

BLAZING SADDLES

Amy Barry takes the high roads on a ride through Spain's Alpujarra mountains

My favourite part of a week riding in southern Spain's Alpujarra mountains was when we went down a gorge near the village of Busquistar and up the other side.

We all dismounted and led our mounts down the snaking stony path. Miles below, a river rushed, crossed by a small stone bridge.

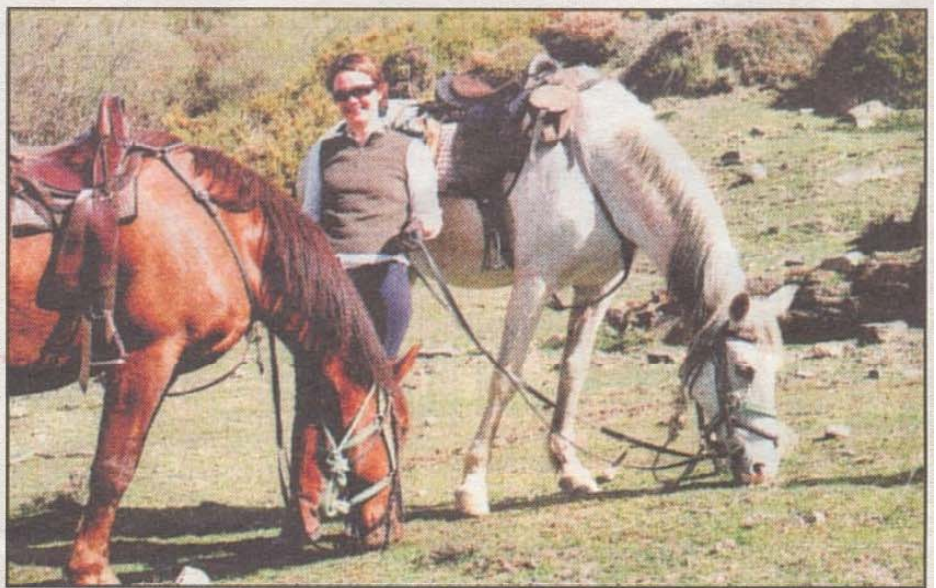
Our horses walked as sure-footed as mountain goats. But my legs were wobbly and I was glad that my little mare kept her distance – just close enough for me to feel her warm breath at my shoulder, but not so close that she was in danger of pushing me over the edge.

As we crossed the bridge, I looked back and was amazed that we had negotiated the seemingly perpendicular cliff face behind us.

Not all the riding on the week's trip was this dramatic, but it was always fulfilling. Starting in the hilltop village of Bubion we rode from one village to the next, across ridges, over peaks and along valleys.

The scenery changed constantly as, at different altitudes, did the seasons. We went from cold winter on the first day, with snow-capped peaks, to bursting spring later in the week, with wildflowers and bees.

Climbing up from a river valley one morning, the horses crushed wild thyme underfoot and the scent



HAPPY GRAZE: Amy Barry takes a breather while the horses Monty and Polly refuel after the travails of negotiating a mountain gorge near the village of Busquistar, right

was amazing. Another day, we rode across a ridge up to our knees in yellow gorse flowers. And late one hot afternoon we galloped for miles along a dry riverbed, olive trees rushing past on either side.

The Alpujarra region is on the coastal side of the Sierra Nevada. Despite being only a couple of hours from Malaga and the beach resorts of Torremolinos and Benidorm, the Alpujarra feels miles from anywhere and years behind modern life.

It is a mainly agricultural region with a handful of small white-washed towns perched in the folds of hills. Almond, olive and fig trees

grow in criss-cross patterns, still tended by old men and mules pulling ancient ploughs.

The villages have steep cobbled streets and crooked central plazas. Old women in black scrub porches, men stand on corners gossiping and skinny cats search for food.

We rode for about five or six hours each day and saw places I would never have reached had I been on foot. Generally, we went quite slowly due to the terrain, and every now and then we had to get off and lead.

There were some opportunities to go faster – on broad forestry tracks and dried-up riverbeds. My horse

Getting there

In The Saddle (01299 272997 or 08700 133983, www.inthesaddle.com) specialises in riding holidays all over the world. A seven-day break in the Alpujarra costs from £860, including full-board accommodation and all riding. **easyJet** (www.easyjet.com, 0905 821 0905) flies to Malaga from airports across the UK.





was called Polly and she was the fastest of the lot.

All the fresh mountain air and exercise gave us big appetites and we ate well. At lunchtime we picnicked on white Spanish bread with olive oil, cheese, cured ham and amazing salads. Artichokes, olives, tomatoes, plump anchovies in oil, glasses of rioja and spring water completed the feast.

The weather was great and lunch was usually followed by a brief siesta in the sun. In the evenings, having put the horses to bed and showered, we would meet up in local restaurants for mountains of paella, delicious soups and yet more rioja.

There were nine of us – five Brits, three Germans and one American, plus our guide, the fantastically named Scottish expat Dallas Love. We included a newly qualified doctor, a geologist, a landscape gardener, an

art historian and a headmaster and his wife. Everyone got on brilliantly and evening conversation ranged from learning to do stitches, to how run a public school in Yorkshire.

One evening, in the lovely Morayma hotel with views across the valley we'd just ridden and beautiful Moorish rooms, there was even a yoga class that I joined.

Crossing the gorge near Busquistar may have been my favourite part of the week, but there is another moment that came close. On the last day we took the horses up to the foot of the Mulhacen, the highest peak in the Sierra Nevada. It was another glorious day, and the snow was glaringly bright in the sunshine.

We passed the snow line up to some pine trees where we stopped for lunch. I slept, revelling in the warmth of the reflected sun.

Later we went higher, at times wading through the snow. It was a dramatic end to a fantastic week of adventure, companionship and fun.