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THE PRIDE OF ANDALUCIA



Nina Shavel goes to Seville to enjoy a week of riding the spirited, elegant horses of which Spain is so justifiably proud

Andalucian horses have been prized by horse-breeders and riders for centuries. They are very elegant and possess beautiful proportions and powerful quarters. They carry their broad foreheads high, silky manes flowing down their arched necks and their smooth hides gleam, thanks to the attention of their masters.

Highly sought after by the Roman conquerors of Spain, the Andalucian breed is not only ancient but well-travelled – these horses laid the foundation of the Latin-American breeds, having been taken there by Spanish conquistadors, and even such British breeds as the Welsh Cob and the Cleveland Bay.

Wanting to combine a holiday with my curiosity about Spanish horses, I booked a stay at the Epona Equestrian Centre, a British Horse Society approved centre, near Seville.

When our group arrived at the villa – which was surrounded by fields of olive trees as far as the eye could see – it soon became apparent how serious they are about horse-breeding. There were around 60 horses and ponies in various enclosures dotted around the living quarters.

We were greeted by the owner of the centre, Don Fernando, who represented all you imagine a seasoned Spanish horseman to be – weatherbeaten face, grey hair, warm smile and laughing eyes. The other part of the

welcome committee was a group of seven different dogs who seemed ecstatic to see new visitors.

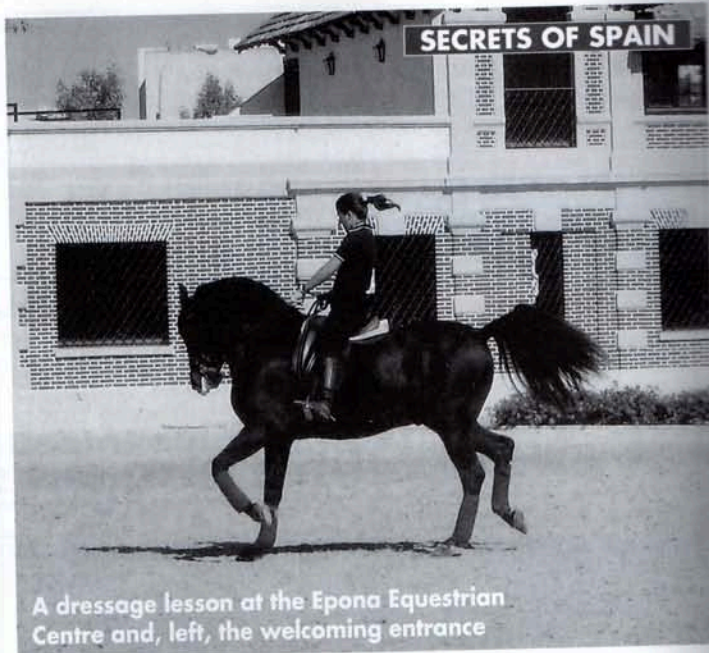
Next morning we rode into the fields at around 10am, to avoid being out in the hottest part of the afternoon. The landscape of red earth and olive trees stretched out before us with hardly another building to be seen.

We trotted for a little, as my horse, Macarena, was eager to go and the silence was broken only by the sound of the horses' hooves on the ground and an occasional command from Don Fernando. When we cantered, the excitement of the speed made me forget everything. I was lost in the sense of oneness between myself and the horse, its powerful body straining to go faster and faster. Three hours flew by, until the rising heat forced us to return.

I enjoyed every ride in the morning, but it was rather tiring, so a shower and a three-course meal prepared on the premises were just what was called for.

Everybody was very friendly and we chatted throughout the meal, which was delicious and hearty without being heavy. After lunch we had a siesta, during which we were free to lounge by the pool, read or sleep.

Then, after the heat had abated, everyone had a lesson, in which an



A dressage lesson at the Epona Equestrian Centre and, left, the welcoming entrance

individual instructor worked with a group of two or three people teaching them dressage, including how to make a horse do pirouettes, or how to jump. All the horses were easy to work with, but we needed to ensure that our hand was felt firmly on the reins to keep their passionate Spanish temperament in check.

As a part of getting to know Andalucian horses and how trainable they are, we went to a show at the Royal School of Equestrian Art. We saw these magnificent animals stand on their hind legs and leap in the air. We also watched some beautiful choreographed "dances" involving 10 horses.

The performance changes every week; Don Fernando goes often and is never bored by it. His daughter had recently become one of the four students chosen from many hundreds of applicants every year and this enhanced his enjoyment. Being praised as an excellent horseman or woman is the highest accolade that can be given to an Andalucian.

One evening we went to see a flamenco show, where song, dance and guitar combine Spanish, gypsy, Moorish and Jewish influences. The movement of the dancers' bodies, the whirling of their long, colourful skirts and the clicking of castanets had a mesmerising effect. It was

a captivating performance.

Afterwards, we dined at a restaurant famous for its tapas, those small, tasty dishes traditionally served as bar snacks with local wine. There were plenty to choose from – tortilla (Spanish omelette with potatoes and vegetables) and cheese croquets (a mixture of potatoes and cheese covered with breadcrumbs) were particularly popular – then we shared a seafood paella.

Spanish food is a culinary delight and its simplicity only enhances its appeal.

The people in this region enjoy food, wine, good conversation and jokes, and the atmosphere of pure *joie de vivre* would be reason enough to go to Andalucia.

I left after a truly magical week, carrying away precious memories of the beautiful horses, happy people and life that can only be described in the brightest colours. It was an experience I will never forget.

● The Epona Equestrian Centre, Carmona 41410, Seville, Spain (334-608 155 359; www.eponaspain.com). A six-night full-board riding holiday, from March, costs from £700 (sharing) for combined training and trail-riding holiday, or £797 (sharing) for training only holiday. Single room supplement is £100. Children aged three years and under go free; there is a 25% discount for children between four and 12; full price for children over 13. All meals, drinks at meal-times and transfers from Seville airport are included in the price, with the exception of two restaurant meals and drinks on the first and last nights. Flights to Seville from London Heathrow (BA) cost around £130 return.