

What better way to spend your annual holiday than galloping across rolling hills in the heart of Europe? We showcase three exhilarating riding trips not far from home

A Hungarian adventure

I was fortunate enough to join a week-long adventure in Hungary organised by travel operator Ride World Wide this summer, riding the noble Kisberi horse. The Kisberi has many attributes – excellent conformation, superior athletic ability and the stamina of an ox. My trip's Hungarian host, Janos Loska, also waxed lyrical about its superb temperament, docile character and willingness to bond with its master – traits that have seen the horses excel in show jumping, eventing and racing.

Rider's delight

Janos, a former member of the Hungarian eventing team, runs the most successful stud in Hungary, with around 80 Kisberi horses. He has been organising riding trips since 1980 with his business partner Marta Jokai, aiming to show guests the beauty and history of Hungary from horseback.

The holiday is a rider's delight; guests cover 40km-50km (around 30 miles) every day, riding for an average of five to six hours. The horses are spirited and the pace is fast, where the ground allows.

If you are a thrill-seeker, this trip will not disappoint! This is predominantly because the horses are outstanding – I believe you will be hard-pushed to find such well-trained and responsive horses on another riding trip. On many occasions, 12 fit and forward-going horses galloped abreast across the valleys in their snaffle bits, and not one tried to race the other, fight their rider, or bolt into the lead. This is due to their impeccable training, which includes them stopping on command when Janos whistles – an impressive feat.

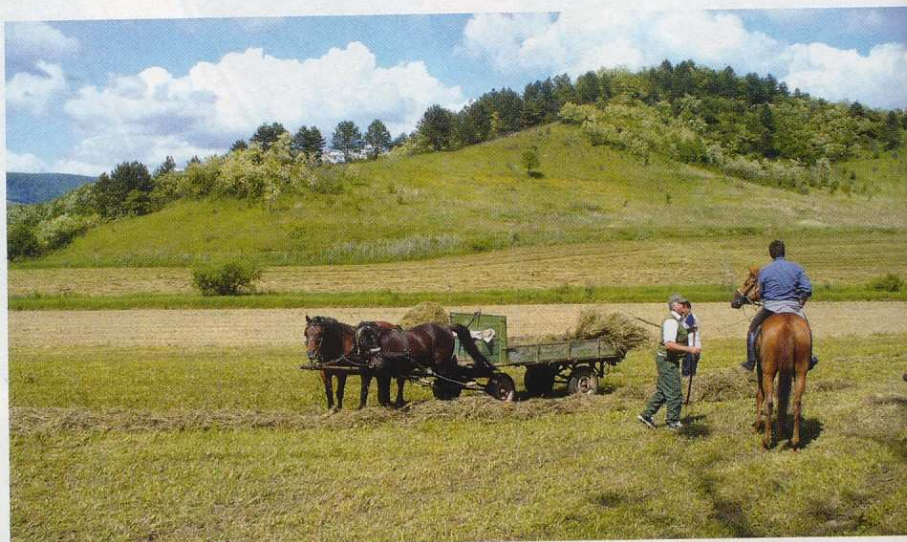
With a choice of three itineraries, I joined the seven-day 'Vanyarc to Eger Ride', which begins on Janos's farm, an hour's drive north of Budapest, and ends in Eger, an historic town in a famous wine-growing region.

When Janos introduced me to my mount for the week, I must admit to a slight feeling of trepidation – the 10-year-old chestnut mare I was to ride, Thetis, is a former international eventer. No pressure, then. However, it soon became clear that Thetis was a wonderful companion – despite the odd spirited buck, she was careful, responsive and a real pleasure to ride. I trusted her implicitly.

Expect the unexpected

With the other nine guests, plus Janos and one of his grooms Georges, we set out on the first day's riding across farmland and valleys. I have

Imagine riding one of the world's most beautiful sport horses across endless, lush valleys, just a few hours away from Britain. This wonderful experience awaits you in Hungary, says Kathy Carter



Blast from the past: The riders round a corner to find a horse-drawn cart collecting hay.

never seen so much unspoilt greenery! Janos had a few safety rules for us – we were not to overtake him, even in walk, not to take our feet out of the stirrups to relax, and not to ride one-handed. Janos meant business!

