

On the hoof in Andalucia

Inspired by a memoir in a second-hand bookshop, Kate Kellaway saddles up for an adventure on horseback through the Sierra Nevada

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White wash ... The Andalucian hills. Photograph: Alamy

Just under a year ago, in a second-hand bookshop, I came across a memoir by Penelope Chetwode, John Betjeman's wife, about riding on horseback through Andalucia, published in 1963. It is a charming, intrepid story, but what I liked most about it was its title: *Two Middle-aged Ladies in Andalusia*. One of the middle-aged ladies was a horse: a splendid portly mare, *La Marquesa*. I had a particular reason for being drawn to Chetwode's classic. I had just started, as a middle-aged lady myself, to ride. As a child, I had barely ridden: a dozen lessons, a couple of trekking holidays. I had been an uneasy rider. An unnatural. I never took part in a gymkhana nor pined for a rosette. Mine was a romance about leaving the pedestrian life behind: saddling up and riding away, preferably on a horse of my own. But that dream never materialised. And before long a teacher, unable to conceal her preference for horses over people, put me off riding altogether.

Living on the outskirts of London, I often drive past stables. And at 49, I steeled myself to try again. For a year I have ridden obsessively - twice or three times a week. It wasn't long before, riding round in circles, I started to dream again. Through Ride Worldwide (an excellent Devon-based company), I discovered I could ride almost anywhere: Argentina, India, Kenya, Greece, Mongolia ... I scrutinised photographs, itineraries. In imagination, I globe-trotted (and galloped). But I think I knew all along where I was headed.

In the second week of May, I arrived in Bubion, a tranquil village in the Sierra Nevada. For so long, this holiday had been a distant date about which I had felt a

steady, uncomplicated excitement. Now, I felt anything but steady as I stared at Bubion's strange chimneys (like alien white coffee pots) and wondered about the week ahead. I reread the itinerary. We were to ride for six hours a day for six days, from one village to another. The ground would be steep. The trip was aimed at 'experienced' riders but could accommodate a novice or two. I was by far the least experienced of the delightful group of 10. (The riders included a New Yorker who directs fights for theatre, an ex-pilot from Nantucket, three agile Englishwomen and two Belgians, expert equestrians with horses of their own.) Would I be up to this?

Our guide was the implausibly named Dallas Love. But banish thoughts of American soap opera - Dallas was named after a Scottish village. (Dallas, in Gaelic, means 'Valley of Water'.) I liked her at once. She has lived in the Sierra Nevada since she was eight and first explored the landscape on a mule. She knows every path, river, rock. And she knows about people too. She had a look in her eye, an amused sideways glance, as if she could see straight through me.

Her stables must be the most beautifully situated in the world: to the right, snow-topped mountains, to the left the sea. And her horses are wonderful. On that first morning, I pictured myself on one of her princely Andalucian throughbreds. But Dallas - who takes enormous care to match horse with rider - had other ideas. She introduced me to Portos: a stout bay of uncertain parentage, named after the greediest of the three musketeers. A fat middle-aged man in Andalucia? This was not the plan. But I told myself it was like an arranged marriage - Portos and I would come to an understanding in time.

The first day was a 26km ride ending in Trevez, the highest village in Spain (4,700 feet up). Sitting on the hotel bed at the end of the day, I could hardly distinguish between euphoria and despair. My mind was shimmering with after-images: snow-topped mountains and all the flowers of May: poppies, euphorbia, sweet peas, cistus and a wild iris growing insouciantly by itself. And such peace! There was no one for miles around, apart from an occasional shepherd with his flock.

I had never had such a day - and yet. I couldn't move. I was exhausted. How would I survive another day? It seemed miraculous (though, apparently, it is normal) that by the end of the second day, my aches and pains had vanished. And, as I had hoped, I became fond of Portos. Each day, we would rest at lunchtime with a picnic. The horses were tied up by a stream or in a glade: dappled shade merging with dappled sides. The food was simple but delicious. And there was wine for those (not me) who felt safe to drink and ride. Dallas's horse, Marselino, strolled about (he was never tied up) with a black silken tassel on his brow. It was a pleasure to watch Dallas ride: she would mount as Marselino hastened uphill, casually flinging her body after him, then flipping upright.

It was on the second night, in the pretty village of Berchules, that I tempted providence. I had been teasing my fellow riders about the lack of incident on the ride. An hour later, the hotel manager informed us there was an 'emergency'. Portos had punctured a vein in a back leg. Dallas's helper plugged the wound for hours while Dallas got help. He could have died. I felt terrible. This was not the incident I had in mind. But I was excited, too, because - by wretched means - my wish was about to be granted. I was about to ride an unsuitably glamorous Andalucian thoroughbred.

His name was Hardy. A handsome grey, he was swift and obliging. I was entranced but there seemed small chance of him returning the compliment. I had a swollen lip (an allergy to sunblock) and had improvised a bandanna by ripping up an old white cotton skirt. With my black hat on, I looked absurd and earned several nicknames: Bandita, Lone Rangeress, Fatima. Would I frighten the horses? Fortunately, Hardy was immune to the oddball on his back. He galloped, thrillingly, down dry riverbeds regardless. (The most challenging thing about the trip was never the riding; it was leading the horses down steep paths - descending the gorge on the way to Busquistar is not for the faint-hearted.)

Before the end of the week, we had lost track of time. Days fused. The hotels - plain but excellent, serving robust meals - merged, too. Only the Morayma hotel now stands out: beams, slate roofs and yellow roses. The landscape, too, was like a fluent, on-going narrative: fields of poppies, almond groves, Moorish paths, the Guadalfeo river.

When I got home, I didn't know how I would ever return to a tame English paddock. The week was one of the most marvellous of my life. And although I decidedly scattered many of my possessions through the Spanish hills (saddle-bag management is one of the many equestrian skills I lack), I won't ever throw the memories of that week to the winds. On the last day Dallas asked politely whether I had enjoyed myself. And when she added, 'The first riding holiday of many,' it did not sound like a question.

Essentials

Kate Kellaway travelled with Ride Worldwide (01837 82544; www.rideworldwide.com) on its seven-night 'Contraviesa' trip through the Sierra Nevada. The price is £870pp (based on two sharing) and includes accommodation, riding, meals and transfers. Trips depart throughout the year. Flights to Malaga cost extra. British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) has return fares from £90.