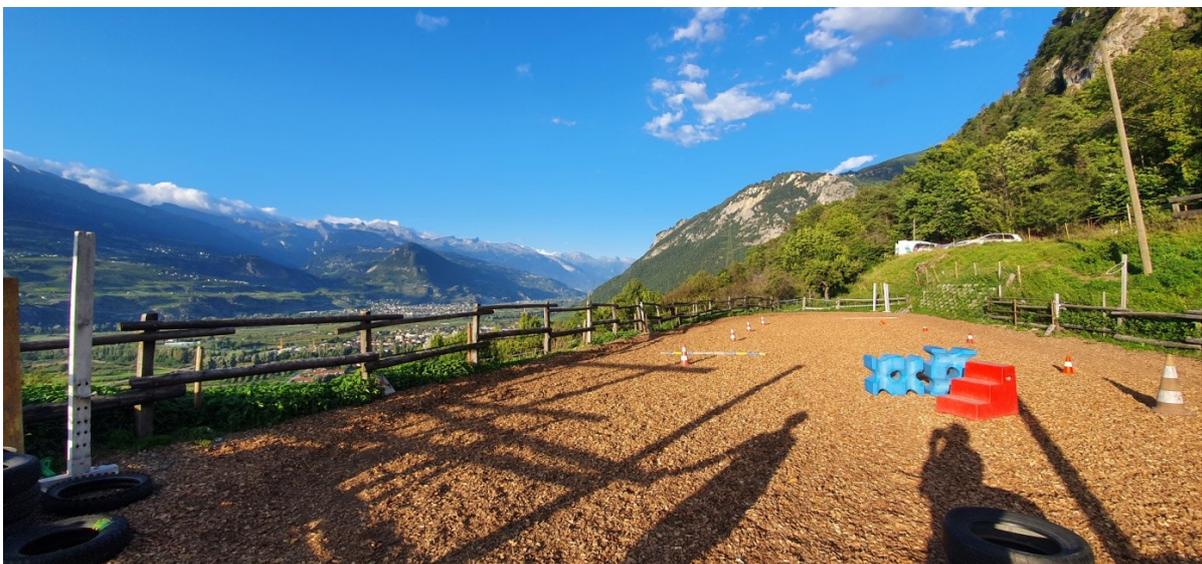


## Valais Alpine Ride

A magnificent adventure for mountaineers!



One of my highlights of summer 2021 was definitely my 5-day horse riding trip in the Valais Alps in French-speaking Switzerland. I arrived at the small ranch the night before the ride was due to start, as it was scheduled to begin at 8 a.m. the next morning. It was a leisurely three-hour drive from Basel to Sion. Upon arrival at the ranch, I was warmly welcomed by Roger and Stéphanie, the owners of the farm. Roger only speaks French, but Stéphanie speaks very good English and even a little German. I was first shown to my room so I could unpack my luggage. There were two of us riders who arrived the night before, so we had a large room with 15 bunk beds all to ourselves. This was, of course, a luxury. European sockets, pillows and wool blankets were provided. There was no internet. We shared the clean and fairly modern bathroom with two other riders who had done the tour before us and were staying for an extra night afterwards. We unpacked and then explored the small farm, which is located on a hillside.



However, our horses were not there because they had already spent the night at the starting point of the tour. They had already completed a 5-day tour the week before. The farm had an organic shop selling its own produce. At 7 p.m., we had dinner together with the two riders from the last tour, with a wonderful view over Sion.

The next morning, we packed up and loaded our backpacks and sleeping bags into the trailer provided. A lovely breakfast with coffee, tea and juice was already waiting for us. The other riders slowly arrived and joined us. At around 8 a.m., eight riders were driven to the horses. The weather was beautifully sunny. When we arrived at the horses after about a 20-minute drive, we were greeted by three other riders who were joining us on the 10-day tour, as well as Cora, our second riding guide. This was followed by a tour briefing and the allocation of horses. I got Fripouille, a handsome Freiberger gelding. Before we set off, everyone was given a jute bag with their lunch in the form of a picnic. We didn't mount straight away, but led the horses for the first 10 minutes. This was to become our daily routine. On the first day, there were a lot of uphill sections, some of them quite narrow passages on slopes with extremely stony paths. The horses mastered the route with flying colours. I was amazed at how much strength and skill the horses had. My Fripouille was a natural. He knew his job inside out. Nevertheless, it never got boring, because when I wanted to, I could lead, and when I just wanted to relax, he took the lead. After a short time, we were already a wonderful team and I felt 100% safe on him. The other riders felt the same way about their horses. After only three hours, we were already so high up that looking down made you feel a little strange. This was followed by a lunch break. Our jute bag contained a cheese sandwich, a small lentil salad, a piece of fruit and a dessert – not exactly French haute cuisine, but I looked forward to the ever-changing packed lunch every day. We continued through the forest, still mostly uphill. In between, the horses could drink from fountains and we also had the opportunity to fill our bottles with clear spring water. On the first day, we only walked at a slow pace. But the view further up was so breathtaking that I didn't mind at all. We could see the surrounding mountain peaks and by the end of the day we were already at an altitude of over 1000 metres. After 5 hours, we arrived at a mountain hut where we spent the night. The car with our belongings and mattresses was already there. The horses were unsaddled and taken to the pasture.