Despite some unseasonal heavy rain, we enjoyed a short introductory ride to get to know our horses, returning to dry off in the comfortable rooms at the farm and eat a hearty lunch, before setting off again in the afternoon. The first part of the trip involved a fairly slow pace as the ground was quite wet, although as the week progressed, we rode out for longer and covered ground more quickly.

The second day saw some memorable action; crossing a field of rambling cows that headed in our direction, Janos galloped towards them and verbally 'saw them off', making sure they didn't wander into our group of horses. Unfortunately, the resident bull took exception to this, chasing after Janos and returning the vocal challenge. What started off as being funny quickly became a little scary, as the bull stood his ground and protected his 'women'.



Kathy on her mount Thetis, who she trusted implicitly.

In the manner of an optimistic matador, Janos and his fearless horse had a short stand-off with the bull, before Janos's groom, 'Handsome Tony', led us all away and we made a sharp exit up the nearest grassy track.

It quickly became clear that Janos commanded respect wherever he went – the following day, we crossed five lanes of motorway traffic while he solemnly brandished his crop at the oncoming traffic. Although not all drivers we saw in Hungary

What you need to know

- The Kisber horse was originally bred for cavalry officers in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy at the beginning of the 19th century. It stands between 16hh and 17hh and is solid in colour, commonly chestnut or bay. Kisberis are sometimes crossed with Thoroughbred and selected Trakehner horses.
- The food in Hungary is hearty and filling – lots of soups and meat dishes, often laced with paprika. The wine is world-renowned, and on the trip you can visit a number of cellars in Szépasszonyvölgy, where you can purchase the local speciality, 'bull's blood', a delicious red wine. Another speciality is Unicum, a strong liqueur made from a secret recipe of over 40 herbs. It is 40 per cent alcohol – try it at your peril!
- Janos and Marta are keen to show guests the history of Hungary, and on the last day, a sightseeing trip to the Baroque town of Eger with a historic Basilica (ceremonial cathedral) and medieval castle is included.
- Average daytime temperatures in mid-summer are usually 15°C–28°C. Rain is possible at any time of year, however.
- The Vanyarc to Eger Ride costs £980 per person, excluding flights – visit www.rideworldwide.com or tel: (01837) 825 44.



A young gypsy boy shows off his trick-riding skills.

