



Riders to the sea

Escape the crowds and head for the silver sands of Aquitaine to discover real freedom. **Judy Armstrong** saddles up to explore the fragrant forests and deserted beaches of Landes ➤



Horse riders reach the water's edge as Atlantic waves crash on to the Landes coast

PHOTOGRAPH: FRANCK MOLINA

Thunder. All I can hear is thunder; it pounds through me, shakes me, leaves me breathless. It comes from four hooves hammering against hard sand, on a beach so long I cannot see the end.

This is the Côte d'Argent, a stretch of sand which continues almost unbroken between the Gironde estuary and Biarritz. And I am on a horse, galloping along it into a blue and white distance, faster than a storm-blown wind.

There is no-one ahead of me; no children digging sandcastles, no surfers or walkers, no dogs chasing sticks into the wave-frothed sea. Because this is Landes, one of the least populated areas of France, and outside the summer season there is virtually nobody here.

The region of Aquitaine – once a kingdom and now made up of five *départements* reaching up from the Spanish border – has its honeypots. To the north are Bordeaux, the vineyards of Gironde, Arcachon and its monolith Dune du Pilat, the largest sand dune in Europe. To the south are Biarritz and Bayonne, with their beaches and bull-fighting. But in between is the *département* of Landes, once an infertile swamp and now home to the largest maritime pine forest in Western Europe. That doesn't sound like a selling point – but there's more.

Wild Atlantic seas

Landes (which translates as 'heathland') was, for centuries, marshland in winter and covered in rough pasture in summer. Settlement or agriculture close to the sea was impossible because of the rapidly shifting sand dunes but, once it was learned that periodic burning of scruffy vegetation created good grazing, by 1850 it was home to a million sheep. The shepherds counteracted the drainage problem by moving around on stilts, until 1857 when Napoléon III ordered the land to be drained and a vast sprawl of trees planted, effectively ending traditional pastoralism. Pines, grasses, reeds and broom were introduced to anchor and stabilise coastal and inland dunes, and resin extraction became a major industry.

Still not excited? The crucial words here are sand and dunes. Outside July and August, when surfboards, kites and gaudy parapente wings move in, the beaches and dunes are open, empty spaces wedged between the wild Atlantic and endless, aromatic forest. But you're right: that amount of sand and forest could be monotonous for a person on foot, or even on a bicycle. So I thought about it – and realised that the perfect way to explore this quiet corner was on horseback.

In the middle of the Silver Coast is the little resort of Mimizan-Plage. It is a short drive from Bordeaux, down an arrow-straight *autoroute* and along small roads wedged between tall pines. A cluster of low houses, mostly painted white, line the seafront and



the few inland streets. It has the right number of shops and restaurants to cater for high-season visitors yet still be viable in the quiet times, plus a handful of hotels with views stretching toward the Americas.

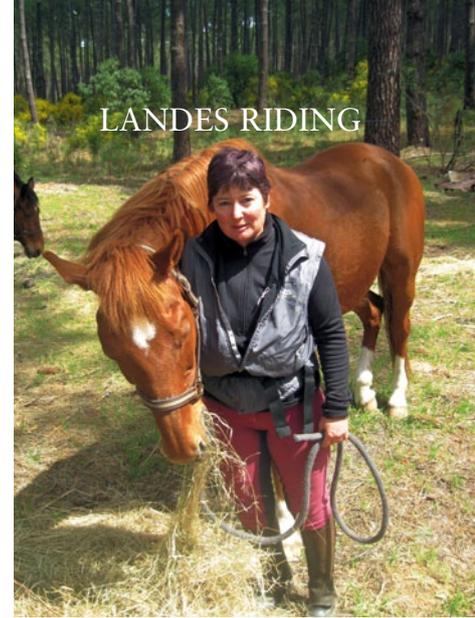
The great forest surrounds the village. On the south side, across the Courant de Mimizan which drains the lake of Aureilhan, there is a small opening. Into this is inserted Le Marina, an equestrian centre run by Michel Girard-Mille, who abandoned a career in medicine for the love of horses. He chose Landes for its riding possibilities and, three decades later, feels he hasn't touched the edges. Like him, I was seduced by the idea of riding here, of long gallops along beaches and slow meanders among the pines. So were my friends Sylvia and Judy, who have joined me for a long weekend in the saddle.

Through the internet, I had found a place to stay by the beach. Hôtel de France is light and bright with blue shutters and a gentle maritime theme, just as you expect at the seaside. As the sun begins to set we wander out on to the sand and stop, almost bewildered, as the sky catches fire. It burns red, orange and gold; nothing can stop the inferno of light, until the orb slides into the crashing sea and is, finally, extinguished. We are so transfixed, we fail to notice the beach stretching north and south. This makes it even more astonishing when, in the morning, we ride on to the sand for the first time.

