



The galloping gourmet

Ignoring the glowers of her conveyance, **ALEX MEDHURST** eats – and rides – her way through the Dordogne

IT was with some trepidation that I touched down in Bergerac – the place, not the TV show. I had never been on a riding holiday before and, slightly more bizarrely, I was plagued by thoughts of John Nettles.

Yes, I know Bergerac was set in Jersey, but the TV theme tune ran continuously through my mind as I took the 15min taxi ride from Bergerac airport to Le Bourdil Blanc, the 18th century manor house which was to be my home for the next five days.

Bergerac is situated in the Dordogne region of the south of France, some 40 miles east of Bordeaux and with flights direct from London Stansted, it is within easy reach for anyone looking for a few days in the saddle. Thankfully, and quite unusually for a riding holiday, we would be returning to this same base every night, which is ideal for someone like me, who finds it impossible to travel light and move from camp to camp.

It was growing dark as I hauled my bulging case up to the door. Although grand

from the outside, the inside is more of a welcoming shabby chic that only the French can get away with.

As I sat around the log fire that night meeting fellow riders, and sharing excited talk of fastest gallops, scariest fences ever jumped and, of course, favourite all-time horses – Milton got more than the odd

mention – the scene might have been lifted from any number of Pony Club camps – discounting the red wine, of course.

The next morning, we drove to a riding

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school four miles away where we were to meet our mounts. Although the manor house boasts its own excellent, recently converted stabling for 10 horses, they are not kept here all year and nor are they owned by Bourdil Blanc.

Instead, your choice of mount is transported from the riding school for the duration of your stay. As proprietor Jane Hanslip explained, this is the best set up for everyone; I am inclined to agree, as it gives the rider a much bigger selection of horses.



A typical lunch-time spread

With around 40 to choose from, the utmost care is taken in helping guests find the perfect partner, depending on riding experience, weight and height. There is no room for dishonesty either, as a preliminary hour in the indoor school will soon show you up. If you don't feel happy with your mount for any reason, it can be swapped for another and this change can be made at any time during the holiday.

However, Jane is obviously an astute selector, as nobody felt the need to change



Above: Chateau la Gaubertie, one of the many landmarks taken in during the week
Left: ambling through the autumnal forests



Alex on Alee: "I wasn't looking for an Olympic prospect, just a safe, reliable ride"

gourmet



When are we stopping for lunch?

Despite this, I was able to take in the sights as our guide, Antoine, led the way. The countryside is not dissimilar to the woodier parts of England, although the chateaux with their fairytale turrets standing proudly on every hilltop and the beautiful, sunny weather served regular reminders that actually, this was France.

Many trails took us through dense forests with low-hanging branches, and the majority of the riding was done in single file to avoid disasters of the headless rider variety. However, one afternoon, we came to a long stretch about six horses wide and straight for as far as the eye could see.

"Canter?" asked Antoine casually.

"Why not?" we agreed, equally casually.

the far stall, I set about bribing Alee with carrots to keep all four feet on the ground at all times.

This pact agreed, I became aware quite early on in our partnership that we shared a similar philosophy, based around the question: "When are we stopping for lunch?"

On my part, at least, this wasn't a problem, because the food was delicious and plentiful. Breakfast consisted of fresh croissants and jam, picnic lunches comprised cheeses, quiche, foie gras, cold meats, rice and salads, and dinner might be confit of duck with sautéed garlic potatoes. And did I mention the French apple tarts and chocolate tarts?

The packed lunches were excellent, and while we rode carefree across the valleys, Jane would drive all the food and wine in her car to a pit stop — a chateau, actually — where lunch would be ready and waiting for us. So, while we didn't have to carry it with us in the morning, I'm sure the horses would be first to point out that they certainly felt its weight on the way back.

In fact, the memory of Alee neighing frantically, pawing the ground and growling as I tucked in to a second helping of Camembert still haunts me at times.

But in between all this gorging there was also a lot of serious riding to be done. There was 6-7hr a day, with 35km the typical daily distance covered.

My new-found friends were speed demons, and while I was content to amble across the horse-friendly terrain and admire the autumnal forests, a good pace was kept up, with plenty of chances to canter.



and all agreed that the horses were of a high standard. Despite this, the tack was of that familiar "riding school quality", which, although not dangerous, could be improved on for comfort.

It is some time since I last called myself a regular rider, so I was more than happy to be partnered with the short, pot-bellied Alee (no comparisons, please).

I wasn't looking for an Olympic prospect, just a safe, reliable ride, so while the others squabbled over the flighty, leggy chesnut in



Manuel, the groom, takes care of his mount

COSTS AND CONTACTS

■ Prices are £750 per person per week, which includes accommodation, all food and wine, riding and transfers (in the Bergerac area). Weekend and midweek breaks are available on request. Single bookings are welcome, although an overall group of four to eight people is needed in order for trips to go ahead.

Non-riding spouses and friends will also find plenty to do and they can be accommodated at the rate of £550 per week.

■ For booking or more information see www.dordogne-riding.com

■ Bookings can also be made through UK agents Ride World Wide (tel: 01837 82544) or visit www.rideworldwide.co.uk



Room with a view: Le Bourdil Blanc, the 18th century manor house visiting riders call home



All tied up: our mounts recuperate in the shade after a busy morning riding across horse-friendly terrain



Over a barrel: the cellar at Tiregand vineyard

We set off at a good pace and I leant forward in the saddle, enjoying it. Things got a little faster and a lump of mud suddenly hit my right eye.

"No matter," I thought, "I'll just close it for the time being." But a sudden shift in pace up to what I can only describe as warp speed gave me a distinct feeling of being totally out of control.

I had always assumed that I'd had some good gallops in my time but perhaps they were only canters.

This was truly scary. I was now at the front of the pack, hoping and praying that we would stop soon. The brakes weren't working, so

I was just going to have to sit this one out. I wondered how long a horse could run for before it got tired, then heard galloping hooves beside me and turned my good eye to see who it was.

Manuel, the groom, drew alongside and was now pulling on his reins in an exaggerated manner, which I could only assume meant that I should do the same.

I'd been trying this very trick to no avail for several minutes, but I humoured him, took a pull, and, as if by magic, we

stopped. Well, Alcee did — I carried on over her head.

In typically English fashion, my five co-riders had played down their riding ability. I should have guessed as much when they needed both hands and feet to count off their past riding holidays. I should perhaps have stuck to the rear — and speaking of rears, did mine ache.

You really do need to be saddle-fit to enjoy this holiday properly, and it became a

popular dinner table game to guess which part of my body wasn't aching. By the third night, only my nose and fingertips had escaped mention.

It was a relatively strict itinerary, with the evenings nearly as full as the days. We enjoyed a trip to the truffle farm at Ste Foye de Longas one night, and went wine-tasting at the Tiregand vineyards and cellars on another, with opportunities to purchase produce at both.

There wasn't much room for movement in the day's plans apart from choosing not to ride at all. This meant relaxing around the house or enjoying the other facilities such as the tennis court or swimming pool (shut in winter).

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If you want to brush up on your skills, Antoine can also give a riding lesson in a nearby manège. He is an excellent horseman who has the ability to make it all look simple, although he didn't find English as easy. We all caught his gist, but it would have been nice to gain a little local knowledge as we went along.

However, this did not detract from what was a memorable holiday and as I took my last gallop up the hill back to Bourdil Blanc, my stomach full of cheese and my bottom now as comfortable in the saddle as in an old armchair, I wondered if I could stay just another week. H&H



Wine tasting: the ideal thing for saddle-weary riders