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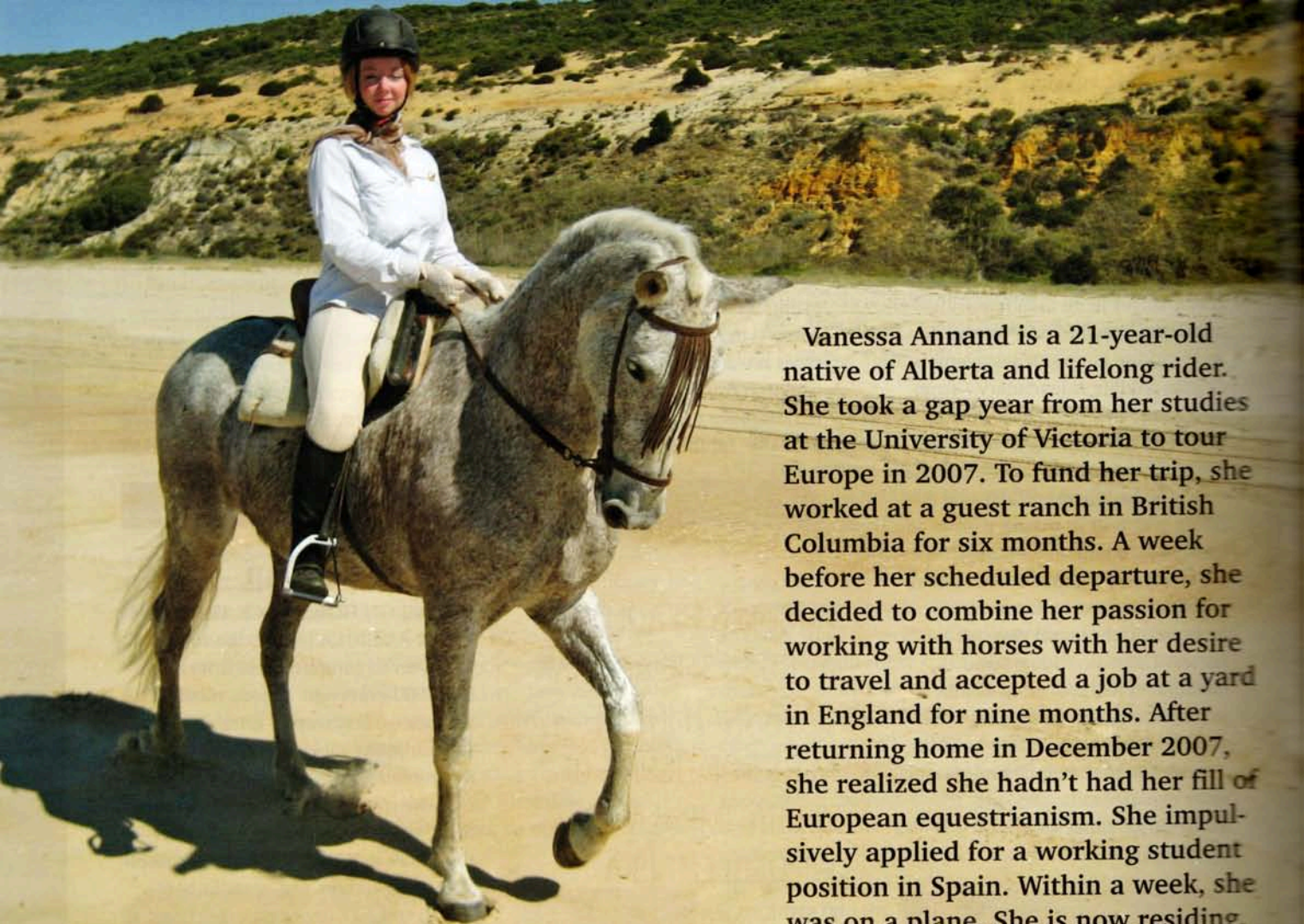
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A Canadian Equestrian Abroad

Vanessa Annand is a 21-year-old native of Alberta and lifelong rider. She took a gap year from her studies at the University of Victoria to tour Europe in 2007. To fund her trip, she worked at a guest ranch in British Columbia for six months. A week before her scheduled departure, she decided to combine her passion for working with horses with her desire to travel and accepted a job at a yard in England for nine months. After returning home in December 2007, she realized she hadn't had her fill of European equestrianism. She impulsively applied for a working student position in Spain. Within a week, she was on a plane. She is now residing, learning, and riding in Andalucia.

