

Can Muni, Spain - August 2015

Mad dogs and Englishmen

A family adventure in northern Spain? Ears prick up at the thought! Having spent several holidays in the Costa Brava during student days, I know that despite costa horror stories, its a beautiful unspoilt area - and with the sea on your doorstep, fantastic for a family.

Deterred for a moment by the thought of riding with children in the August Spanish sun, one more rainy Devon day and the decision is made. We'll fly to Perpignan to combine our ride with a visit to France - and because it's one of those small, one-building airports that might just make travelling in the peak August season a little bit more bearable. Ryan Air from Stansted - hmmm - but it works well and as we pick up our natty red hire car and set off to the Spanish border, we're smug at the travel-ease. Just 50 minutes or so from Perpignan and soon we're driving through Vilopriu and along the small tarred road that leads to Can Muni itself.

Opening the car doors and emerging from our air-conditioned bubble, we're swiftly reminded that we are indeed in Spain in August and there's been a heat wave. Expecting to ride...are we completely mad?

A lovely welcome from Paloma, our guide and Joan, our host, then the boys make a dash for the pool where several Spanish families and our English friends, with their 3 daughters, are enjoying the relative cool of the late afternoon. Phew.



Over dinner in the open barn, Paloma tells us about her horses and we tell her about our riding skills, firmly opting for 'Holiday Horses' for the children. Spanish horses will be different to the ones you're used to I tell them. Inspiringly different is my hope.

Delicious chicken, a balmy evening, jugs of cold red wine. Anticipation - and the noise level - rises.

Monday. Monday morning meet time is 'relaxed' in typically Spanish style. Breakfast at around 9 and at 9.45 we head to the stables to meet our horses properly.

Our youngest is delighted to hear his horse is called Speed. I'm nervous but Paloma reassures me the name was to try and encourage rather than to reflect. I hope she's right.

A lot of fumbling and frustration trying to get 6 small-to-medium sized children to groom and tack up their own horses. Never good at paying attention to what goes where, our boys are lost, thrown by name tags in Spanish and quick release clips on the endurance style tack. Hot and sweaty my patience is tested. I do wish they'd focused a bit more at home. But at last, job done we're feeling better. The smallest horse is 15hh and it IS hard to reach backs and heads... They have some excuse I concede!

Hats on, chaps zipped, water bottles full to the brim, we lead horses to the school to mount up. Children allow their horses to walk into each other, stop, change direction. Paloma's patience and humour are remarkable. They're just a bit overwhelmed I say, hopefully they'll improve in a day or two... I'm not sure whose first day butterflies are the worst.



A few cones and trotting poles later, just to be sure we have some control, we're given the all clear and head out of the yard as the sun continues to beat down. I love the heat but gosh, this is HOT.

Can Muni is in 500 hectares of its own land, surrounded by woodland, corn and alfalfa fields with criss-crossed paths and tracks beyond leading to Camallera, the mountains and on. We ride through gorgeous shady woods, along wide sand and gravel paths with views over the treetops to hill towns on the horizon and the distant Pyrenees. Several stops for water, poured on heads and in mouths. Its pretty, gentle countryside - but the children are wilting, hot heads in hats and they're keen to get home.

It doesn't take long to get back and soon we're untacked and in the pool, spirits immediately restored. Its Paloma's birthday and we celebrate with Cava and Joan's delicious lunch, then its time for a customary Spanish siesta. Children protest wanting to stay in the pool. How do they keep going when all we want to do is collapse in a heap?

In the evening, making the most of our car, we investigate the beach at Sant Marti searching out Ice creams, early evening tapas and cold white wine. Then back to Can Muni, for a jolly Spanish supper - Catalan stew, jugs of wine and melon that tastes of the sun.

There's a horse show we could visit tomorrow or Friday at 9.30 says Paloma but we're anxious not to miss any riding - "9.30 in the evening" she laughs. Ahhh, we definitely need to adjust to Spanish timetables.

Tuesday. Tack allocated, confidence grows. The fumbling is less and we might be making progress. Nigel heads off to spend a day riding in the Pyrenees with Can Muni's partner Xavier, the rest of us mount up in the school for a little more practice. Its already HOT so we quickly make for the woods, a lovely ride along wide forest tracks and through a few small villages, with their narrow stone streets and medieval church towers. Shutters are thrown open as locals watch us pass, children waving at us from shady gardens. Trotting and cantering happily up the last hill home, its good to see beaming smiles all round - or is it that the pool and pizza await!?



Wednesday. We've booked Kayaking this morning so breakfast earlier at 8, before a drive to the coast at Llanca. Parking is impossible – it's market day of course – but at last we line up on the beach for a refresher in how to paddle. Co-ordination is iffy, I wonder how far we'll get as we drag boats to the sea edge. But, in we go - and its gorgeous. Clear-blue, calm and only a few minutes before we tip in to properly enjoy it.

Paddling on we find spiky sea urchins and watch shoals of fish, then visit some caves before heading back, arms now aching, for lunch - calamares and garlic prawns by the harbour. All is good!



Later back at Can Muni, boys make straight for the pool protesting again about a siesta. Paloma offers a late ride. The pool's too much fun so just a few of us go and its the best yet, in the glorious dappled light of early evening cool.

Thursday. An all-day ride today to the lake where we can swim with the horses. Everyone's excited - but are we truly mad Englishmen to attempt 5 or 6 hours in the saddle in the midday sun...? We decide we'll review en-route. After an hour or so, progress is sloooow. Its very hot! A quick debate. Children wilt at the suggestion of 2 hours riding home in the mid-afternoon sun so we re-route back to Can Muni. We'll drive to the lake and perhaps ride again this evening. A visible sigh of relief; spirits lift and riding magically improves.

Back home we board the minibus, driving to the lake where there's a lovely cooling breeze. It may have been OK after all! Joan and Gustavo have set up tables for lunch by the river and, ravenous after riding, we tuck into a delicious spread of salads, pork steaks, bread and olives rounded off with water melon and my favourite sun drenched melon.



Paloma takes the children to swim allowing us to linger over coffee. The lakes are man-made but the perfect swimming spot with the blue-est blue water, diving ledges in the banks and a rope swing to jump off. A superb playground and we're there until 5pm unable to drag ourselves away.

When we head back to Can Muni there is a treat for the older girls who want to ride again; a ride to town for a drink as the rest of us head out by car to explore.

Friday. Our final riding day - it has gone so quickly. Morning tack up - hooves picked, saddles & blankets neatly waiting, bridles on and only the parts they cannot reach left waiting. I'm amazed at the improvement.



We know by now that in the heat, the children fare best with just a couple of hours riding at a time so Paloma keeps it short. It's the last day, it's fun and we're into the routine, hosing down horses after riding before we flop into the pool. A last lunch out, we go to a bar by the river for a feast of gazpacho, prawns and ice-cream, then back home to siesta. Waking up with a swim at 5pm, we tack up again and set off on our final ride.

A last canter, "we'll go steady, go slow, stay behind" but as we start I'm sure I hear a little boy whisper 'go Speed go' and we're off across the stubble....! What wonderful horses, looking after everyone so well.

High spirits on the ride back home, then a quick change for Paloma and the girls who head out to the evening horse show, a fiesta of Spanish horses, flamenco and gymnastics. Boys want their last floodlit swim; we happily settle for another peaceful evening alfresco with a chilled glass of wine.



Saturday. An early start, so sad to leave and as we wave goodbye, the pleading begins - "please, please, please when can we come back to Can Muni...?"