



Riding through a (high) meadow.

Anna Bruce reports on a riding holiday in the Austrian Alps.

Grazing under a rainbow.



Riding Beyond Cloud Nine

The aeroplane touches down and already people are grumbling as they race to disembark and resume their hectic lives.

Like the rain that falls on my face as I wait – patiently – to resume mine their distress washes over me.

Yet I have empathy with these people – a few days earlier I would have been one of them.

And now, five days later on, a smile still cannot be wiped from my face as I believe I've found a place to find inner peace.

Where?

Austria.

I admit I was really hopeful of a great holiday on reviewing The Riding Company's website but my expectations were to be vastly exceeded.

The company's founder, Kat Tiefenthal, is the archetypal adventurer but clever with it.

Since retiring from professional paragliding in which she held the World distance record for ten years, and producing two young children, she seems to have recognised just what a modern holiday-maker wants.

She offsets your carbon emissions for

your flight; offers a choice of hotels to suit every style and budget; and can source something for all the family – satisfying those wanting spa treatments, a heart-stopping adventure, or just to feel spoilt.

The Austrian Alps are ideal for this, and although the initial impetus for the company came from Kat's family and friends who, on visiting her from the UK, were so impressed with the riding – and riding training – in the region, fishing, dog-sledging, skiing, swimming, white-water rafting and a host of other activities – including paragliding – are also on offer.

Providing bespoke holiday packages is what Kat does best and for my part, her choice in the 3-star Schlosswirt hotel in the Karnten region, under the shadow of Austria's highest mountain, was perfect.

The informal atmosphere and homely feel coupled with plentiful delicious traditional food, at a price to suit all budgets, meant that I relaxed easily into my new surroundings, enough that I even dared sample the sauna, steam room, swimming pool all included in the price and splashed out on a massage.

But, the hotel, though lovely in itself, and popular with climbers, hikers and

bikers, was not my main attraction, for over the road was its accompanying stables.

Tony, the hotel manager (who in true Austrian fashion multi-tasks to be the mountain rescue leader, and riding guide too) tried to tempt the group of riders that included all levels of rider from beginner to advanced to get really in tune with nature and take a five hour ride to stay in a mountain hut without water or electricity, overlooking a glacier but, seeing the storm clouds we, wisely, opted for a shorter ride with a more sensible destination instead.

And I think Tony too was perhaps relieved when he was then called out on a mountain rescue and did not return until shortly before our departure the following morning.

No one is joking when they tell you that you and your plucky Haflinger pony are going to go up a mountain.

In only a few hundred yards one is out of the rural village complete with individual vegetable patches and postage stamp paddocks that the smallholders were scything to make winter hay for their cows grazing on the summer pasture higher up.



We're going down where?



Steady/Nettle!



Riding through the glorious woodland.

What faces you then is a near-vertical climb.

Criss-crossing through pine-scented woodland, open meadow, through rivers and over boulders and fallen trees the ponies carefully picked their route and the rider in you suddenly realises, that on this terrain, we are just passengers and they are in charge.

Initially I was surprised at how often the ponies stopped and picked at the bright green shoots growing under the shafts of strong sunlight breaking through the fir trees.

But when we had to lead our ponies up a small section to avoid a fallen tree suddenly I understood.

The clear air filled my lungs but at 2500m my requirement for oxygen to make the shortest of climbs was so great that I only made it to the top by grasping at tufts of grass above and trusting my pony to pick his way behind me rather than barge on past – it seems even the ponies have Austrian manners!

After three hours we reached the Almgasthaus Glocknerblick, a guesthouse nestled in the clouds.

A traditional steaming Austrian lunch sated our hunger and after a rest we were off again, this time not climbing

but going around the mountain through the fields of wild flowers and herbs that were being grazed by the villagers' cows that produced a gentle melody as their cowbells chimed.

After crossing the clear-water stream that serves the village beneath without the need for chemical treatments and then cantering back along a winding track we were unfortunate to meet the tail end of a rain storm before returning, but what are a few drops of rain when you are riding above cloud nine?