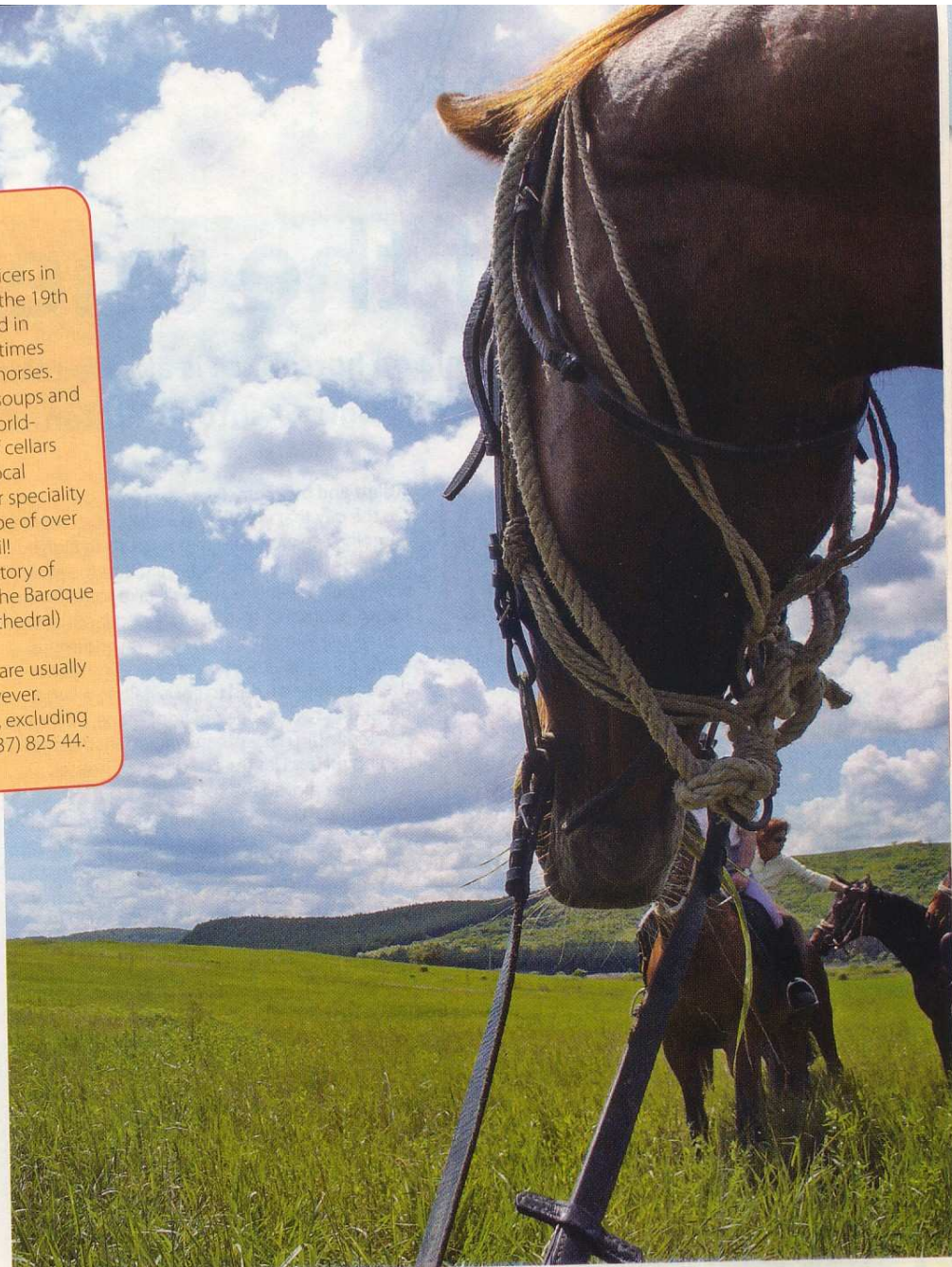
were so compliant, on this occasion the traffic miraculously halted as the chain of 12 horses crossed the equivalent of the M25.

I soon discovered to expect the unexpected in Hungary – with few fences or boundaries to speak of, it is completely normal to walk through a field full of cows or goats, come across a horse-drawn cart collecting hay, or, as happened later in the week, happen upon a young gypsy boy demonstrating bareback trick-riding with his handsome horse.

Fast pace

We headed north through some of the highest hills in Hungary over the next few days, the horses staying at local farms, while we lodged at riding inns or local hotels.

Although the facilities were a little basic on one or two nights, the beds were comfortable and there was always a shower at the end of the day – very welcome when you are not used to riding for six hours a day! I must confess to aching a great deal by day three, but the next day I woke up daisy-fresh, my body finally accepting the workload and embracing the challenge.



Is this trip for you?

● Terrain:	Undulating, with good going
● Horses:	Well-schooled, but spirited
● Riding ability:	Trips are aimed at experienced riders, who are well-balanced, with an independent seat.
● Fitness:	You should be riding fit, as the pace is moderate to fast.

The latter part of the week saw welcome sunshine, and many more fast canters and gallops. Heading to the small town of Bükkszek, through the beautiful landscape of the Bükk plateau on day four, we rode abreast for the majority of the time (much more exhilarating than single file), galloping up steep hills to be greeted by stunning views across the valley, hundreds of metres below. The hilly riding was interspersed all week with walks in shady oak forests, often with hairy, plant-eating caterpillars dangling down from invisible threads above our heads, Mission Impossible-style.

A crime not to visit

It's impossible to talk about this holiday without mentioning Marta Jokai's legendary lunchtime

picnics, which greeted us without fail every day at a picturesque spot. 'Handsome Tony' and the equally efficient groom, Bandi, would whisk the horses away from us to be tethered nearby, while Marta served up a range of bread, salami, cheese, wine and chocolate. These feasts, combined with filling breakfasts of scrambled egg and cold meats and cheeses, plus scrumptious evening meals at local eateries, meant we never, ever, went hungry.

Hungary is a wonderful country, and so close to home that it is a crime not to visit. After all, what better way is there to explore the countryside than on the back of one of the most endearing and generous horse breeds known to man? >>>