

top ten riding holidays

A ride in the wild country

Kitty Melrose picks some of the best sites to saddle up

1 Don Augusto Polo Club, Argentina

Thirty-seven acres surround Don Augusto, a stylish private polo farm only 45 minutes outside Buenos Aires. It has two official playing fields, a practice field, 40 stables with over 30 horses, and is well equipped for complete novices as well as advanced players. The set programme starts with morning polo lessons under the watchful eye of local coaches, followed by afternoons spent playing four to six chukkas with renowned professional players. During high season (September to January), you can visit famous neighbouring polo clubs to watch world-class tournaments. You stay in one of two rustic-style country houses, sleeping up to eight people and serviced by a private staff. When it's not all polo, polo, polo, enjoy wonderful barbecues and views of the lagoon and swoop tactics in the club house. Horseback rides through the beautiful countryside and sunset carriage rides can also be organised. Polo clinics cost from US\$300 (Dh1,101) per person, per day, all-inclusive (www.estanciaaugusto.com.ar; 00 54 911 3284 1668).

2 Singita Grumeti Reserves, Tanzania

In February, the award-winning Singita Game Reserves introduced their first East African horseback safari. It's a stunning four-night trip with the horses you ride as magnificent as the accommodation. Starting at Paul Tudor

Jones's Sasakwa Lodge, with its state of the art equestrian centre, a maximum of six experienced riders ride up to 20km (about five hours) per day, accompanied by two game guides, through the vast plains of Tanzania's Grumeti Reserve. Game is plentiful: diverse bird life, rare black and white colobus monkeys, and frequent sightings of the Big Five – lions, elephants, cape buffalo, leopards and black rhinos. During migration, you canter across open grassland with thousands of wildebeest and zebra. Two nights are spent at Sasakwa Lodge, built in the style of a grand manor house, and set on 137,600 hectares, so you have this enormous wild stretch of Africa all to yourself. Another two nights are spent at Faru Faru bush camp, equally as glamorous. Sundowners, spas, infinity pools and game drives are all on offer. A four-night package costs from \$5,790 (Dh21,267) per person, all-inclusive (www.singita.com; 00 27 21 683 3424).

3 Okavango Delta, Botswana

Gallop with giraffe, zebra and herds of wildebeest through flood plains and you might come face to face with a bull elephant on this adventure. Botswana's mighty Okavango Delta is rich in wildlife, and with no roads and lots of water, horseback is one of the best ways to safari. From base camp on the western side, featuring walk-in tents with twin beds, you take daily guided horseback safaris into the delta to stalk el-

ephants and the like, sometimes thundering through water meadows alongside antelope and splashing through vast open plains, home to cheetah and giraffe. It's fast, exciting and during flood time there's nowhere quite like it. On longer safaris, a day ride will take you to a camp overlooking a pool where hippos bathe. After four to six hours of riding daily, go on a guided walk, canoe trip, swim in the private pool or watch the sunset to the sounds of roaring lions. While offering some stunning sights Okavango Delta, is best suited to the fittest and most confident of riders – beware, you may be asked to gallop out of trouble. A seven-night safari at Macatoo Camp, including accommodation, activities, meals, drinks and return domestic flights, costs from \$4,570 (Dh 16,786) per person (www.wildfrontiers.com; 00 27 11 702 2035).