And, as we sheltered back in the comfort of the guesthouse – complete with beds, showers, toilets and electricity, a double rainbow spilled out down the mountain.

Yet, despite the ardour of the day the ponies still found energy to frolic in the pasture and the following morning cantered up to meet Tony's call.

Securing the comfortable western saddles back on, we then prepared to ride home.

I'd spent much of the previous day's climb in believing that there was no way we could go back down such steep and at times narrow paths with a deathly drop to one side.

I was wrong.

So, in truth, it was our descent of the mountain that made me admire the Haflinger as a breed most.

Their care over steep and treacherous sections was unsurpassed and they somehow still had the stamina to carry us along wide galloping tracks with staggeringly beautiful views at every turn, too.

Thus it was with great sadness that I said goodbye to my two steeds for the ride; 28 year-old Nettle and the mildly-younger, Moritz.

The age and fitness of these lovely creatures is undoubtedly testament to both the care they receive and the lives they lead.

And, as I returned home feeling rejuvenated and relaxed I felt closer to them than the manic lives of the people around me.

So now, if I start to feel a little stressed, I'll tap into the memory of riding Nettle through the rain, cloud nine beneath me, a snow-sprinkled mountain peak ahead and with a rainbow brewing from just behind my shoulder.

To create your own Austrian adventure visit www.theridingcompany.com



Left to Right: Back home and relaxing; Two thirds of the way up; Nettle & me preparing for our adventure.



A third of the way up the mountain, looking down on the village.



THE HAFLINGER

Originating from the South Tyrol, Haflingers were the native ponies of the Alpine farms of Austria. The Arabian stallion El Badavi XXII was introduced to the breed and it was him, along with his son, that are the founding sires of the Haflinger. Most of the five main bloodlines can be traced back to his offspring and the Haflinger retains its distinct look and character because of this pure heritage. Haflingers are always chestnut and white, with a flaxen mane and tail. They can be up to 14hh. They have a delightful temperament and a willingness to please which makes them ideal for adults and children alike. They are sturdy, strong, surefooted and intelligent. Haflingers have an attractive head, generous and kind eye, small ears and are short in the leg but with a broad, strong back and muscled quarters. They need and enjoy plenty of exercise and are 'good-doers', not needing large fields of lush grass or hard feeds (unless in strenuous work). Like all horses, their fields must have strong boundaries and plenty of fresh water. Despite being a hardy breed, Haflingers need shelter from the cold and wet. For further information contact The Haflinger Society of Great Britain (GBHS) – 01371 810216.



What to wear when heading for the hills?

The Riding Company advises you bring your own well-fitting riding hat when taking part in any adventure. For comfort and fit, I chose Charles Owen's Show Jumper XP which was perfect for me. Visit www.charlesowen.co.uk

In terms of appropriate attire, Mountain Horse clothing was an obvious choice. They offer a complete range from underwear to casual and extreme clothing as well as footwear and gloves.

I wore their underwear, Isolde breeches, Ashley t-shirt, Tyler leather gloves and High Rider II boots to go up the mountain.

With the thin WPS Prisma jacket being easy to fit in the saddle-bag I was grateful to have packed that too and it kept me dry in the heaviest of downpours while still being breathable and having watertight pockets for my camera and phone.

I wouldn't be without it now as it is so rare to find a riding jacket that really is waterproof and I love the elastic drawstring around the neck that prevents raindrops from dripping in.

In the mountain hut and I put on my classic micro fleece and have hardly had it off since. So warm, yet lightweight and breathable it's a must have in your suitcase.

I also used Mountain Horse's Free Rider boots and matching Sport Legging half chaps that are particularly suited to this type of holiday as they are waterproof, breathable and chafe resistant and if space is limited in your luggage, the Free Rider boots can double up as your daily footwear too.

And, their excellent grip is a real godsend over the tough terrain should you have to take a turn at walking up or down the mountain!

For more information on the wide range of Mountain Horse products visit www.horsemasters.co.uk