



Riding in Croatia



Living in Australia, but originally from the UK, Denise Legge visits her family once a year. As an avid horse riding enthusiast she combines this trip with a riding holiday somewhere in the world.

Having been to Poland, Portugal, Spain, France and Tasmania the question was, where next?

A riding friend suggested Croatia, which as a general holiday destination had great reviews. When she contacted the farandride website it offered 5 days, 7 nights accommodation, riding, all meals and drinks with meals, airport collection and return for about \$1,500, so Denise is now sharing her experience with readers.

by Denise Legge.

*Photos kindly supplied by
Elise Freedman.*

"The first surprise was landing at the Zagreb airport. I expected some neo-brutal communistic style building but the ultra modern airport would not have looked out of place on the film set of Prometheus. There were five of us on the ride; Elise from Scotland (who very kindly supplied the photos), Carine from France, Felicity from Denmark and Magali from the French island of Reunion plus myself. We were met by the son of the ranch owner, who spoke excellent English, and delighted in learning new expressions. Only 20 minutes away from the airport and we were deep into the very green Croatian countryside with chooks running around the gardens and black clad old ladies cutting the grass with scythes.

A late lunch at the ranch restaurant was followed by a trip to the stables to meet our horses. We were assigned horses based on the information we filled out on the farandride questionnaire. The first two days were spent riding in and around the Old Mulberry Farm itself so if horses and riders were not a good match there was the chance to change but generally Milorad, the ranch owner, founder and first secretary of the Croatian Gallop Association, was spot on with his selection.

The horses were a mixture of TB and TBX and Croatian WB's, all useful sorts. My horse went by the name of Junior and was about 14.3, black/brown; very much like my own gelding at home.

As we were the first group of the season the horses had been in training for the last four weeks. The saddlery was English style and in good repair. Under the saddles the horses wore a folded woollen blanket with a cut out for the wither, a cotton saddle blanket with pockets for coats and cameras, a sheepskin followed by a gel pad. With the exception of the guide's horse Badco, all the horses

had snaffle bridles without a noseband as head-collars were worn underneath and lead ropes clipped to the saddles. Our guide Sefi was Tunisian and wore traditionally embroidered Tunisian clothing and had the most amazing balance. Sefi kept us amused by riding side saddle or by standing up on the horse's rump and the lighting up of a cigarette was no indication of a slower pace! He also kept us very safe with warning shouts of "careful!" and helping us over ditches and creeks by creeping down to the obstacle to avoid any massive leaps.

The horses were very sure-footed (unshod), coped with all manner of terrain and were not phased by deer, tractors and dogs. They were responsive; after a warning shout of "little bit trot, little bit gallop" from Sefi you could find the go button and later the brakes.

At the end of each day the horses were fed a mixture of maize and black oats and when at the ranch, turned out to grass plus meadow hay. During our lunch breaks the horses were happy to be hard tied (no bridles and girths loosened) and eat hay whilst we riders enjoyed a barbecue or a woodland picnic.

OUR WEEK WENT LIKE THIS:

Day 1 - get collected at the airport, meet our hosts and horses and settle in; Felicity and I choose to stay in the cottage (2 x twin bedded rooms with ensuites) and a kitchen diner plus terraces. The other guests were accommodated in the mini hotel (8 rooms all with ensuites) plus a common room with kitchen and bar (on an honesty basis) and lounge.

Day 2 - we groomed and helped tack up our horses and rode around the estate (75 acres +) during the morning and later again after lunch. I think this day reinforced our confidence

Continued



*Above:
The stables were
well set up.*

*Right:
When camping
the horses were
washed in the river
and given a 'string'
scrapping.*

*Opposite page:
The ride passed
small holdings
and picturesque
villages.*



04



SCARED OF THE "C" WORD ?

Why are we so scared of Cantering?

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Left and below: The food and hospitality were superb and the riders experienced the full range of venues, from local restaurants to noon stops in the forests to meals in the ranch restaurant.

Bottom: Grazing on the banks of the river before entering the small village.



in Sefi and our horses as they coped with up hill and down dale plus marshes and woodland. After supper some of us took advantage of the sauna - recommended to help aching limbs.

Day 3 - we rode through forests and meadows to the river Kupa where we were transported down river to a wonderful banquet of fresh fish and salad. Our horses snacked on the river banks whilst we enjoyed Croatian hospitality and of course the traditional schnapps! Too cold to swim but we did get our feet wet paddling in the Kupa. Then it was back to the ranch restaurant and a relaxing sauna.

Day 4 - apparently a rest day for us. No riding but instead a visit to the picturesque old mill town of Rastoke, followed by a couple of ferry rides in the Plitvice National Park and 6km of board-walks/steps to marvel at the crystal clear water and amazing waterfalls. This place has UNESCO rating but is in danger of losing it because visitors exceeded 1 million last year. Stunning scenery but even though it was not high season, some spots felt like "selfie-stick city". We enjoyed a great supper at a local restaurant before being bussed back to the ranch.

Day 5 - we rode through an ancient beech and oak forest and spotted both deer and boar before enjoying a picnic/BBQ lunch. We ended up at Topusko where the horses were stabled in a converted boat shed and we had the chance to enjoy the Top Terne Spa Centre. The warm water pools were a good antidote to our day in the saddle and a few of us even joined in an aqua aerobics class.

Day 6 - we got close to the top of Petrova Gora (St Peter's Mountain) and it was an awe-inspiring ride with a great lunch at a bee farm and supper at a traditional hunting lodge. The horses were corralled in a small green paddock at the end of their ride after being washed down in the fresh stream. No sweater scraper so they just used a bit of baling string.

CROATIAN FACTS

SIZE - 56,538 square kilometres (a bit smaller than Tasmania)

POPULATION - 4.4m

A crescent shaped country in SE Europe with over 1,000 islands along its coastline in the Adriatic Sea

BRIEF HISTORY - originally part of the Austrian-Hungarian empire until the end of WW1, then became a Kingdom for a short while before being invaded by Axis forces in WW2. Post WW2 united under Marshall Tito as part of Yugoslavia. On Tito's death independence was sought. The Serbian/Croatian war 1991-1995 caused a huge amount of damage to cities and industry.



Day 7 - our last riding day over some quite testing countryside and towards the end we had some great gallops. At the end of the ride the horses were released into their resting paddock for their week off (great to see that the horses were fed for the work to be done) and riders enjoyed a final farewell supper beautifully produced by Milica, as were all the meals throughout the ride.

Our week had passed very quickly and in all we covered 155km on horse-back. The farandride website promised that this riding holiday would be the perfect way to experience the beautiful and unspoilt Croatian countryside. And they were spot on. I was also impressed by the genuine hospitality and friendliness shown by the Croatians we met during our week. Milorad and Bojan should be congratulated on not only the way they manage the ranch and the horses but also in show-casing Croatia