4 Wadi Rum Desert, Jordan

Ruth Taggart, who used to be a lawyer in the UK, and company co-director, Nigel Harvey, spent 10 years looking for, and working at, some of the best horseriding spots around before founding Ride World Wide, which offers tailor-made riding tours in 27 countries. Destinations include cattle ranches in South Africa and the chance to gallop across the Andes. A deluxe Middle Eastern tour called the Hashemite Kingdom Ride takes in the mountains and sands of the Wadi Rum in the south of Jordan on wonderful, spirited Arabian

5 Connemara Trails, Ireland

"It's difficult to translate the charm and magic of Ireland on horseback," says Willie Leahy, who has led the popular Connemara trek for nearly 40 years. Described as the jovial John Wayne of Ireland's wild west and a legendary horseman in his own right, Willie takes riders of all abilities on a week-long, 160km ride inland, trotting through farmland and along age-old trails, cantering along the coast and venturing over rocky hillsides and river crossings. Starting at Oughterard, you're in the saddle for four to six hours a day staying in simple but comfortable hotels while your trusty steeds graze in nearby fields. Highlights include visiting a 13th-century castle, trotting along grassy railway lines, and a full day spent admiring the fabulous Mannin Bay, where riders can gallop along the deserted beach, jumping sandy banks as well as swimming with their horse in clear waters, before a picnic. You can also spend a day riding at Dartfield Horse Museum, with the option of some cross-country jumping. A six-night package starts from \$2,228 (Dh8,184), all-inclusive (www.connemara-trails.com; 00 353 91 841 216). The holidays run from May to the end of September.

and concerts, stabling your horses at a mix of unique ranches, farms and inns along the way. A seven-day trip costs from \$2,295 (Dh8,429), per person, all-inclusive (www.ridingtours.com; 00 307 455 3363).

6 Rajasthan, India

What's special about riding in India, according to the travel company In The Saddle, is the horses – the Marwari breed with their trademark curly ears and endless stamina, which in times past made them exceptionally suited to the battlefield. You ride them through the state of Rajasthan, over deserts, farmland, forest and the fertile Aravali hills. But, perhaps more thrilling, are the villages you pass that let you see what country life is like in western India. The pace is often furious so riders must be experienced – riders travel for five hours a day, breaking for picnic lunches in gorgeous settings. And rewards await – you stay in converted ancient forts and palaces, along with safari-style camps in spacious tents with twin beds. Trips are tailor-made and run from October to March, or you can join set trips, such as "Fairs and Festivals", which include visits to Batehsvar's huge cattle and horse fair and the Taj Mahal. A 15-night holiday with seven days riding costs from \$3,772 (Dh13,854) per person, all-inclusive, in groups of two to six people (www.inthesaddle.com; 00 44 1299 272 997).

7 Redwood Coast Ride, California, USA

If you dream of galloping through the surf in glorious sunshine, you'd be hard pressed to beat the Redwood coastal ride. On the beautiful northern coast near Fort Bragg, long rides through ancient, towering redwood forests are combined with spectacular long roams across wide sandy beaches and alongside ocean bluffs. Not for novices, Lari Shea, who specialises in dressage and endurance, breeds Arabians, Russian Orlov crosses and Akhal-Teke, all of which are highly trained. Meandering towards the Mendocino Coast, your journey is spent riding along ridges with stunning mountain views, through a working cattle ranch and an hour-long canter through the spray with seals basking offshore. Days end with wonderful meals, relaxing soaks in outdoor Jacuzzis, massages

and concerts, stabling your horses at a mix of unique ranches, farms and inns along the way.

A seven-day trip costs from \$2,295 (Dh8,429), per person, all-inclusive (www.ridingtours.com; 00 307 455 3363).

8 Tyrolean Trails, Austria

This might sound like a slightly more sedate affair, but riding ponies in the countryside, surrounded by the peaks of the Austrian Alps, is pretty magical. The recently remodelled five-star Interpalen-Hotel Tyrol is your base, situated in an amazing, isolated setting in the midst of the Tyrolean mountain range. The outdoor riding school lies in the middle of the forest, and each day you take one-hour, guided treks on traditional Haflinger ponies that are sure-footed enough for all ages and riding abilities. They take you for an enthusiastic canter along wooded river valleys and climb steep mountain passes. Best of all, you can ride any time of the year: expect glistening mountains and meadows in summer and galloping through the snow in winter. The hotel offers 283 apartments, suites and rooms, designed in the style of Tyrolean country houses, with a pool, spa and a renowned kitchen run by Gault-Millat and the award-winning chef Christoph Zangerl. If you like you can combine riding with golf, tennis, climbing, cycling, fishing and skiing.

