

Wild at heart

Pure white horses and untamed countryside combine to create an elemental experience.

Louis takes a fall as we gallop, flat out, along a beach in sunny, windswept southern France. This isn't meant to happen: as a gardian, one of the tough cowboys of this wild Camargue region, keeping one's seat is a given. We ride on oblivious as Louis bounces on the sand behind us, our hands along our horses' necks, their manes streaming silver. Sand dunes and marram grass flash by on our left. On our right rolls the Mediterranean, foaming and sparkling. But while we're all on trustworthy steeds from a selection at Louis's stables, Louis is on a filly that hasn't yet encountered the ocean. First impressions prove too much for the youngster whose coat, once brown, now grey, is still turning white. The white horses on the waves spook this (nearly) white horse of the Camargue, unseating our handsome leader.

White horses have been roaming the Camargue for centuries. Stocky, pretty and just over pony-sized in height, they are ubiquitous in this vast marshland area, a national park between the Rhône delta, next to the sea. These descendants of the Arab and Barb horses brought in by the Romans and the Moors, and bearing more

than a passing resemblance to the prehistoric equines of the Lascaux cave drawings, squelch through the Camargue's slow-moving, man-made channels in their manades (semi-wild herds), past salt lakes filled with wading pink flamingoes and scrublands dotted with sea lavender. The white horse, immortalised on screen in the French children's classic *Crin-Blanc*, in picture books and tourist brochures and innumerable little girl's fantasies, stands, rearing, at the centre of Camargue folklore.

The white horses are the traditional mounts of the gardian, who — kitted out in floral shirts and stetsons, gypsy versions of Marlboro men — use them to herd the Camargue's equally stocky, equally folkloric black bulls. The thickset and curious Camargue cattle, with horns that point skywards (unlike their coming-straight-at-you Spanish counterparts), graze amidst the swaying marsh reeds, with white egrets hitching rides on their backs. Come summer harvest time, when the lakes dry up and the salt mountains are gathered, traditional festivals centred on horsemanship and bullfighting take place in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, the gateway to the

Camargue. Late May's colourful gypsy festival attracts travellers from all over Europe, but it's the Fête du Cheval in June that sees gardian, bulls and white horses come into their own.

Our small group is here under the aegis of World Horse Riding, an award-winning international ecotourism outfit "for people who love to ride, on horses who love to be ridden". Unlike the first-time riders who descend upon the Camarguais Mas, the area's traditional whitewashed farmhouses — thatched residences offering accommodation and riding, set back from the roads beyond long lines of tethered white horses — World Horse Riding patrons instead get to live the life of a gardian, falls and all.

Our small, family run hotel is more lonestar than five star (there are posher, more comfortable places in nearby Arles, Aigues-Mortes and Saint-Maries) but when you're all day in the saddle, all you want when you're off it is a decent restaurant with a fine wine list — which ours thankfully has — and a place to lay your head. The rooms are basic, no TV, shower-only affairs, which doesn't seem to matter. Food, wine and conversation with an array of ►

Camargue's white horses are at the centre of the French region's folklore.



BY JANE CORNWELL

Bazaar Culture Escape



The authentic experience aboard a trusty World Horse Riding steed.

colourful locals keeps us down in the bar/restaurant till lights out. We're up early for breakfast though (jam and baguettes, mainly) after which we head over to Louis's stables to saddle our mounts — Éclat, Nuage, Arc-en-ciel — and ride out into an untamed, nature lover's paradise. Sometimes, through the reeds, we see the tops of tourist paddle-boats as they cruise the Petit Rhône. But for the most part we go where the gardian go, off the tourist track.

We practice herding cattle, cutting calves out from the fray and watching as they galumph, lowing, back to their mothers. We play gardian games: racing from one barrel to another, reins in one hand, long sticks in another; chasing a mercurial Louis on his prancing stallion, Badalu, trying to wrest the posy of sea lavender that he is holding above his head. Cooled by the mistral, the ever-present breeze that sweeps across the flatlands, our heads wrapped tightly in bandanas (bugs just love the Camargue), we canter through elephant grass higher than our mounts, past sprawling rice paddies and across muddy, hoof-sucking marshes. We spot rabbits, muskrats and wild boar; kestrels, kingfishers and herons, most of whom spot us first. At the end of each day we return along horizons lit by flaming sunsets, like our own living impressionist paintings.

Louis shows us the graves of some great bullfighting bulls, traditionally buried standing up and facing towards the sea (a few exceptional Camargue horses are buried the same way). Unlike their Spanish counterparts, bulls are never killed in the Camargue bullfights; the wildness of their character reveals the bravery

and fitness of the young men of the villages, the razeteurs who race in to the arena at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer and pluck rosettes off bulls' horns with metal combs before dashing — followed by an enraged bull — to safety in the arms of an excitable crowd. Round-ups take place each morning, with gardians on white horses driving posses of black bulls into a large corral on the edge of town.

Despite his fall on the sand (after which he brushed himself off and got straight back on again), Louis proves himself to be more than just a pretty face. With the World Horse Riding crew cheering him on from an outdoor cafe on the road leading into the arena, he canters past on Badalu, one of a group of white horsemen guiding the bulls in clusters called *abrivados* — squeezing in so close that bulls' heads rest on horses' rumps. Occasionally a bull is separated from the herd and becomes aggressive, wheeling around in fright and fury — sending observers under tables, onto car roofs, up poles — until he is rounded up by a gardian on a white charger and returned, snorting, from whence he came.

On our last day we join hundreds of gardians for a breakfast barbecue on the salt flats a few kilometres out of town, tying Éclat, Nuage, Arc-en-ciel and the rest of our beloved white horses (with whom, if it wasn't love at first sight, it was by second) to horse and cattle boxes and chatting in pidgin French to the cowboys cooking sausages and slurping (some of them, anyway) cognac. Then, bulls let loose, girths and bandanas tightened, we move out behind the great swathe of white horses and riders, feeling like proper Camargue cowboys, if only for a day. ■

Ride on time

Nudie Jeans shirt, \$195, (02) 9331 6066.

Seduce pants, \$140, (02) 9517 8888



David Lawrence boots, \$399, 1800 100 366.

Bally bag, \$950, (02) 9519 2433.

Horsing about

World Horse Riding started out hosting intense riding experiences in the French Camargue in 1992 and now organises similar trips to other handpicked destinations — Patagonia in Argentina, Pantanal in Brazil, Rajasthan in India, Tuscany in Italy, the Transylvanian mountains in Romania, Trollbältet in Sweden and the Timote grasslands in Uruguay. The organisation was founded and organised by Anna Widstrand, a Swede who divides her year between Sweden and Italy, and cooperates with a dozen local freelance guides. The multilingual Widstrand travels with the groups to most destinations to translate and work with local guides.

TRAVEL FILE

A week horse riding in the Camargue costs approximately \$2195 per person excluding flights to Montpellier and drinks. For more information, www.worldhorseriding.com

STAFFAN WIDSTRAND, STYLED BY APRIL HENIG. SEE BUYLINES FOR DETAILS AND STOCKISTS