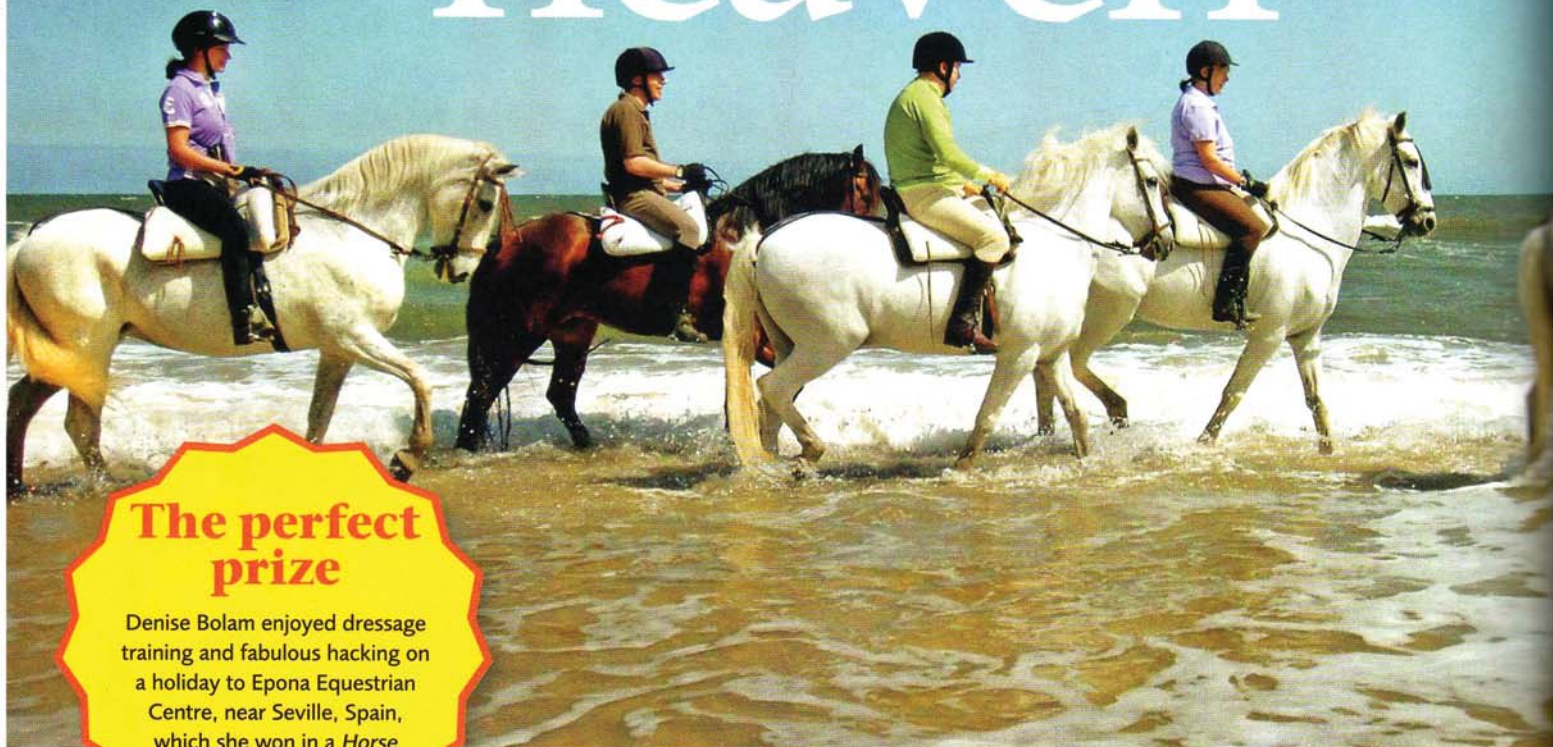


Holiday heaven

Two *Horse* readers recommend their dream riding holidays, plus we suggest trips to suit every taste, ability and budget



The perfect prize

Denise Bolam enjoyed dressage training and fabulous hacking on a holiday to Epona Equestrian Centre, near Seville, Spain, which she won in a *Horse* magazine competition

I was so excited when I found out I had won the holiday to Epona – I would finally get to ride a Spanish horse! After deciding to share the trip with my friend Nicky and booking for autumn when the weather would be a bit cooler, I started counting the days.