Wondering if a working student gig would work for you? Read on. In the following article, the first of three installments, Vanessa describes her experiences at the Epona Equestrian Center.

by Vanessa Annand
photos by Karin Borg

On January 12, 2008, in the balmy night air of a parking lot just outside of Seville's San Pablo Airport in Andalucia, Spain, a command rings out. "Keep the leg on! More impulsion!" cries Catalina Garcia Dow, head instructor at Epona Equestrian Center. However, there is not a horse or rider in sight. There is only me, struggling to push my luggage trolley up a ramp into the parking lot.

"Well done!" she says, laughing as I overcome the incline. We make our way to the blue minivan that will take us to Epona, the riding holiday center owned and run by the Garcia family.

A hack along the shell-strewn Atlantic coast that is sheltered by rugged cliffs.

When we get there, I'm sure I'll hear that instruction again, probably many times in the next six months. I've accepted a working student position at Epona Equestrian Center for that duration. I've flown across an ocean. I've navigated my way through four different airports. Now it's time for me to see how a riding holiday center cum dressage yard is managed, and how I'll contribute to the day to day routine there.

The next morning, I'm up early to meet Karin Borg, a multilingual Swedish employee at Epona who will introduce me to the tasks and horses I'm to become familiar with.

"You can groom these six horses every morning," she



Vanessa leads Rumbero, a registered Andalusian gelding, past the white-washed Hacienda Los Nietos.

says. Six Andalusian heads peer out from their terra cotta coloured stables. Six long manes to be detangled. Twenty-four hooves to be picked out. An indefinite number of stable stains to be removed. I am determined to devote hours to Mission: Immaculate.

When Karin re-appears after half an hour, I've started to groom my second horse.

"Ready for breakfast?" she asks.

Looks like Mission: Immaculate will need an element of speed introduced to it.

Within a week, I've become more familiar with and considerably faster at a typical day's tasks. My schedule is, with slight variations, as follows:

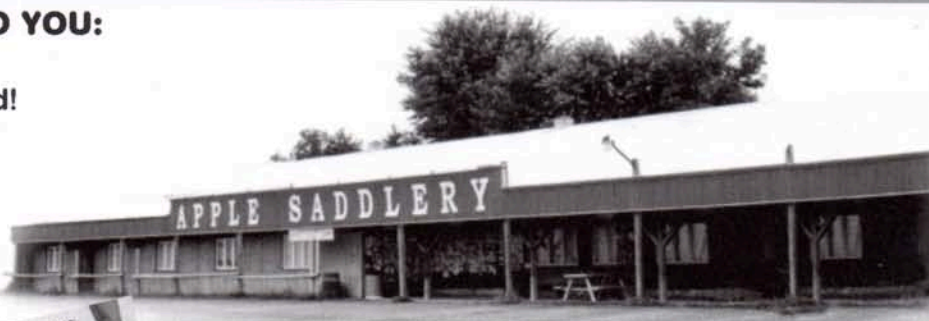
- 7:30-8:30 am: Groom stabled horses
- 9:00-10:00 am: Groom and tack up horses for the guests to hack out on.
- 10:00-11:30 am: Trim horses and/or clean tack
- 11:30-12:30 am: Have a private lesson where I practice, with varying degrees of success, my leg yield, *travers*, and shoulder in.
- 12:30-1:30 pm: Untack horses who have returned from the hack and tidy yard.
- 1:30-4:00 pm: Lunch and that spectacular Spanish tradition of siesta.
- 4:00-5:00 pm: Groom and tack up horses for the guests' lessons.
- 5:00-6:00 pm: Gently exercise horses who are coming back into work after injuries while guests are in lesson.
- 6:00-7:00pm: Untack lesson horses, quarter and rug up stabled horses for the night.

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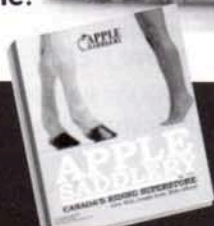
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Of course, my day's work is only a fragment of the operations at the riding center. Epona is a family business headed by Fernando and Jane Garcia and their two daughters. Fernando is the head guide on hacks and on excursions into nearby Carmona, Seville, and Jerez de la Frontera. Jane cooks the much vaunted traditional Spanish cuisine, takes reservations, and responds to inquiries. Catalina (Caty), the eldest daughter, teaches the bulk of the lessons with her Intermediate Instructor certification from the British Horse Society. Viviana (Vivi), the younger daughter, trained for four years at the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art, and applies her knowledge daily when schooling the horses at Epona and managing the stables.

Add to the family core an assortment of gardeners, kitchen help, housekeeping, and working students, and you have the mix of nationalities and abilities that make Epona run smoothly.

Most of the time.

The schedule I detailed above is at best an approximation of a day. This isn't just because the tasks vary. It's because there are unforeseen interruptions to a workday centered around the unpredictable species of *el caballo*.