We ate and slept in an empty, swept-clean cowshed. We had cheese fondue for dinner, and Roger's family joined us to spend our first evening together. There were no showers, but at least the toilets were very clean. The night up there was quite cold. I had brought a sleeping bag that was rated for minus five degrees Celsius. However, we were given woollen blankets to cover ourselves with. I also slept with a hat and thick clothes. Even in summer, you should not underestimate the weather up on the mountain. Winter clothes are a MUST.

The second day started at 8 a.m. with a sweet breakfast, coffee and tea, and this wonderful view.



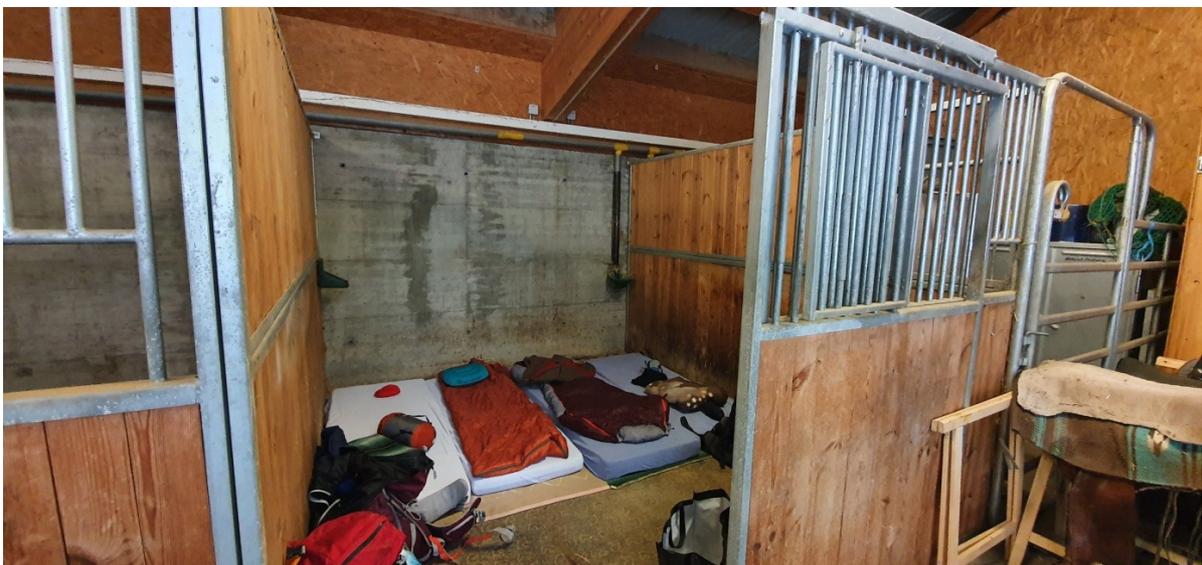
We cleared out our dormitory together and prepared the horses. We continued uphill. We were now above the tree line and the weather was beautiful. However, it is always a good idea to bring several layers of clothing, because everything from T-shirts to down jackets came in handy during the course of the day. We rode up to the summit cross. The horses once again performed magnificently.



For the first time, the trail went downhill again, so we had to lead the horses in some sections. I recommend wearing good footwear for this, as it's easy to slip otherwise. Unfortunately, I can speak from experience, as I was only wearing trainers because my light trekking shoes had given up the ghost the day before the ride...



We took our lunch break in a valley. Our packed lunches were once again full of delicious cold dishes. Today we had potato salad with quiche, fruit and snacks. We spent the second half of the day riding in the forest, where we even managed a trot and a gallop or two. We crossed bridges, rode through streams, sometimes on steep slopes and sometimes on flat ground. No matter what the terrain was like, the horses did a great job. We rode in the same order every day. On the second night, we had to find alternative accommodation at short notice. So we ended up spending the night in stalls at another horse ranch. Four riders slept in each horse stall, but in a separate area without horses. It took some getting used to, but it was definitely an adventure.



