

Black BEAUTIES

JESS MORTON experiences the magic of galloping a black stallion along a Spanish beach in a unique holiday

IMAGES: REBECCA FOLTZ AND SANDRA LOPEZ

In the words of US author Henry Miller: “The aim of life is to live, and to live means to be aware... joyously, drunkenly, serenely, divinely aware.”

So there I was, living. Thundering along an expanse of brilliant white coastline, on the back of a jet black stallion. Sea spray stinging my eyes, and euphoria filling my soul.

Spain boasts incredible scenery, passionate people, food, wine, and so much more. Is there a better way to experience this magical country than by horseback?

To the north of Valencia lies the Costa del Azahar, also known as the Orange Blossom Coast. It is one of the most beautiful expanses of Spanish coastline, where the fragrance of citrus wafts through the air, and narrow



Setting off along the beach, we ride almost in formation

roads snake precipitously through villages of colourful houses.

The coast also has many old castles, some of which were built by the Knights Templar on top of former Arab fortresses.

With this magnificent old-world scenery, the region offers plenty of scope for those who enjoy outdoor pursuits and rural tourism; in particular, horse riding.

Although Spain is best known for its Iberian horse breeds, such as the Andalusian, I am here to ride a Friesian, the beautiful light draught horse that originated in the Friesland region of the Netherlands and became enormously popular as a war horse throughout Europe during the Middle Ages.

I had aspired to ride one of these horses since watching the film *Ladyhawke* as a child. When I heard about two Swedish women organising an exclusive trip with Friesian stallions in Spain, let's just say my inner horse child jumped for

joy, and my boyfriend and I made the booking right away.

From Valencia, we drive down to Les Cases D'Alcanar, a charming fishing village. We find our accommodation, a beautiful stately villa with colourful gardens and a private swimming pool, arriving just in time for a glass of chilled

cava wine and some delicious tapas with the other guests before bedtime. The rest of the riding group are from all around the world, including some who have flown in from Canada and the US. Everyone is as excited as I am about this unique chance to ride

Friesian horses in Spain.

Our room has magnificent views of the ocean, and a balcony to enjoy the light breeze that arrives off the sea. The weather in Spain in October is perfect for a riding holiday; during the day it is warm enough to swim, but the evenings require a light jumper to stay comfortable.

“There I was, living. Thundering along on the back of a jet black stallion.”



LEFT The team who put the trip together (l-r) Oriol, Matilda, Sara and Marc
BELOW We take part in a yoga class at dawn on the plateau of a mountain, with poses carefully adapted to help riders
BOTTOM Our villa bedroom has tantalising views of the turquoise ocean from the balcony window



RIGHT The author on the horse with no name, who is one of the younger stallions at Frisones de la Cruz, an impressive stud facility that has around 80 Friesian horses in total
ABOVE Sunset on the beach at Les Cases D'Alcanar



This trip came about when Oriol and his team were approached by Azahara Adventures, a cultural travel business founded by Matilda and Sara to offer riders the exclusive opportunity of riding purebred Friesian horses while on holiday. The concept of the trip is novel, as they only accept riders who can demonstrate they are competent in the saddle. To apply to join the trip, interested participants must send through video footage confirming they are capable riders. Though this is a bit embarrassing, it does make the whole experience more enjoyable. The horses here are not worn down from tedious nose-to-tail trekking, and the riding is fast-moving and exciting due to the lack of novice participants in the group.

Matilda tells me: "When we were designing this trip, we did our research. We interviewed countless riders to understand what they looked for when they booked a riding holiday. Then I recruited a test group, and we trialled a bunch of different stables to get the right experience.

"All our test riders unanimously agreed – nothing compared to this."

A horse with no name

"*Esto no tiene nombre* (this horse has no name)." Marc passes me the lead rope and indicates where I should tie my horse. While not terribly large, my stallion has a presence that towers above

his actual height. This horse with no name is a striking artistic masterpiece. His long, tousled mane spills over his lustrous black coat, and two big, expressive eyes peer out behind his thick forelock. Getting involved is a crucial element of this trip, and for most people, this will add much to their experience. We guests are responsible for fetching, grooming and tacking up our horses each day, both before and after riding, though help is on hand should we require it from the many friendly grooms.

stallion is one of the youngest, and though he startles occasionally, he never spooks – a testament to the training he has received.

We are assured that though the Friesian gaits can feel intimidating to start with, we will feel comfortable enough to ride our charges out on the beach the final day with confidence. They end with a warning: after our beach ride, we'd be hooked for life.

And they are right. The highlight of the trip was our beach ride on the last day.

"We guests are responsible for fetching, grooming and tacking up our horses each day."

We are split into two groups and are invited to bring the horses into the indoor school to start our lessons. The class starts with some gentle transitions and school movements, and after this, we move into the outdoor arena for further instruction.

The Friesian horse's movement has natural elevation, which can be helpful for dressage movements that require collection. The trot is bouncy, and to follow my horse's movement, I incorrectly try to relax all through my body.

Marc advises me to sit still, which makes a notable improvement. My

The Delta de l'Ebre

The Delta de l'Ebre is the second-largest wetland in the western Mediterranean, after the French Camargue. Around 20% of Spain's rice is grown in the flats, which are also home to Spain's largest colony of flamingos and a herd of roaming Camargue horses. In this out-of-the-way corner of Spain, the vast terrain and wide horizons stretch as far as the eye can see.

