

Rosie's trip across Portugal #touroperatorontour March 2016

My first recce trip for Ride World Wide visiting 2 different potential new destinations, followed by a quick visit to the Alentejo Coast to meet our good friend, Claudia exciting!

Sunday 13th March - After a short drive from Lisbon airport, I found myself at Quinta do Pilar - the heart of the Henrique Abecasis Lusitano Stud. Shown round the stud farm by Tiago Abecasis, Henrique's son in gorgeous sunshine, falling in love with the old fashioned stable blocks and of course the beautiful Lusitano horses. I soon began to realise that Tiago was very successful in both breeding and competing Lusitano horses. Dinner with the other guests next to an open roaring fire (very much appreciated on this rather cool March evening) before being transferred to the Vineyard of Quinta de Lapa - not the usual accommodation for Equestrian Tourism Portugal's itineraries but I was not complaining #touroperatorontour!



Quinta do Pilar - Henrique Abecasis stud and mares and foals enjoying the sunshine

Monday 14th March - Met by Marta (Tiago's right hand) and then our guide, Edgar Alexandre (Marta's husband, who has worked for Tiago since he was 18 - he is now 34!). Edgar is very traditionally Portuguese, riding in a classic Portuguese bridle and his great grandfather's Portuguese army saddle with the solid stirrups, ordinarily used for bull fighting. Homebred Lusitano mares, waited patiently for us in simple snaffle bridles and very comfortable trail saddles. A short morning's ride through the forests surrounding the farm brought us to Vale dos Fornos for wine tasting and a typical Portuguese lunch before riding onto Quinta de Cerca where the horses would spend the night. Usually guests spend the first two nights at Quinta de Cerca but due to a bereavement we were transferred back to Quinta de Lapa for another comfortable evening.



Our first view



Vale de Fornos

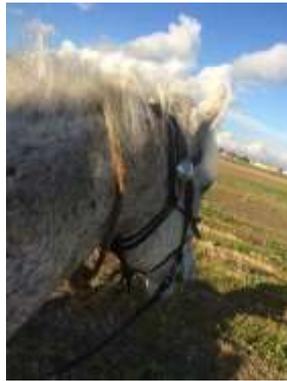


In the Eucalyptus

Tuesday 15th March - Fully equipped in our rain gear we set off in search of toiros bravos (fighting bulls) - on entering the 500 hectare farm we soon spotted a herd of horses and a flashy black stallion. As safety of the guests is priority for Edgar we quickly retreated back to the road. The bulls would have to be spotted from the road as none of us fancied being chased by a stallion! After a short spell on the road we enjoyed our first canters through the recently harvested tomato fields before arriving at a local restaurant, where we tasted the local delicacy of deep fried eel (I never thought I would eat eel - it was actually very tasty!). Following parts of the Caminho de Fátima (Walking Pilgrim from Lisbon to Fatima) we reached Santarém, one of the last Moorish bastions in Portugal, sitting on a hillside over the Tejo valley. This evening was spent within the medieval ramparts of the castle of Santarém at the Manor House hotel, Casa da Alcacova with wonderful views of the Tejo river.