A four-night holiday in a one-bedroom apartment, including a group riding lesson, carriage ride, two half-day picnic rides, entry to the spa and half-board accommodation costs from \$1,160 (Dh4,263) per person (www.theridingcompany.com; 00 43 4284 204311). Extra lessons and rides can be booked separately.

9 White Stallion Ranch, Arizona, USA

If horse riding is all about cowboys for you, head to the American Southwest. There are working ranches, but a luxury dude ranch experience allows you the freedom to do as little or a much as you wish. White Stallion Ranch in

Arizona, run by the True family since 1965, is well known for being the real deal with warm hospitality. Built in a Spanish style and set on 1,200 hectares of wide-open land, the ranch has one of the largest herds of horses in Arizona. It also offers everything a rider of any level could wish for: breathtaking steep mountain trails, fast desert rides, daily lessons and all-day adventures. It's perfect for children too, with hayrides, weekly rodeos, team penning, "cookouts" and trail rides suitable for those aged five and over. There's a choice of standard and more luxurious rooms, some with whirlpool baths, fireplaces and a patio to peacefully sit and gaze at the mountains. There's also a lovely pool, telescopic stargazing, line dancing, bike rides and a new spa. A seven-night stay costs from \$938 (Dh3,445), all-inclusive with daily rides except on Sundays (www.hiddentrails.com; 00 604 323 1141).

10 Tien Shan, Kyrgyzstan

Alexandra Tolstoy and her husband, Shamil Galimzyanov, met when retracing the Silk Road on horses and camels for 8,000km through Mongolia and Siberia. Now, they organise riding holidays in Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. As one rider put it: "even by outer space standards Kyrgyzstan is pretty remote". Green valleys, ancient forests, rivers, snow fields and alpine-flower meadows beckon in this land of snow leopards, bears, deer and eagles. You move to either Lake Songkol or Sary Chelek national parks and spend eight to 10 days in the foothills of the majestic Tien Shan mountains. With Alexandra and Shamil, you ride with a local Kyrgyz horseman, for roughly five hours per day, and in the evening, huddle around campfires beside majestic lakes.

Trips are generally two weeks long and take place between June and September. A 15-night trip costs from \$3,213 (Dh11,801), all-inclusive. You can book through www.wildandexotic.co.uk; or call 00 44 1439 748401.



Horst Klemm / Singita



Visitors to Singita Grumeti Reserves in Tanzania, top, may find themselves in for a wild ride. Hidden Trails's White Stallion Ranch holiday in Arizona, above, offers a real dude ranch experience with a side of luxury. Courtesy of Hidden Trails

the protocol
Effie-Michelle Metallidis

Do like the Turks and share a ride for a slice of life

Their stops may be unmarked, their fares varied and their timing unpredictable. They are old, rattled and beaten, and it's a war to get into them. They are filled from top to bottom, driven at harrowing speeds, and ridden by bad-tempered old men and grandmothers who give off mysterious smells. They can pass you by on a whim, kick you off at will and refuse to stop without question.

They are the shared ride, and, despite their shortcomings, they remain one of the greatest achievements of modern day transportation. Shared rides are often privately owned and operated, cheaper than other local transportation and expertly manoeuvred by drivers who have seen it all: from city traffic jams to where stray farm animals roam. All around the world shared ride vehicles wheeze, hack and cough their way to their end destinations, but always manage to get there at the lowest cost to the passenger and the fastest possible speed.

In Turkey, this mode of transport is known as the *dolmus*, which literally means stuffed, owing to the fact that the vehicle often departs only when it is filled to bursting.

