

Perfect Combination for Photography Workshop

French Guardians, Blue Water the White Horses of the Camargue

Story & Photos by Karen Brenner

he sun was setting as ten white horses galloped toward me splashing through the foaming waves of the Mediterranean. Was this really happening? It seemed like a dream—only way better than any dream I could remember. I had to silently remind myself—this is real, aim the camera and take more photos!

As an Ohio-based equine artist I have been photographing horses throughout the United States for over 15 years. The photos are used as reference for the oil paintings in my 'Beautiful Horses of...' series. I love photographing horses, so in my quest for new adventures I'd Googled 'horse workshops' back in 2014 and come across amazing photos of the white horses of the Camargue region of Southern France. It reminded me of Horses of the Camargue by photographyer Hans W. Silverster, from my small collection of horse books. I dug it out and flipped through the pages. Interestingly, the Camargue horses were not galloping—rather grazing and resting. The book focused on 'a year in the life' of the native French horses. From years of photographing

horses, I knew getting actions shots of the horses galloping through the wetlands of the region would require a lot of coordination. And those were the shots I wanted for future paintings!

Online I discovered at least a half a dozen Camargue workshops available in 2015 and 2016. I chose to go with Create Away. Serge, the owner/workshop leader, was from the Camargue and knew the region, land owners and guardians (French cowboys) personally. He was also a professional photographer who had worked extensively in Londonwhich meant he spoke English! Create Away offered a wide range of workshops-horses and the famous black bulls, bird photography (the region is famous for the water fowl), lavender, horses and pageantry, and—the workshop I chose 'Wild Horses of the Carmague' with on horses. All I wanted to do in France was photograph these

As an added bonus, Create Away was based in Aigues-Morte, an ancient city surrounded by a milelong wall that was built by Louis IX in 1240 AD as a starting point for his Crusades.

I emailed Create Away and was soon corresponding with the trip coordinator, Ros, who cheerfully answered all my questions. Yes! I was soon enrolled...And studying French—using an app called Mango. I had over a year to learn a bit of the language.

My husband, Will, and I flew into Montpellier (Mon-pee-aye) in May 2016. Serge picked us up at the airport and drove us to Aigue-Morte—and it was beautiful. Inside the huge city walls were old world houses, shops and restaurants neatly lining the tiny streets—many of which were just for pedestrians. Our hotel, Hotel des Templiers, was built of stone, and rumored to be where the Knights

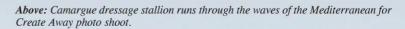
Templar stayed in the 1200's. A secret tunnel allegedly connects the hotel with a church a few blocks away.

We met that afternoon with Serge, Ros and the three other participants in the workshop: a pediatrician from London, a professor from the College of Charleston, SC, and a professional Royal Air Force photographer, for our basic instructions. Most important; 1) when standing in the lakes or marshes expect to slowly sink into the mud, so step out carefully so you don't fall and 2) if you fall remember to hold your camera up high out of the water.

Early the next morning Serge drove us to the Mediterranean for Photo Shoot #1. A beautiful Camargue stallion awaited with his owner. Trained to rear on command, the stallion provided amazing photo opportunities along the beautiful sandy heach. The owner then lead







Top left: A Camargue mare grazes with two foals. The horses are born dark and gradually turn white.

Bottom left: Karen Brenner recently completed the first painting in her 'Beautiful Horses of the Camargue' series. She took over 4,000 photos during the workshop she attended in France and plans to do many paintings based on the photos.

his stallion straight out to sea, removed the halter, and the stallion galloped through the waves straight toward our cameras—or rather the bucket brimming with grain at our feet. (The bucket was inside a small section of the beach that had been roped off one strand of temporary fencing.) The combination of the raging surf and the animated stallion leaping through the waves with his mane billowing in the wind was better than I'd ever imagined!

That afternoon we traveled to a privately owned region (it was miles and miles of land) and parked along a dirt road. Soon a dozen horses, herded by the guardians trotted up the road and were funneled through a gate. We followed. The horses were slowly coaxed into a large, shallow lake. We gingerly pulled on our rented hip waders and followed them in to the dark water. The weather was cold, dreary and gray with a light drizzle as we gingerly practiced moving through the water, holding our cameras high. Soon we were trucking along, petting horses and snapping some photos as they calmly rested thigh high in the water.

"Line up and stand close together," Serge instructed us, pointing to a spot about 30 feet down in the middle of the lake. We obeyed. The guardians slowly herded the horses past our group so we could get acclimated—if we stood closely together, the

horses would go around our group rather than through it. Got it! Soon the guardians had the herd of horses galloping by, pass after pass, so close we should have shielded our cameras from the splashes—but didn't want to miss any shots. It was thrilling!

That evening most of our group opted to attend a ferrade, a traditional branding ceremony-complete with roasted leg of bull. It was delicious...I fascinating! Two dozen guardians on horseback formed a line at the far end of a 200 yard pasture. A young bull was released and the chase began! We, along with about 100-200 guests, awaited at the far end of the pasture. As the bull neared the crowd, five guardians leaped off their horses and wrestled him to the ground to be branded. Later, in the second part of the ferrade, a tight cluster of guardians on horseback entered a large round enclosure. As they rode together around the inside wall, we were able to see that there are four large bulls—with huge horns, packed tightly inside the group of horses and riders.

Up before sunrise the next morning, we were back at the pasture photographing horses in the brilliant early morning light. This time we were standing in the middle of an even larger lake as the brilliant white horses thundered by. We never did see the far perimeter of this seemingly endless pasture. Nowhere else on earth would you be able to photograph white horses herded by guardians, with their tridents waving, galloping through lakes, marshes, rivers and the sea.

That evening we photographed a herd of young Camargue horses at a different location. Camargue horses are born dark and gradually turn white as they mature. These youngsters were a rainbow of gray shades. They looked amazing with the rays of the late evening light streaming through dramatic backlight, dark clouds.

The final day arrived, and once again we set out in the wee hours of the morning. Our mission: Photograph dueling stallions. We drove through a private estate, stopping occasionally for Serge to open and close gates blocking the roadway. As we arrived at a huge lake, we saw a flock of hundreds of flamingos—and a few swans—floating near the shore. We got our cameras ready—hoping they would take flight—but they were content to drift away off into the distance to the far side of the lake.

The morning light was spectacular and the white stallions—more playful pals than arch enemies—galloped together along the lake shore. Their occasional sparring made for some great shots.

Our second stop that morning was at a nearby pasture where we were

quickly surrounded by mares and foals. Curious? Yes. But the moms were most interested in the feed bags overflowing with French bread in the back of our truck! A treat they ungracefully devoured. We stayed and photographed the fuzzy foals and moms as they lazily nibbled on grass.

workshop The finalephotographing horses galloping through the Mediterranean at sunset galloping was the highlight of the amazing trip. Ten horses were trucked to a vast private, sandy beach that went on and on as far as we could see. Five of the horses-geldings-were ridden by guardians; five mares were completely free. The guardians guided the mares to the edge of the sea where they shied slightly as the waves rolled in. Sandwiched between the water's edge and the guardians they slowly ventured into the water. The horses were really not afraid, just cautious. We stood, clad in hip waders in the Mediterranean Sea, cameras ready.

As the evening sun was setting, the horses galloped straight at us, splashing us as they dashed by. Thrilling beyond words.

Equine artist Karen Brenner lives in Wooster, Ohio. She specializes in oil paintings and artistic horse photography. You can see her work at www.karenbrenner.com. For more information contact Karen at 330/263-1023 or kmbrenner@hotmail.com.