

ON THE TRAIL

Lifestyle Director Farzana Ali grabs life by the reins for a week as she learns to horse ride in the Azores

Have you ever heard anyone say: "I really miss school"? Me neither. You leave it and never look back. And yet here I am on a trip away, notebook in hand, reading about correct horse riding posture.

But unlike the suburban comprehensive where I spent my early teens, I'm on the island of São Miguel in the Azores in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean - 950 miles off the coast of Portugal. My school for the next week is the Quinta da Terça ranch, where I'll - hopefully - tick learning to ride off my bucket list. Considering I haven't spent much time around horses, let alone on top of one, it's going to be no mean feat.

LEARNING TO WALK

My week starts with my flight into Ponta Delgada, before Rui from the ranch - 20 minutes away in Livramento - comes to pick me up for my transfer. I arrive to find rustic surroundings and a cosy, comfy set-up. My large room, with four-poster bed and horse-themed bedding, sets the tone for my stay. There's no time to get nervous, though, as Christina de Laval - who runs the riding school with her husband Claude - quickly puts me at ease when I meet her in the morning for my first lesson. Things start with an introduction to Zarita - a chestnut and white skewbald mare. While taller than some of the other horses on the farm, she's pretty chilled, which is a relief for a new rider like me.

After going through some basics on paper and being shown how to get a horse ready for riding, we start the first practical session in the picadeiro (AKA riding arena). Balance is key, so it's essential to nail the correct posture - shoulders back, channelling Dolly Parton with chest

out, and heels down in line with your back and bum. Once I'm comfortable with walking, it's time to learn how to tell Zarita what direction I want her to go in before we start the rising trot.

That afternoon, during a one-hour hack in the local area, I get to put it all into action. That's one of the best things about learning here - every day is a mix of theory and practical, followed by a few hours of riding outside of the picadeiro.

We explore quiet paths lined with high volcanic rock walls and go on uphill climbs through thick, tropical vegetation. On one ride we even make our way through a rainforest jungle - ducking branches and steadying our steeds over uneven ground - and a sea of sweet-scented yellow ginger lilies, which are the equivalent of Haribo to horses.

HOT SPRING BREAK

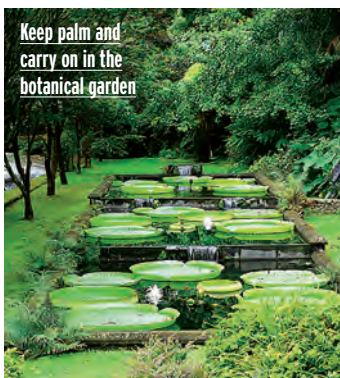
Luckily for my aching muscles, there's more to do on São Miguel - the largest island in the Azores - than just yeehaw your way round.

Devote a morning soaking in the warm springs at Caldeira Velha. Or head to Terra Nostra Garden in Furnas, entry £7.30, where you'll find a rusty-hued, mineral-rich thermal pool in the middle of a botanical garden. It's excellent for rejuvenating tired bodies (Parqueterra.com).

Farzana enjoys life in the saddle



Keep palm and carry on in the botanical garden



We're pine-ing for this fruit



4 HOURS



-1 HOUR



EUROS



*To book your trip to Quinta da Terça with In The Saddle, visit Inthesaddle.com. Prices start from £1,084 per person sharing for seven nights full-board. Non-riding excursions cost extra.

*Flights with Azores Airlines cost from £397 return (Sunvil.co.uk).

Pack it



Gloves, £19.99,
Requisite



Polo shirt, £45,
Hurlinghampolo
1875.com



Bumbag, £18,
New Balance

TROTting AHEAD

As the week progresses, to give me a real understanding of how a horse moves, Christina talks me through some classic dressage moves, which we then practise. On day five, we also try a small canter in the arena. I'm nervous, but have a real sense of achievement after a successful attempt.

Then it's on to our final day - a full day's ride at Sete Cidades, which is a massive volcanic crater. We begin along the rim of the crater, where narrow paths lined with blue hydrangeas offer an outlook over the Atlantic on your right. On the left, you'll find lush greenery and views of the Lagoa Azul and Lagoa Verde (that's the blue lake and green lake, FYI). Be warned: the terrifying drop is on *both* sides. A delicious picnic lunch by the lakes follows, before the afternoon ride on flatter terrain.

We trot around the blue lagoon, before it's time to practise my canter. With my lovely instructor Constanze leading the way, I grip my reins tighter and move my legs into position. Zarita follows my cues and we take off. The adrenalin washes over me as we successfully canter around the emerald-green lagoon. I arrive to cheers from Debbie and Ester - two more advanced riders in the group, who have already galloped around. As I get off my horse and she joins her equine friends for a splash in the water, I can't believe what I have managed to achieve in just a week. **F**

Pineapples are grown on the island in abundance, and once you've tasted the super-sweet yellow flesh of an Azorean fruit, you'll only want more. So check out the Arruda Pineapple Plantation to see how they grow. It's also a great opportunity to pick up a jar or two of delicious pineapple jam (Ananasesarruda.com).

Fancy something even more chilled? A short 10-minute walk from the farm, you'll find a black sandy beach and ocean views.

But whatever you do, make sure you build up an appetite during your stay, because mealtimes at the ranch are a highlight. Breakfasts consist of cheese, cold meats, eggs, cereals, yoghurts and tropical fruits. Lunches are hearty, too. But it's the evening three-course meals cooked by Christina that will leave you salivating. Expect comforting soups to start, baked fish, chicken or red meat mains and waistline-expanding desserts that you *have* to devour - think chocolate truffle cake and apple Tosca cake.