The holiday became all the more relevant as a few months before we were due to go I went to an auction of Spanish horses. I only went to have a look but came home with a four-year-old Spanish stallion, so I was looking forward to getting tips from the experts on how to ride and train him.

Well-schooled horses

Epona is run by Fernando and Jane Garcia, who ensured we enjoyed the

most wonderful week. In the morning we rode out through the picturesque Andalusian countryside and every evening we had dressage lessons on beautifully schooled and responsive horses.

The tuition was excellent and aimed at riders of all levels. One of our fellow guests had only started learning to ride earlier that year, but by the end of the week was able to perform walk to canter transitions along with the rest of her group, who had many years of experience.

Our stay also included a fabulous trip to The Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in nearby Jerez to watch a performance

Riding along a deserted beach is one of the highlights of a trip to Epona.

by their famous horses. I had goose bumps throughout.

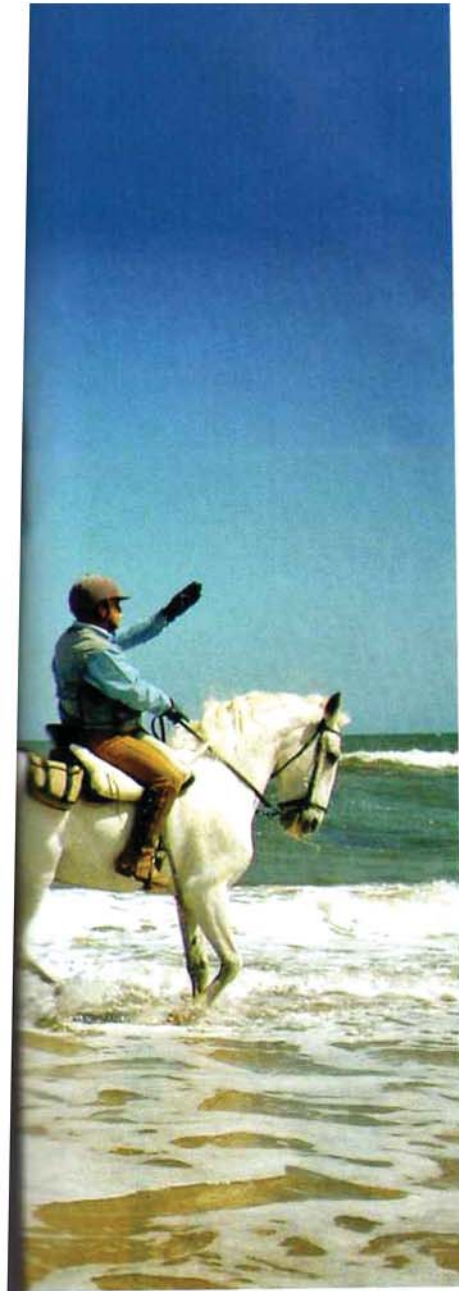
Fernando knows everyone at the school (his daughter Vivi, who schools the horses at Epona, trained there with Rafael Soto for four years) so we had excellent seats, and he provided lots of information. The whole place was immaculate and stunningly beautiful, and I could have spent all day there.

Beach ride

Towards the end of the week Fernando took us down to the coast for a ride on a deserted beach, 'vacaro' (cowboy) style! The horses weren't the prettiest we saw during our stay, but they were all forward-going and responsive.

We rode in traditional Spanish tack, which was great fun, and the scenery, especially the deserted beach itself, was stunning!





Our final evening was spent in Seville, soaking up some of the atmosphere and taking in a very entertaining flamenco show.

