

LOUISE'S SIERRA NEVADA BLOG
The Contraviesa Ride, 8th to 15th October 2016

DAY 1 - On the road

A horribly early start to catch my flight, a few hours in Malaga airport before our mini-bus driver arrived, then we piled in (a couple my age and two ladies, another two would arrive later) and off we went. Along the motorway then up, up, up the twisting mountain roads - if you suffer from travel sickness then I encourage you to take your tablets!



We got to Bubion to be greeted by our host Dallas Love, at Casa La Sevillana, the spacious townhouse where we would stay. After a rest I went out exploring, to find that Bubion is utterly captivating. Built on the steep mountain side, its narrow streets are lined with white washed stone houses, flowers crowding their balconies, and a freshly flowing water fountain around every corner. Dallas told us that evening that Bubion was a Berber settlement and that the fountains dated from those times, meaning that some had served the town for over 1000 years. The views over the mountains and soft pink sunset were magical.

Dallas took us for a delicious meal at a restaurant in the town and we chatted about our forthcoming adventures. A few of my companions had not been on a riding holiday before and none of us had been to the Sierra Nevada, so though we were all very much looking forward to getting going, we were all a bit nervous, too!



DAY 2 - Up and away!

A delicious breakfast at Casa la Sevillana before being picked up by Dallas for the short drive to her stables, where a multitude of horses, many of them greys with distinctive brands on their quarters, greeted us. My first impression was how healthy and happy all of the horses were, living out together as a herd. Dallas took great care to introduce everyone to their horses and I was delighted to find that my mare for the week, "Caprichosa", was a purebred grey Andalusian, about 15hh, compact and beautiful.



We set off, some horses carrying panniers containing our picnic lunch, others with the vital task of transporting the wine! Up the huge glacial Poqueira valley, crossing summer pastures and Berber immigration channels - Dallas told us that some of them dated from 900AD, and despite this they still worked better than the modern versions. The going got increasingly steep, and I realised that despite the fact that the horses walk a lot on this ride, it is by no means boring. The terrain is challenging and it was an eye opener for me to see such nimble horses crossing the steep and rocky sections. I can't imagine that the Thoroughbreds I ride at home would cope.



The views were incredible - the sides of the valley seem rippled, covered in soft green tussocks and with the shadows of clouds scudding across. We could see right up to Mulhacen, at a dizzying 3,478 metres, the highest peak in Spain. After a few hours riding we arrived to a small valley with a babbling brook, our lunch spot, where we tied the horses up to doze in the heat of the afternoon. We sat by the stream to enjoy the feast that was unpacked from our saddle bags - pork roasted with apricots, a huge salad, fresh bread, goat's cheese and those tomatoes,

ripened by the hot sun, that you simply cannot get at home. Dallas told us that her neighbour exchanges them for horse manure!

After lunch we went back onto the forestry tracks and had some lovely canters. It took me a while to get used to the style of riding - less is more, leg off and a very light contact - definitely easier on both horse and rider when you spend many hours on board. That evening we enjoyed supper at a different restaurant in Bubion and returned to Casa la Sevillana to pack our bags - tomorrow we were off! I had survived my first day and couldn't wait to explore more of the Sierra Nevada.

DAY 3 - Bubion to Trevez

Back to the stables and we were all a little quicker off the mark! One lady had found her horse a little big, and Dallas had swapped her onto a neat bay mare, who she loved. We set off downhill this time, to the "Valley of Blood", the scene of much bloodshed during the Spanish Civil War. One of the great things about this ride is that you pass many fascinating historical towns and locations, and Dallas always stops to explain and share her knowledge of the area.





It got greener as we descended, a stream tumbling beside us, shadowed by towering Spanish chestnuts. Dismounting to scramble down steep sections at times, we eventually came around to the huge Valley of Trevezlez and started to climb upwards again, seeing lots of smallholdings. The farmers in the foothills of the Sierras grow a wide variety of produce, with vegetables, small fields of crops, olives, grapes, walnuts and peaches. Dallas' horses are keen foragers - they loved picking up fallen apples, and Caprichosa was very partial to a fig!

