

Riding Vacation Directory

Horse Classics™



2001 Calendar and Handbook

Epona Equestrian Centre - Spain

Epona - Goddess of horses.

And, true to its name, Epona Equestrian Centre has plenty of horses! Located between Seville and Carmona in southern Spain, the Centre has over 60 horses - Andalusians and Andalusians crossed with thoroughbreds or Arabians plus a few ponies and draft horse crosses.

Once surrounded by acres of olive trees, the oldest part of Epona's hacienda is 500 years old - part of it built of stones from the Roman era. During the French attempt to take over Spain, Napoleon billeted his officers in Epona's guest quarters while his troops were in tents under the olive trees out in what is now the paddocks. The outer walls of the two-story hacienda enclose a courtyard, and a massive gate once kept bandits from attacking its inhabitants. Today, Epona is noted for its horses, especially the Spanish Andalusian.



Fernando and Jane García Carvajal were our gracious hosts and with their "20-something" daughters, Vivi and Kati, we were immersed in the beauty, education and instruction of horses and horsemanship. Fernando was born in Columbia, Jane in Scotland and they met in Guatemala before moving to Spain, starting a family, and an equestrian center. Jane, a regional judge of dressage tests, and Fernando were eager to share their knowledge of horses and of the area, patiently answering all of our questions.

My husband, Doug, and I made arrangements through Cross Country International (see Riding Vacation Directory under Worldwide) to visit Epona last October. Our spacious room had twin beds, private bath and wonderful double windows that swung open to give a view of the olive tree-shaded paddocks, the round pen, and the saddling and grooming area. A dressage manège, jumping rings, barn, more paddocks, and a covered arena where we had our daily lessons, were on the other side of the hacienda.



Nikki from Great Britain, Lisa from Boston and Judy from Charlotte, NC, were also guests that week, and we all bonded immediately, sharing humorous incidents and educational equestrian experiences together.

Our first evening Fernando drove us all into the walled town of Carmona for dinner at a local tapas restaurant. For over half a million years people have lived in the vicinity around Carmona, and it is the oldest continuously inhabited town in Europe. After parking our car just outside the town walls, we walked

through the Seville Gate, a mixture of Roman and Moorish construction, and along the narrow streets to the restaurant. A couple of days later we explored the village by car, visiting the museum, parador, market place and ancient churches.

The next morning Fernando assigned us our horses - Pauli, a chestnut thoroughbred cross for Doug and Rambarro, a gray Andalusian gelding with a long wavy mane and tail for me. We rode out across the surrounding countryside with Fernando who pointed out eucalyptus trees, orange trees and fields where cotton and sunflowers were grown. He explained the history, function and difference between the 16th and 17th century haciendas with their olive mills and towers and that of the smaller cortijos.



Throughout our stay at Epona our meals were both native Spanish dishes, such as paella, and typical American fare - chicken and rice, pork and potatoes. My favorite was the flan and fruit offered for dessert every night. Free time for a siesta, reading, swimming in the centre's pool or playing with a new litter of puppies filled our mid-day hours before our equitation lesson in the arena each afternoon.

Husar, a bay Andalusian gelding, was my mount for our dressage lessons. Nikki, Judy, Lisa and I all rode together, but, part of the time, we received separate instruction according to our abilities. Both dressage and jumping lessons were available for beginners to more advanced riders.

We got an early morning start the next day for the 1½ hour drive to the province of Cadiz and the National Wildlife Refuge on the Atlantic Ocean. We drove by farms and orchards of fig, cork, eucalyptus, orange and olive trees, and lollipop-looking pines which produce pine nuts.

The 250,000-acre National Refuge is home to many different animals including lynx, deer, boar, black storks, flamingoes, and the last 120 pairs of Imperial eagles. Mounted on Andalusian cross horses, we rode up into the huge, scrub and bramble-covered dunes and along a ridge before zigzagging down to the beach where we could, seemingly, canter forever on the hard-packed sand next to the breaking waves.

A nice combination of trail riding or sightseeing in the morning and equitation lessons in the late afternoon was planned for us, but Fernando and Jane were open to requests or suggestions if someone wanted to do something different.



While I rode, Doug, who had rented a car, took his clubs and sought out both local and distant golf courses, later reporting back to us how nice they were and how friendly the people were. Fernando helped him arrange tee times, and Doug often played with English-speaking golfers.

We drove to Jerez de la Frontera one morning to see a performance of the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art. Similar to the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, the beauty of the classical horsemanship and Andalusian horses performing to music the passage, half pass, piaffe, pirouette, Spanish Walk and the "air above ground" movements together in groups of four, eight, ten or more, brought tears to my eyes.

The Jerez region is known for its sherry, too, so after going behind the scenes to see the Andalusians relaxing in their luxurious stalls and choosing a few souvenirs, Fernando took us to a shop to taste samples of various sherries. On the way home we saw men on motorbikes riding alongside the fields conditioning their greyhounds for hare hunting season. The unleashed hounds ran freely behind and beside them, their long legs and slender bodies stretching and contracting, accordion-style, in ground-eating strides.



We also visited an Andalusian stud farm where three of the resident stallions were brought out of their stalls for our inspection. They strutted and pranced, eager to show off in front of an audience while we marveled at their strength and beauty.

Our final evening was spent in Seville sightseeing, shopping for samples at an olive oil store, and visiting El Cabello, a tack and riding apparel store that also offered high quality leather goods for sale. Then, a wonderful dinner before enjoying a Flamenco performance at El Patio Sevillano in which one of the dancers was a National Castanet Champion.

Andalusia - land of olive trees and Andalusian horses, where you can see plenty of both - rows of olive trees stretching for miles over rolling hills, flat plains and part way up the sides of mountains and approximately 1500 horse breeding farms!

Doug and I lengthened our vacation by adding a few days in Marbella on Spain's Costa del Sol where we arranged a round of golf at Valderrama, a former Ryder Cup and World Cup course. We toured Granada and the Alhambra, explored a small mountain village, and viewed the Rock of Gibraltar. Sightseeing and shopping, golfing and horseback riding can all be combined in southern Spain for a vacation to appeal to a variety of interests.