When we arrived at the ranch, a snack was waiting for us to recharge our batteries. There was cheese, sausage, chocolate and plenty of bread and drinks. This was followed by a nice warm shower. Today we had been on the road for a total of eight hours, so after a delicious dinner of lasagne and pear dessert, we fell tiredly onto our mattresses. The next morning we set off at around 7 a.m., as today was going to be the longest day. After a sweet breakfast, we saddled up the horses and stowed our gear in the trailer. We rode a short distance through the forest. It was very cold today and I was tired. So while my horse trodded along obediently, I rested a little on him, as I had come to trust him with my life. We left the forest and entered a wonderful rocky mountain landscape. Simply fantastic! I was wide awake again in no time. Today's ride took us to a huge dam. The reservoir was turquoise blue. Unfortunately, the weather was quite cloudy today, making it a cold August day. However, the sight of the wonderful lake in the middle of a grey-white mountain world made up for the weather.



We rode our horses over the dam to a wonderful little café on the other side, where we treated ourselves to hot chocolate and other delicacies. It's a good idea to have a few francs or a credit card with you for this. Otherwise, you won't need a penny during the entire ride. The horses were simply tied up on the quiet road and became an attraction for other visitors to the dam. Refreshed, we continued on our way. Now we had a mountain pass to cross.



It was breathtaking. On the way, we also saw a few ibexes. The further we went, the more rugged the landscape became. There was no trace of green mountains anywhere. Only after two hours did the landscape slowly become more colourful again and we encountered the first herds of cows. A small mountain lake invited us to linger.



Now that we had reached the highest point of the entire ride, we first had to lead the horses downhill for quite a distance. It wasn't easy to lead the horses downhill and watch your own step at the same time. It was quite a workout for the muscles. You shouldn't be unsteady on your feet for this ride. In general, it's a rather slow ride, as much of it is at a walking pace, but good stamina and basic fitness are always helpful. Age is irrelevant, by the way. Our oldest rider was almost 70 years old. However, most of the riders were between 25 and 35 years old. We led the horses for almost an hour until we arrived at a wonderful little mountain lodge. It consisted of a main house and many bungalows in mountain hut style.



Our group was given one hut for the men and guides and another for the women. It was a dream come true, with hot showers and even proper bed linen. When we arrived, our daily snack was already waiting for us. Afterwards, I went for a short walk in the beautiful mountain scenery with some of my fellow travellers. For dinner, we had meat stew with vegetables and polenta (corn porridge). Today's dessert was tiramisu. Afterwards, some of us celebrated a little in a convivial atmosphere. However, like most of the others, I was exhausted from the longest and most strenuous day and was looking forward to a warm, cosy bed. The fourth day was to be the shortest day of riding, so we could take our time in the morning. We packed our things, got the horses ready and set off at a leisurely pace. It was the perfect day for a little rest and relaxation. Today, the route was mostly straight or slightly downhill. We rode along the mountainside with wonderful views of a landscape that reminded me of the heath in summer. Everything was blooming in shades of purple.



Further down the mountain, we entered wooded areas. After the break, it was time for a little trot and gallop again. The horses were just as fresh as on the first day. This penultimate day was really very relaxed, but was just as adventurous as the other days. In the forest, we crossed many bridges, rode along adventurous little paths, through enchanted areas and past beautiful mountain villages.



After four hours, we arrived at our last hut for the night. We unsaddled the horses and rode them bareback up to the pastures. It was great fun. We all felt transported back to our childhoods at the pony farm. Everyone clearly enjoyed riding bareback. Those who didn't want to ride were allowed to lead their horses, of course.



To round off the day, Roger himself served us a typical Swiss raclette. We listened to traditional music and, of course, enjoyed a schnapps or two to bring this wonderful trip to a fitting close. After breakfast the next morning, we set off again on horseback towards the ranch. Today we did a lot of riding, as it was almost all downhill. After all that riding, I found it pleasant to walk more again. We enjoyed our lunch break on the last day in bright sunshine and summer temperatures.

When we arrived at the ranch, we unsaddled the horses and took them to their comfortable, spacious open stables. The horses really deserved a rest. They all contributed to an unforgettable riding trip. My Fripouille got a farewell carrot before returning to his herd. You couldn't tell he had been working in the mountains for 10 days.

The horses' health was checked every evening. They are all in excellent condition and in the best of health. I can highly recommend Roger, Stéphanie and their entire team, as well as the rides. For my part, I would like to say a big thank you for this unique adventure in the mountains. The whole team gave us a warm send-off. Some stayed for an extra night, others bought out the farm's own organic shop, while I set off for my next destination, the Matterhorn!

Mira Kuhnhardt, August 2021