc for €1,315 per person including riding, meals, drinks, accommodation and transfers from/to Bergerac, excluding flights.