Like their food counterparts, stuffed grape leaves, *dolmas* come in two varieties: small and packed or minuscule and even more packed. Short trips, such as the five-minute ride up the winding hill of Besiktas in Istanbul, employ seven- to eight-person minivans that charge a flat fee. Longer routes use larger minibuses, such as those of Otoyal, the boxy Turkish response to the travel wagons made by Peugeot and Mercedes.

These ever-present vehicles are fixtures of Turkey's landscape, which is hard to see when you're crushed between an armpit and a bag of mustard greens. But the *dolmus* is worth a few rides if only to understand its integral role in Turkish culture and society.

A few suggestions: to pick up a *dolmus*, wait by a regular bus stand. Bus stops and taxi stands double as *dolmus* stops as the drivers descend upon the streets like reapers to the harvest. They stop anywhere, gathering until full. Then, the real stuffing starts.

If you're just on the street, catch the eye of a driver and raise your hand. They will stop unless the *dolmus* is full. A flick of the head back means there's another *dolmus* with the same destination coming. A raise of the eyebrows means the *dolmus* is full, and good luck finding another one. One or two beeps means "get a ride?" Three beeps means "get

You are more likely to get a reaction if you garble a Turkish sentence rather than over-enunciating a foreign one

out of my way!" The destinations are normally noted on plaques in the front window or on a marquee that hangs from the side. Always double-check by asking the driver though, as sometimes the signs don't get changed.

Once aboard, fish for small bills. Exact change is preferable, though inexact change has led to the development of an art form. Passengers stuck at the back, or anyone generally unable to move, pass their money forward via those sitting at the front, who in turn give it to the driver, who in turn, with fussed machismo, flicks the coins into slots on the dash, rummages for change, calls out: "Who gave 20?" and passes it back. All this happens with one hand on the wheel and one eye on the road, through traffic jams, construction work, animal herds and different fare amounts.

If you're not sure what the fare is, don't worry. Most trips within cities cost less than two Turkish liras (Dh5), so if you give a five or 10 lira note, you will be passed back the correct amount of change. Normally, the fare, if it is fixed, will be attached to a sign somewhere, often under the swinging evil eye in the rear-view mirror, as if to hold you accountable to an honest trade. Despite countless transactions and the endless throng of riders, there are very few passengers, if any, who fail to make payment.

So, you have entered, you have paid, you endured or enjoyed the ride. Now, it's time to get off. This too is an art form. Here is a guided visualisation that steers you through the morass of bodies that will be blocking all escape routes. Pretend that you are the Night Fox in *Ocean's Twelve* during the final museum scene. Assume the passengers are all alarm-rigged lasers. Commence movement. Weave your way to the front or back door. Don't wait for the driver to glide to a bus stop. Throw your head back, project your voice towards the front and call out: "Burada durabilir misiniz?"

It means "can you stop here?" and Turks don't really like saying it either. That's why every one fakes it. "Bur...[mumble, mumble] simiz?" will have you out on the pavement in no time (English is understood, but you are more likely to get a reaction if you garble a Turkish sentence rather than over-enunciating a foreign one.)

Lastly, and above all, try to enjoy the experience. People from all walks of life ride the *dolmus*, which is what makes it so fascinating, more-so than hopping on a proper city bus, which are orderly, modern and stick to their lanes. The *dolmus* is in fact been more than a way to get from A to B; it's a rite of passage, a common point of solidarity, a staple of life and a great social leveller.

Nothing brings people together like a death-defying experience, and from businessman to fruit vendor to politician, all sorts of people have at some point clung the handgrips of a 1975 Otoyal, having feared for their lives and then been grateful to have survived another day of riding in a stuffed grape leaf.

✉ mmetailidis@thenational.ae



Join the fun: hail a dolmus, a shared taxi, in Turkey. David Moore / Alamy

Don Augusto Polo Club in Argentina offers a variety of polo-related activities. Courtesy of Don Augusto Polo Club