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Horse-riding in Portugal: Along the coast at a canter

Alexandra Ferguson enjoys a riding holiday among the cork forests and beaches of south-west Portugal.

By Alexandra Ferguson

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'Form a line,' Miguel shouts, as we plunge into the dunes and the horses pull at the reins, eager and excited. The beach is deserted; virgin sand stretches north and south, and Atlantic rollers crash on the steep shore. As we descend to the water's edge, the hiss and roar of the surf is deafening and spray flies on the breeze. The horses brave the surge: chasing the retreating waves, shying from the advancing breakers and we fight to hold them as Miguel raises his arm. "Everyone ready?" he cries. Then we are off, galloping along the sand: the horses slick with salt and sweat, the warm wind on our faces.



We gallop along the Alentejo Coast: the horses slick with salt and sweat, the warm wind on our faces

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At lunchtime, we stop in a pocket of pines behind the beach to feed and water the horses, before feasting on silvery fish smoked on a barbecue and platters of salad and olives, bread and cheese. Then we kick off our

boots and unwind, the red wine rushing to our heads in the warm sunshine.

We are in Santo André on Portugal's Alentejo Coast, two hours' drive south of Lisbon. Development is restricted here as much of the coastline is a protected nature reserve. Traditional fishing villages still hug quiet estuaries, and tidal lagoons attract storks and flamingoes.

Inland, paddy fields give way to dense forest and verdant pasture.

Over the coming week the 10 of us will ride south through the hinterland, staying at remote farmsteads and rural guesthouses. We are a diverse group of horse lovers from Europe, the United States and South Africa, and our guide is Miguel Mendez, a former instructor from the renowned Alcainça equestrian centre. He has provided us with native Lusitano horses, originally bred for military purposes, and famous for their discipline and dressage skills. Next morning we saddle up and set off past a row of smallholdings. As pigs snuffle in the undergrowth and barking dogs rush to greet us, a farmer waves from his vegetable patch and we ride on, two-abreast, through fields of wheat. Courtney, an accountant from Denver, is beside me, chatting about her quarter horses. Roger, from Suffolk, follows, searching for bird life with his binoculars.

The dark clouds that earlier threatened rain lift and, by midmorning, the sky is clear. Stands of pine loom on the horizon and a hush descends as we enter the forest, the carpet of needles muffling sound. As we fall into single file on a long, straight track, the horses pick up the pace. My mount, Oniverse, has a comfortable, collected canter, but I am grateful for the soft, sheepskin saddle cover.

We hurtle on through the trees, ever faster, and, just when my legs are beginning to tire, slow to a walk. It is time for another barbecue and John — Miguel's right-hand man — tends the charcoal in a clearing. "I don't know about canter," Courtney laughs, as we dismount, "that seemed more like a gallop to me!"

After lunch, the cool canopy of pines gives way to a vast cork oak plantation. The lower trunks are denuded of bark, each daubed with a number. "It refers to the year of harvest," Miguel explains. "The cork is cut just once every 10 years." We pick our way through the trees all afternoon, until we spot the whitewashed walls and terracotta roofs of Quinta da Ortiga, the historic estate where we will spend the night. The horses have the luxury of stables here, and guest rooms are split between the imposing main house and converted outbuildings. I explore the grounds, wandering through the topiary garden to the private chapel. Although tiny, it has an ornate blue and gold reredos and some fine majolica tiles.

It is a peaceful place, but by eight the next morning we are back in the saddle for another day riding through this beautiful landscape. Drifts of pink and yellow blooms colour the hillside and we pass a tumbledown cottage where a gigantic stork's nest dwarfs the chimney. In the afternoon we cross a broad river basin, spooking a herd of cattle. They take flight and we trace the bright bend of the river alone, labouring through thick mud to rejoin the trail.

We are in need of a bath when we finally arrive at our next stop, the Verdemar guesthouse. We hose down the horses and repair to our rooms in the colourful cottages that nestle in citrus groves beside a pool and a tree house. Our host Nuno, an artist and chef, welcomes us, serving roast lamb and apple tart. We stay up late, admiring his paintings and working our way through local liqueurs.

The collective hangover dictates the pace the next morning. After a leisurely crawl through the forest, we leave the horses and pile into a minibus for a planned excursion to the beach near the quiet town of Vila Nova de Milfontes, which has a series of sandy coves backed by high cliffs. The view from the coast path is stunning and it is great to feel the sand between our toes, but after an afternoon of inertia, we are itching to return to the horses.

Reunited, we continue south. The days have acquired the same easy rhythm. We rise early and ride for around five hours, covering the bulk of the route in the morning. The landscape unfolds at our feet: the forest, farmland and rolling hills.

There are exhilarating canters and long, unhurried lunches. We swap stories as we walk and Roger strikes bird species from his list. And although we cross several roads and skirt the ugly towers of a power station, for

the most part we remain deep in a pastoral idyll.

On the final day, we trek into the hills. The eucalyptus forest thins to reveal fields of corn. We follow the path, but find ourselves hemmed in by a new electric fence. Eventually, a farmer rattles up on a motorbike. After an animated discussion with Miguel, he kicks out a couple of posts and flattens the fence, jumping as he inadvertently touches the wire. We thank him as we gingerly file past.

We push on, climbing higher until we reach a ridge. The ocean shimmers in the distance. "It seems like a long time since we were riding on the beach," Courtney sighs. It's true. We have covered a lot of ground. The diverse scenery has made the trip memorable and there is praise for the sweet-tempered horses. With the sun sinking, we head towards our final night's rest. We turn the horses out among the olive trees and recline on the terrace where, over a beer, we watch a fiery sun slip over the horizon.

- Alexandra Ferguson travelled with In The Saddle (01299 272997; www.inthesaddle.com). Departures for the seven-night Alentejo Coastal Trail and the circular Dolphin Trail, in the same region, run until mid November and start again in April 2010. Prices — including transfers, accommodation, full board, wine with lunch, all riding and excursions as per itinerary, but excluding flights — start at £1,230 per person (based on two people sharing).

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