After some canters on the forestry paths, we arrived at a lovely spot amongst the pine trees for a scrumptious lunch of lemon chicken. Nothing went to waste as the horses loved getting left over salad and bread - in fact as soon as they saw us packing up the picnic each day they would start to look at us expectantly.



We enjoyed some long canters after lunch, Caprichosa loved it and I was in my own little world. Suddenly everyone skidded to a halt, blocked by a very excited donkey in the middle of the path! The horses sidled past suspiciously, but the lone donkey decided that he had finally found some company and determinedly kept following us. We had to round the next few bends at a smart trot to leave him behind!

The views out across and back down the valley were wonderful, with craggy peaks towering above us. Around the next corner and we spotted Trevezlez, our destination, in the distance, nestled in the massive valley. Dallas pointed out some of the routes she takes her high mountain rides on - what an adventure that must be! We descended past more small farms then through the quiet cobbled streets of Trevezlez, the highest town in Spain, and like Bubion originally a Berber settlement. The horses would stay in a traditional stone barn, and after giving them a well-deserved shower (it had been a hot day, despite being high in the mountains, and early October) we took them into the cool to relax and munch their oat hay.

My room at Hotel Fragua was (like all of the hotels we stayed at) scrupulously clean, with a large shared balcony looking out over the valley, giving a wonderful view of the sunset. We enjoyed supper at a pleasant restaurant in town before an early night for all, well deserved after a long but very rewarding day.

DAY 4 Trevezlez to Berchules



We led the horses through Trevezlez, past the ham curing houses for which the area is famous, and hopping on board to ride along a Moorish irrigation channel. Then on to small tracks, with the horses climbing up incredibly steep sections - I rode at the back of the group for most of the week and so could fully appreciate their powerful Andalucian hindquarters! The steep climb took us to a high, dry plateau, the Sierra of Juviles. The Sierra Nevada has suffered from a dry year and soaring temperatures; much of the ride was still green and beautiful, but on these high, exposed areas you could see how punishing the climate is in the area.

The horses were getting excited as we walked through some shady pine trees; they knew a good canter spot was coming up (I must add that they are all very kind and don't do anything scary, just a bit of jig-jogging and snorting - they love their jobs)! Off we went, Rona leading on her horse Tanque - we all had the chance to lead the ride during the week, with Dallas calling out directions where necessary - great fun, and it definitely gave us even greater appreciation of Dallas' vast knowledge of the mountains. Lunch was an excellent spinach tortilla, eaten high up amongst the trees.



Eventually we came to the next valley, which was much greener - it was amazing how quickly the vegetation changed - passing flocks of goats wearing bells, some with a young herder accompanying them. Lastly quite a long walk on foot down to the town of Berchules, built in typical local fashion on the side of the hill, where the horses all crowded around the fountain to enjoy a long and well-earned drink of the sweet water.



The horses settled for the night in a spacious barn near the Hotel Berchules, our accommodation for the next two nights. It was a lovely spot - the rooms have balconies looking out over the valley, there is a very nice pool (I did test it, much to the owners amusement!), and interesting books to peruse over an aperitif before a very hearty supper of lentil stew, grilled chicken, and for pudding a local speciality, almond custard.

DAY 5 - Contraviesa

We set out on a day ride to the Contraviesa foothills, for which the ride is named. It was a fascinating morning - none of us could get over the variety of landscapes we were experiencing throughout the week. We went down out of the village, passing a wealth of cultivation, and sampling grapes (Dallas knew the farmer!) so sweet and dark they almost tasted like a fruity wine - Caprichosa enjoyed them too!

Climbing up, we found wild rosemary and thyme amongst outcrops of a clay type rock, still used by locals to roof their houses. Following a winding path through the valley, we passed through a tiny hamlet called Montenegro, with a hilltop chapel - Dallas explained that this was where Aben Aboo, last Moorish king in Spain, once lived, before he was stabbed to death in a nearby cave, by his own men.