On Caminho de Fatima



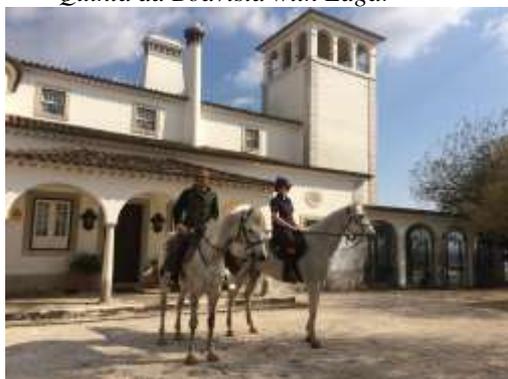
Nearly at Santarem



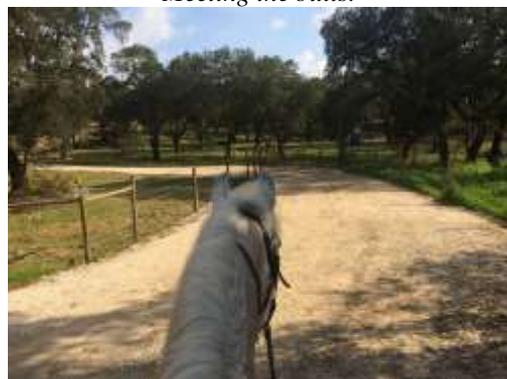
The Tejo River from Casa da Alcacova

Wednesday 16th March - A foggy start cleared to bright sunshine as we set off up to the old town of Santarém - attention was needed as we rode alongside the train line and down cobbled streets before heading out into the countryside once again. Eventually we reached the beautiful Quinta da Boavista owned by the Tavares de Pina family who are renowned for their carriage driving and sport horses. After lunch Edgar gave us a tour of the very impressive stable yard and gallery (which is larger than my sitting room) overlooking the grand indoor arena on one side and the astounding Tejo River on the other! When travelling with a full group, you may be lucky enough to experience a carriage driving lesson. The sun was still shining as we set off following the river up into the surrounding forest, where we came across some fighting bulls (luckily behind a huge fence!) Enjoying the odd canter through farmland we reached the small town of Azinhaga and our accommodation for the night Casa da Azinhaga - not as grand as the manor house in Santarem but still a very comfortable guest house. My last evening with guests - tomorrow I would be having a dressage lesson or two!

Quinta da Boavista with Edgar



Meeting the bulls!



Thursday 17th March - Right in the centre of Azinhaga the Manor House of Solar do Espirito Santo, dating back to the 15th century is well hidden behind huge walls (I didn't believe it was actually there!) and has undergone a great restoration to produce this equestrian centre. Shown round by the co-owner Raquel Firmino, I soon discovered an intensive dressage holiday could actually be quite good (and relaxing too)! The covered arena is huge to allow all levels to perform - from amateur to professional riders and is located in the centre of the Espirito Santo grounds, just next to the swimming pool, pool bar and stables so you can watch other guests' lessons from the comfort of your sun lounger!



The Manor House



Swimming Pool & Bar



The Arena

My instructor for the day Eyke Krause (half German / half Portuguese) soon had me riding a beautiful Lusitano and experiencing an extremely powerful extended trot - What an incredible feeling! After 45 minutes of "shoulder ins", "leg yields", "half passes" and diagonal extensions (to name just a few) I was looking at dressage with a very different view! I had another lesson on a different horse before lunch and then I got to ride one of "the" best pure bred Lusitano stallions on the yard! Towering over me I climbed aboard - excited / anxious for my lesson ahead. I never thought I would learn how to do a passage on a Lusitano Stallion. As the heat of the day began to subside I rode a lovely little bay Lusitano stallion and enjoyed counter canters and flying changes. The horses are mostly all ridden in double bridles but are all different to ride and really help you develop and improve your dressage skills. The accommodation is very comfortable and was all refurbished in 2011 using a slightly "boutiquey" design. For anyone wanting to try a dressage holiday this really is a great experience and very good value - I am really looking forward to adding Solar do Espirito Santo to our portfolio!



Really enjoying classical dressage

Friday 18th March - I eventually arrived in the rain (again!) on the Alentejo Coast at Herdade do Pessegueiro (already in our Portfolio), this was a flying visit to catch up with Claudia. After lunch in Claudia's family restaurant on the sea front (without beautiful views of the rocky Ilha do Pessegueiro due to the miserable weather) and a short drive to the farm, the rain clouds cleared just in time for me to enjoy a quick ride with Diogo and Paulo. Paulo is somewhat part of the furniture at Herdade Pessegueiro having been there for approximately 25 years so he has a great knowledge of the area. We had a lovely canter along the cliff top with a slightly cloudy view over the beach before riding down over some sand dunes and onto the beach! The last time I rode on the beach (albeit in Cornwall) my horse and I ended up going for an unplanned swim so I was a little dubious but Paulo and Diogo encouraged me to take the mare into the sea and then had a great laugh when she started splashing around and soaking me! The ride ended with a long canter along the beach before riding back to the stables - it really is very idyllic and peaceful with the only noise; the sound of the waves.



A late afternoon ride to the Beach!

Saturday 19th March - A 10 minute stroll down to the beach for breakfast at the restaurant in glorious sunshine was a fab start to the day! Diogo and I set off in the sunshine, heading north to the small fishing village of Porto Covo, following winding cliff tops with wonderful views over the rocky coves and unspoilt beaches that line the coast. As we rode back to the farm, the skies became darker and darker and the heavens opened just as we arrived in the yard - what good timing! The Alentejo Coast really is a great ride - nice Lusitano horses, comfortable accommodation (currently in the process of being refurbished) and Diogo, Claudia and Paulo will ensure you all have a great time. I was the only guest at the time but I felt very much at home and would highly recommend to a single traveller. Cliff top views, rocky coves, unspoilt beaches with the added extra of riding great Lusitano horses - what is there not to love?



The Cottages

Some of the horses

Last ride on the beach

Cliff top views