

WISH YOU WERE HERE

Go Wild!

Herding bulls and galloping alongside wild horses in the Camargue leaves **Nicola Acketts** feeling revived

As a riding-holiday debutant, and the least experienced rider in a family of horse-mad women, I set off to the airport with my sister Deborah in tow for moral support.

We stood out, sporting our riding boots in preparation for four days in the Camargue, France, so didn't get further than the terminal before bumping into two other guests on our trip – Janey and Lisa – and Jane, holiday company Create Away's lovely booking agent.

We soon found we had plenty in common, including young children, a sense of humour and the same lust for life and riding.

On arrival at Montpellier, we were welcomed by Serge, who founded Create Away and is one of the company's resident photographers. He formerly shot for the likes of *Vogue* and looks like Richard Gere – what's not to like?

We drove for 20 minutes to the medieval town of Aigues-Mortes, passing lakes filled with flamingos – which made it hard to know if we had landed in France or Africa.

The Camargue is a designated World Heritage site and home to horses, bulls and many species of bird besides the flamingo.

Camargue horses are traditionally the mount of the gardians (French cowboys) and are considered one of Europe's few remaining original breeds. We were here to meet these horses up close and personal.

First, we settled into our hotel, Les Templiers, a stylishly rustic boutique. Every nook of the place is beautifully decorated and well designed.

My warm, inviting room had floor-to-ceiling windows that opened on to the peaceful inner courtyard – which housed three tortoises, and a turtle in the font.

Exploring the town, we came across a converted chapel, La Chapelle des Capucins, which was showing an exhibition of equestrian art – what timing!

We couldn't pass the boulangerie, Olmeda, without buying a French stick, which we ate with some country pâté →

Adrenalin rush: seeing the Camargue horses in their natural habitat is unforgettable

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and a bottle of red wine on the cosy terrace of Deborah's room.

Camargue cowgirls

The next day, we drove past vineyards and pretty pink orchards of apricot trees on our way to 'Manade' ranch.

Here, we met our riding guide Lucien, a local gardian, and Brenda, who left the UK 40 years ago, fell in love with the Camargue lifestyle and never went back.

Brenda now runs a local riding school and likes to help out on the ranch in her spare time.

She supplied our horses and we were matched according to temperament and riding ability – as well as personality,



Deborah, Nicky and Janey take in the scenery

Below: rounding up the bulls



and headed back to Aigues-Mortes for the evening.

We were offered the chance to wake early the next morning to take in the sunrise over the salt lakes, but opted to lie in, exhausted from our thrilling day. An extra, uninterrupted hour in bed for four busy mums was an opportunity not to be missed.

Free feeling

In the morning, we took a short drive to our rendezvous with Lucien, Brenda and Silvan – our guide for the day.

I was given a horse to ride called Agil, who was kind-natured and gentle, but I did miss my munching mate Loulavent from the previous day.

We led our horses and boarded the Bac du Sauvage (Sauvage Ferry), which runs every 30 minutes. The horses were calm and, to my surprise, seemed at home on the ferry.

After a short crossing, we mounted and set off to meet more of Serge's friends who were joining us on our ride.

Winding our way towards the beach, through the labyrinth of marshland, we were surrounded by fragrant flowering rosemary bushes and spotted the tracks of wild boar.

The ground was soft under our horses' hooves, and these equines were well mannered and forgiving of any rider errors.

There was something very special about our first glimpse of the sea. It gave me a sense of pure freedom and excitement.

We rode over the sand dunes to the beach, into the sea and along the shore. Although I refrained, more adventurous riders can take a swimsuit and enter the water with their trusted steed.

Further along the beach I wondered if a mirage was appearing out of the sand. A table, covered with a white linen cloth and scrumptious local delicacies stood there together with rosé wine on ice.

After we had dismounted and tied up our horses, picnic lady-extraordinaire Jeanne was ready with soap, water and a towel to wash our hands before the feast.

The wine and food were endless and, content with the day so far, we sat on the rocks overlooking the sea to soak up the warm sunshine.

We stayed for a while, then headed back and onto the ferry, where we said goodbye to our horses after giving them a well-deserved pick of fresh grass.

Thundering hooves

We thought we'd had as much fun and adventure as it is humanly possible to have in a few days. But the next morning, Serge drove us to a secret location where we met Lucien, Bernhard (known affectionately as The Hoff) and the rest of the crew.