Home comforts

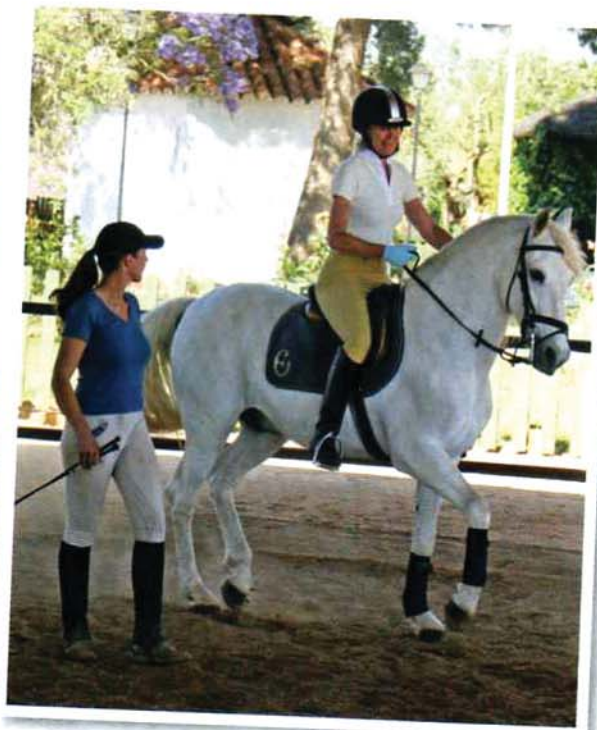
Another highlight of the holiday was Jane's fabulous food – we were treated to three courses at lunch and in the evening, all based on traditional regional dishes.

The accommodation was also fantastic – the Hacienda is a beautiful building, simply and traditionally furnished. Fernando served as both host and guide, providing interesting information and entertaining stories.

It was with a heavy heart that on the Saturday morning we said farewell to our new friends – human and equine. We felt genuinely sad to be going home, but vowed to start a savings campaign for a return visit.



Denise and Nicky prepare to leave Epona Equestrian Centre for a hack in the beautiful Spanish countryside.



Experience classical dressage instruction on board an Andalusian schoolmaster.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

What it costs: A seven-day/six-night holiday (Sunday to Saturday) at Epona costs £1,090 per person, sharing a room. This includes five days riding and most meals, although food on sight-seeing trips is extra. Flights are not included.

How to get there: Fly to Seville, followed by a 20-minute transfer by car.

When to go: Apart from being closed in the last two weeks of July and first two weeks of August, you can holiday at Epona all year round.

Horses and riding: You will be riding Andalusians and part-Andalusians, warmbloods, Anglo-Arabs and Thoroughbreds. The programme involves hacking in the morning and dressage training later in the day. Group sizes are a maximum of 10 people.

How to book: Contact Zara's Planet, tel: (08444) 870 300; visit: www.zarasplanet.co.uk.

OTHER TRAINING DESTINATIONS

Classical attraction

If you want to learn to ride dressage moves such as piaffe, then head for Herdade Da Sanginheira, near Lisbon, Portugal, and its Lusitano stallions.

You can choose to just have lessons or combine training with hacking out in the surrounding countryside.

Comfortable accommodation and a swimming pool to relax in add the finishing touches to your trip.

What it costs: Prices vary but expect to pay around £819 (flights not included) for the 'standard' riding package. Trips run for six nights and seven days, with five days' riding and some meals included.

Contact: Unicorn Trails, tel: (01767) 600 606; www.unicorntails.com.

Training in Sweden

Swedish Sport Horses, near Stockholm, runs three- to five-day clinics with the country's top dressage trainers, where you will be partnered with a high-level horse.

The centre also organises 'shopping trips' for those looking to buy a horse.

What it costs: An all-inclusive three-day trip costs 11,500 Swedish Kronor (approximately £1,000, although exchange rates vary). Flights are not included.

Contact: Swedish Sport Horses, tel: (00 46) 76 116 5744; visit: www.swedishsporthorses.com.

On home ground

There are a number of centres in the UK which offer training holidays.

At Wellington Riding in Hampshire you can choose to ride one of the centre's horses, or take your own.

The centre runs three-day intensive breaks for adults of all abilities from March to November this year.

What it costs: A three-day break costs £360, which includes lunch. Riders who take their own horse receive a 25 per cent discount, but will be charged a livery fee.

Accommodation and other meals are not included.

Contact: Wellington Riding, tel: (0118) 932 6308; visit: www.wellington-riding.co.uk. For other UK equestrian centres offering riding breaks, see the 'Where to ride' section of www.bhs.org.uk.