But I'm getting ahead. We are greeted at Le Marina with breakfast, in addition to the one

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The horses drink from the Courant de Contis after a morning galloping on the beach; Riding is fun in the sand dunes; Judy and her horse Houragan take a lunch break; Entering Mimizan-Plage; Riding beside the River Courant

PHOTOGRAPHS: JUDY ARMSTRONG



we have already eaten. Michel is not daunted: “You have a busy morning ahead, so eat! Please eat! And then you can meet your horses.”

The horses are bred by Michel and used for jumping competitions as well as *randonnées*. Michel and his crew are well-known on the equestrian circuit and the tack room is full of trophies. Along with our new furry friends, we also meet our guide, Laure, a talented horsewoman with a jaunty selection of woollen hats worn regardless of the weather.

No particular skill is demanded – beginners are as welcome as experienced riders – and, with journeys ranging from a few hours to five days,

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there is plenty of flexibility. We have chosen to ride for two days and Michel has devised a 65-kilometre circuit taking in the best of the immediate area.

We mount up and ride slowly out of the centre, into the forest. Because we are riding on dry sand, there is no sound from our horses' hooves; instead, we have birdsong and a gentle creaking from the trees. Following Laure, we brush past yellow-flowering broom and soon turn right, to climb a white dune spiked with thin green grasses. On the top, we face an enormous scene, of a roiling sea

studded with black rocks, and a beach to infinity.

Laure grins at our awe-struck faces. “Now we ride on to the beach. One at a time, we will set off at a gallop, or whatever speed you like, and ride that way.” She points south, into a distance marked only by the vanishing point of sand and sky. “But where do we stop?” asks Sylvia. Laure shrugs. “Wherever you like.”

So, we descend to the Atlantic coast. The horses become alert; they know what's in store. I am first to go and, as the others walk in circles, I gather my reins and my heart quickens. My horse, Houragan, is big and bold; he tosses his head and I sit tighter in the saddle. We trot forward, he slides into a canter, then a gallop. And now we are flying, thundering along hard-packed sand, on a beach empty of anything except a burnished-chestnut horse and me.

We gallop. The speed is thrilling. I have salt on my eyelashes, can taste the sea, have become the wind. Houragan gallops and gallops. The sea sucks at his ankles and sand splatters sharp pellets at his legs. Finally, after three or four lifetimes, he tires, slows and stops. In the excitement, I have forgotten to breathe and together we gulp at the tangy air. Oh, I cannot begin to explain the feeling – of abandoning all sense, and control, and thought.

I sit, in a daze, as the others gallop towards me. We all wear the same expression and Laure grins at us, knowingly. Slowly, we walk along the beach to the settlement of Contis-les-Bains where the Courant de Contis cuts a channel across the sands. Laure guides us up the river to a point where the horses ➤➤➤

We discover marshes in forest clearings and follow clear streams where kingfishers flicker

can drink fresh water and we can safely wade across. The forest presses hard against the sea here, so the village stretches along the river as the line of least resistance.

After a lazy lunch, when the horses roll in the sand and doze under trees, we continue inland. Now we discover marshes in forest clearings and follow small, clear streams where kingfishers flicker. Disorientated by sunlight strobing through trees, we follow Laure until she pulls up beside a large barn in a field. The horses will stay here for the night; we are sleeping nearby in Manoir de Tireveste, in the hamlet of Lesperon.

The manor is wonderfully eclectic, with high ceilings, a traditional tiled entrance hall and antique furniture that imposes darkly. The bedrooms feature marble fireplaces and gilt-framed oil paintings; the view through room-height windows is over a garden rich in wisteria. It is rural France at its best, and when the morning dawns brightly, we are refreshed and ready for another day in the saddle.

Through these huge forests run networks of paths for walkers and riders; in places there are paved routes for bicycles. Striding softly through shifting sand, we ride between phalanxes of trees, upright and close-quartered as infantry. We explore the land where the stilt-walking shepherds once followed their flocks, where rye was grown on a diet of sheep manure, and where the ground was thatched in



winter to preserve it for the growing season. Now, it supports wood, paper and resin industries, and artisans who create parquetry and furniture. But on our horses, silent among the pines, we neither see nor hear evidence of the life-blood of Landes. Instead, we trundle along avenues, over dunes and bowls caused by centuries of sand erosion, to arrive again at the sea.