We descended back down to the riverbed in the valley of Yator and arrived to our lunch spot, sheltering under trees from the drizzle that had closed in (it hadn't rained since May!), and enjoying delicious meatballs. The wine was appreciated as a bit of Dutch courage - we feared it might keep raining, and we were far from home!



Dallas had told us that the riverbed was an excellent spot for canters so we mounted up excitedly; the horses were snorting as we gathered before jumping off for some wonderful long canters, the dry riverbed providing excellent going. We pulled up at the end, exhilarated, and wishing we could do it all over again! But then the rain had really set in - we appreciated our waterproofs as we passed the dry River Cadiar, alongside rows of fruit trees, and back onto the path up to Berchules. Rubbing down the horses back at the stables soon warmed us, followed by hot baths and

drinks at the hotel - admittedly we were all rather wiped out at supper that night!

DAY 6 - Berchules to Morayma

Everyone agreed that it was best to cut the route short to do a morning ride only, as more showers were forecast that afternoon. We rode back down the valley alongside the River Cadiar (already flowing strongly after the rain) and past yet more fruit trees, adding kiwi and quince to our tally. We took a detour up into the mountains among the almond groves, enjoying wonderful views of Berchulez across the valley. Dallas stopped to crack fresh almonds for us - what a treat.



We got to the beautiful country hotel, Morayma, by the early afternoon, with perfect timing as dark clouds had begun to gather, and left the horses munching hay to go and have lunch. The hotel was built by an antiquarian who had furnished it with wonderful woodwork, furniture, pottery and tiles, rescued from Moorish mansions in Granada. Every room was unique with beautiful dark wood, colourful fabrics and tiles. Sadly it was a bit chilly to use the pool but it looked like it would be gorgeous on a sunny day!

Everyone relaxed and wandered around the grounds and vineyards (they produce organic wines and olive oil) before returning for supper, a very traditional rabbit paella - a hearty meal for an autumnal evening. I went to bed feeling refreshed for the next day's riding, all the way back to Bubion.



DAY 7 - Back to Bubion!

An early start with everyone eating plenty of toast as Dallas had told us there was a lot of ground to cover - we would ride for around 8 hours in total. We set off through the green valley, passing the villages of Lobras and Timar, built like most in the area on the steepest of slopes, then on to an old winding Berber road and passing an abandoned copper mine; we learn that there has been mining in the Sierras since Roman times.

Before long we were at the top of the impressive gorge of Trevezlez, which we would descend by foot. Perhaps fortunately, when you are at the top it is so steep that you can't really see the path below, zig-zagging down for 350 metres. It was a tad hair raising but the horses handled it like the pros they are, and we all got safely to the bottom - phew!



It was incredible to cross the Roman bridge at the bottom of the gorge, thinking of the people and animals who had trodden the same path for centuries. We puffed our way up the other side, legs a little shaky - luckily it was only a short way to Portugos, where we tied the horses to trees, walking to the restaurant with our bridles over our shoulders!



We set off after a hearty lunch with only a few hours to go, heading back on to the quiet forestry roads. Caprichosa had a turn in front, marching along with ears pricked and seemingly untired by our exploits, and I felt sad that I would be saying goodbye to the little mare soon - she had a lovely spirit, fun to ride and happy in her work. Everyone had become very fond of their horses - all eight of them were incredibly sure-footed and willing. But then we rounded a corner to spot snow on the Sierras - the first snow of the year! It was a truly magical sight to return to.

Dallas' horses were lined up back at the stables like a welcome committee and I said a fond farewell to Caprichosa. I couldn't believe that it was all over, but was so glad to have had the most amazing experience. Despite having worked with horses all over the world, I have never actually been on a riding 'holiday' before, and had been amazed at the effect it had. All of my normal, day-to-day worries had completely left me, as though my thoughts had been elevated with the altitude.



We enjoyed a final supper together back in Bubion before our flights home the next day, and as we raised our glasses to Dallas I am sure we all shared the same thought, which is how fortunate we were to have ridden with her - a true horsewoman with a deep love and vast knowledge of the beautiful and fascinating Sierra Nevada.