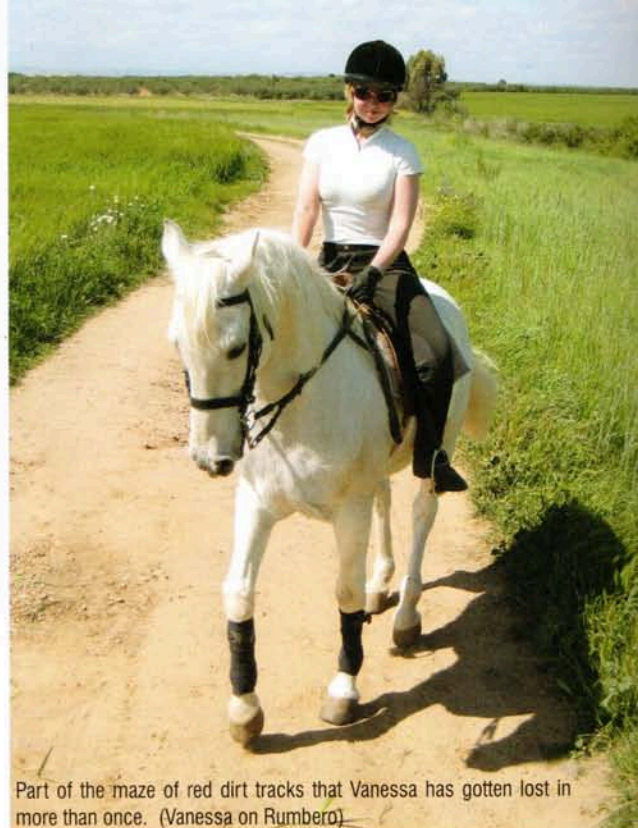
Take, for instance, the day I bathed Eldorado, an elderly pony whose days are spent dozing and giving the occasional pony ride. All that dozing means a lot of lying on the bright red Andalusian soil. This dirt has so altered his appearance that rather than a pale palomino, Eldo resembles a hopeful candidate for an equine re-telling of Anne of Green Gables. He is carrot-coloured.

Perhaps it was this ambition to be an L.M. Montgomery heroine that made him so resistant to the bath. It began with fidgeting and stepping on my foot. When I yelped, he applied even more weight to said foot. When I hobbled over with hose in hand to rinse him off, Eldo—who'd adopted a deceptive docility that I mistook for remorse, or at least resignation to his fate of cleanliness—lept backwards and swooped his head in a single deft movement that left him without a halter and me stunned.

I knew he would roll in the dirt, as wet horses do. What I didn't know was that he would wait until I was just within reach of him before trotting off a few paces and rolling with exaggerated, grunting relish.

I caught him and fastened the halter more tightly, only to discover that this was futile in the face of his Houdini-esque maneuverings. This time, instead of running off, he responded to my voice commands and halted. With the resourcefulness of the desperate, I whipped my sweater off to wrap around his neck in the absence of the cursed halter. By the time I coaxed him back to where the empty halter dangled and re-tied him, the shirt was irrevocably stretched out.

I decided a different halter was in order. Before the switch could take place, though, Eldo gave a virtuoso per-



Part of the maze of red dirt tracks that Vanessa has gotten lost in more than once. (Vanessa on Rumbero)

formance of his signature ducking and diving. He got to roll again. A lot. The bath had to be repeated.

I got a glimpse into what a mid-life crisis must feel like: I questioned my career choice, asked how I ended up here, and was overwhelmed by the urge to buy a fast car (not to show off in, but simply to chase down this evasive pony).

Interruptions to the routine aren't always of the comically bad variety. Karin has been guiding me in what she calls, "The Spanish Way": taking time to watch and appreciate. Everyone at Epona embraces this mode of living. Vivi takes a break from her rigorous training to photograph the horses at play in their paddocks. Caty invites me to smell the orange blossoms that have started to appear on the grounds.

For my part, rather than rushing off when the last surcingle has been fastened at the end of the day, I tend to linger. I watch those earnest, dipping heads. I blow in those proffered muzzles. I listen to next door's over-zealous rooster herald the dawn twelve hours too early. I reflect on what I've learned in my first weeks as a working-student. I came to Spain determined to learn all I could about the management of a European riding holiday center, and to adhere to the schedule that was outlined for me. However, perhaps more important than the ability to tick all the boxes every day is the ability to embrace the unforeseen changes and unscripted moments that abound where horses are involved.

After all, it's the unexpected that gives us something to talk about. Or write about. 🐾

Watch for Vanessa's next installment in the July/August issue.