We rise early on our last day for a shot of strong Spanish coffee before our transfer to the stables. The horses are waiting for us, and we promptly groom them and load into the horse truck for a

short drive to the wetlands. Once we have arrived at the beach, we tie the stallions up on the side of a boardwalk for saddling. Never once did any of the horses kick or squeal, and watching them in this environment, I can see why this breed is such a popular choice for exhibitions and stunt work.

I fuss over my horse with no name and brush out his long mane, which I had left plaited the day before. Friesians are not low-maintenance horses – and we all enjoy connecting with our inner child as we comb out our horses' manes and tails, and brush their coats in preparation.

Once in the saddle, we set off down the beach at a walk. We ride almost in formation, like we are in a cavalry parade, the horses fall into a soft rhythm, hooves softly beating in unison on the soft white sand as we begin to trot.

Oriol signals for us to move to a slow canter. The horses surge forward, but remain in-hand, listening carefully to our aids. Upfront, Nerea signals with her hand that we will start galloping. She darts forward on her stallion, and one by one, our horses follow her lead. 'No name' is one of the bigger horses in the group, and his long strides make it difficult to stay behind the others; I move him to the outside and let him have his head. He surges forward into a gallop but never pulls. His long mane whips in the wind, and the ground vibrates under his hooves. There is no lack of space. Beach

We awake at dawn to a striking red sunrise before taking a transfer up the mountains to an old rock mine with our Swedish hosts, Sara Kimell and Matilda Axelsson. On the plateau of a mountain, Sara leads us through a unique yoga class. The stretches and poses are carefully adapted to helping riders, and I find the emphasis on hip alignment of interest.

Sara, aside from being an experienced yogi, is a passionate equestrian and

follower of Mary Wanless' biomechanics techniques.

We share a delicious breakfast, and after a few hours of leisure on the beach, we are transferred to the stables, where the real excitement begins.

Frisones de la Cruz is an impressive operation. The owners, brothers Oriol and Juan Manuel de la Cruz, inherited a passion for horses from their father, and now run their own stud importing and breeding Friesians.

The stud has around 80 horses, from foals and youngstock to mares and stallions, all kept in impeccably clean and well-organised facilities. There is an indoor and outdoor arena, as well as a bar and restaurant area for events and groups. The whole setup is managed with the help of instructors Marc and Nerea, who oversee the day-to-day running of the business.

Frisones de la Cruz is not a trail-riding farm aimed at tourists; it is a professional breeding and training operation where horses are produced for competition and international sale.



FROM ABOVE Friesians are not low-maintenance but we enjoy fussing over their lustrous manes and tails TOP The stallions enjoy bounding through the waves

riding is possible all over the world but galloping in unison with a troop of 12 black stallions is not. Galloping astride a fit stallion, with waves crashing beside you – it really is just like you imagine it would be.

We reach the shoreline, and Oriol rides forward to indicate to us how we should enter the water with the stallions. One by one, on a slight angle, we move our horses into the sea. 'No name' hesitates for a moment, looks about, then ploughs into the water enthusiastically. The horses arrange their weight back on their haunches to steady themselves and softly begin to bound over the waves and undulating dunes. My powerful stallion handles the water superbly, with pricked ears and a high head; he seems to be enjoying the experience as much as I am.

I turn to look at one of my fellow riders, who has ridden all over the world.

She is grinning ear to ear. Riding beside her is an Italian footballer, visiting from Barcelona, and Rebecca, an American polo player who resides in Mexico. Both are soaking wet and wiping salt water from their eyes as we ride.

We pause briefly to take some photographs. As we ride back towards home, we ask the horses once again to stretch out, and enjoy a fast-paced gallop along one of the longer stretches of coastline. Locals who are fishing on the beach sit up as they hear the distant thunder of hooves drum into a crescendo and turn and stare at us in wonder as 12 black stallions thunder past.

Damp and a little sunburnt, but too exhilarated to mind, we walk the horses back down the sandy tracks to the carpark where a group of locals has gathered. Children ask to pat the horses, and a couple poses for a selfie with the footballer. One of our group is overwhelmed by the emotion of the experience and cries tears of joy. We all feel more united after this ride; equal part exhausted and invigorated.

We drive back to the stables through the salt pans. The low horizons create a mirror-like effect on the water, and flamingos are dotted over the pearly-hazed vista. It is a peaceful backdrop to

enjoy after such an exciting ride.

The trip is not only about horses. Matilda and Sara combine this unique experience with yoga, private wine tasting and delicious Catalan cuisine. Rather than accommodating guests in hotels, they prefer to work with local guesthouses and chefs – so the experience is both authentic and beneficial to the community.

To finish the trip, we enjoy a paella cooking class in the garden with two local women. Accompanied by copious glasses of Spanish sparkling wine, we learn all about Catalan traditions and sit down together to a great evening of food and horsey conversation. ■

RIDE DETAILS

Azahar Adventures organises three and four-night packages with dressage lessons and exclusive beach riding on the Delta de l'Ebre for experienced riders only. Set dates are available from March through to November each year. Packages start at €950 and include meals, accommodation, riding and all transfers once you have arrived. Closest airports are Valencia and Barcelona. Non-riders are welcome. My non-horsey boyfriend was swept up with Friesian madness and had his first riding lesson with Marc. The experience was so inspirational he has decided to carry on riding when we return home. www.azadventures.se