You must pack your waders and cameras along with your riding boots and hats – as what came next was a moment not to be missed.

Lucien and his team headed out to round up the wild Camargue horses, while we walked through the marshland with the sunrise upon us. Swans flew close above our heads as we waded out to find a good spot to wait.

Photography: Serge Krougilkoff

Nervously, and not knowing what to expect, we soon heard the humming sound of hooves moving through water. The Camargue horses were being driven by the gardians towards us, our hearts racing as they came closer.

I felt a powerful force of energy as they charged towards us. All of a sudden, the horses thundered past, foam spray and water flying. The adrenalin rush was fantastic and we couldn't stop smiling for a long time after.

There are 30 separate herds of these horses spread over an area of about 203,000 acres. Foals are born from April and are brown and black, but turn white



Making a splash: booking agent Jane

around their fourth year. At 13hh-14hh they are technically ponies.

They are well cared for by the gardians, but are tough, and canter, swim and wrestle their way through varied terrain.

We were then invited to experience the sensation of herding for ourselves. Galloping alongside wild horses is something I'll always remember.

Gastronomic delights

The experience was incredible for the horse-mad among us, but there

Holiday essentials

- Riding hat and boots;
- Waders or wellies;
- Mosquito repellent;
- Sun cream;
- Camera with a good zoom.

is plenty to do for non-horsey family and friends, too.

On our first morning, we were up at 6:30am to enjoy bird-watching with local ornithologist Jean-Marie. He has exclusive access to certain sites in the Camargue, allowing us to spot ibis, herons, cattle egrets and flamingos.

Serge recommended fabulous restaurants and bars, including Bar Le Tac-Tac, which is filled from ceiling to floor with every kind of alcohol you can imagine.

The fun landlord, Marc, knows everything about his wares and will set off up his ladder in search of your tippie. The hot food is good, but the charcuterie is incredible. I'd come back here just for the bar!

In Aigues-Mortes, between drooling over food and eating our way around town, we spent time exploring the charming antique shops.

On our last day, Serge and Jane whisked us off to meet Aicha, in the hope of improving our culinary skills. Aicha trained at Grégoire Ferrandi, a top French cooking school in Paris. Her cookery academy, a converted loft, was once a wine cellar.

We helped Aicha prepare our lunch, tasting and experimenting, before sitting down for a gastronomic finale to our trip.

Jane and Serge go out of their way to ensure holidays are bespoke, bringing together the best people, with the greatest knowledge, to create a trip you'll never forget.

I left feeling like I'd just been away with friends, rather than spending a few days making new ones. 🇫🇷

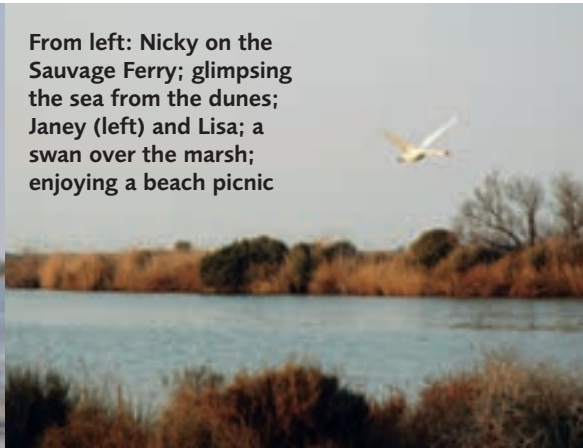
What you need to know



- Create Away can organise riding, photography, cycling, cookery, bird-watching and painting courses in the Camargue. To book, contact Jane Cleghorn, tel: (01206) 241 421. For more information, visit: www.create-away.com.

- Nicola stayed at the Hôtel Les Templiers, 23 rue de la République, Aigues-Morte. Tel: 0033 (0)4 66 53 66 56.

- For drinking and dining, try: Chez Papy Moïse, 10 rue Alsace-Lorraine. Tel: 0033 (0)6 13 08 01 40; and Bar Le Tac-Tac, 19 rue de la République, tel: 0033 (0)4 66 53 60 29.



From left: Nicky on the Sauvage Ferry; glimpsing the sea from the dunes; Janey (left) and Lisa; a swan over the marsh; enjoying a beach picnic