This time, we're ready for it. This time, we don't wait for Laure's lead. Instead, we trot on to the sand, stare at the immensity and the open spaces, and then, we gallop. The sky is so big, a cathedral ceiling of blue and white. The sand is caramel, wet from the tide. The sound is thunder, from hooves hammering, hammering on the hard-packed beach. I gasp with the joy of it.

When we finally leave the surf-licked coast, it is to ride north along the crest of the dunes. Still there is no sign of life, or mark on the sand. Stopping for lunch – a delicious picnic served by Michel's partner Anette, who has come to meet us – we learn about other riding options. Our eyes light up at swimming with the horses in Lake Aureilhan near Mimizan, and in the Atlantic itself, warmed by summer.

Through the afternoon, we make our way back to Mimizan-Plage, over dunes and along waterways, back to the river and Le Marina. We can still hear and smell the sea but can no longer see it; suddenly, the weekend is too short.

As we slide out of our saddles, say farewell to the horses and wish Michel luck for the busy season ahead, we feel exhilarated and, somehow, bereft. So we return to the beach at Hôtel de France and stand for a while, this time looking north and south along the limitless sands. And slowly, as the sun begins its dive towards the wave-washed horizon, I find the word for that sublime feeling of speed and emptiness and space. It is, simply, freedom. 🐾

PHOTOGRAPHS: JUDY ARMSTRONG

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Fording the Courant de Contis; Picnic in the forest; Riding through yellow-flowering broom in the pine forest; Guide Laure offers Jarny dinner as a reward for two days of great riding

SAME PLACE, DIFFERENT PACE

The great forests of Landes offer easy access to cycles, as well as horses. In the immediate vicinity of Mimizan, more than 40 kilometres of cycle paths and ten kilometres of waymarked secondary roads are linked to make routes suitable for all. Some are surfaced, others are sand or hard forest tracks, over flat or gently undulating terrain. The trails are scenic and diverse, running through pine forests, alongside sand dunes, near lagoons and lakes, and through villages. There are plenty of water points, picnic areas and play areas for children.

For the more ambitious, there is also the *Vélocyssée*, a new 1,200-kilometre cycle route which runs along the Atlantic coast, from Roscoff to Hendaye, and passes through the area of Mimizan for about 30 kilometres. A cycle path map is available for €1 at Mimizan tourist office, which also has details on bike hire.

If cycling seems like too much effort, the paths are equally enjoyable to walk. The tourist office also sells walking maps, with waymarked routes exploring the lagoons and lakes, architectural and industrial heritage, as well as the ever-present dunes, forests and beaches.



Francofile *Discover the open spaces of Landes*

GETTING THERE

By air: The nearest airport is Bordeaux-Mérignac. Mimizan-Plage is 100km south of Bordeaux. Car hire is the simplest option.
By rail: The nearest stations are Morcenx and Dax, accessed by TGV Atlantique (taxi to Mimizan-Plage).
By road: A10 *autoroute* Bordeaux-Bayonne, exit at Labouheyre, D626 to Mimizan-Plage.

WHERE TO STAY

Judy stayed at:
Hôtel de France
 18 Avenue de la Côte d'Argent
 40200 Mimizan-Plage
 Tel: (Fr) 5 58 09 09 01
www.hotel-mimizan.com
 Friendly, family-run two-star hotel by the beach. Doubles from €55.

Manoire de Tireveste
 32 Route du Caillaou
 40260 Lesperon
 Tel: (Fr) 5 58 89 62 40
www.manoirdetireveste.com
Gîtes and chambres d'hôtes

in a *Landais* manor. Doubles with breakfast €60 (€65 July and August).

Other options:
Hôtel l'Émeraude des Bois
 66/68 Avenue du Courant
 40200 Mimizan
 Tel: (Fr) 5 58 09 05 28
www.emeraudedesbois.com
 On the forest edge, 1.5km from the beach, this 15-room Logis de France has a peaceful location and a highly rated restaurant. Doubles from €59-€89, half-board from €119-€139 (two people).

Camping de la Plage
 Boulevard de l'Atlantique
 40200 Mimizan-Plage
 Tel: (Fr) 5 58 09 00 32
www.mimizanplage-camping.com
 Three-star municipal campsite open early April to late September, 800m from the beach. Tent,

caravan and motor home sites, plus wooden chalets for rental. Tent pitches from €17.80-€23.45 (two people, one car, low-high season).

FOR AN APÉRO A Noste

7 Avenue de la Côte d'Argent
 40200 Mimizan-Plage
 Tel: (Fr) 5 58 09 31 34
www.anoste.fr
 Sea-view restaurant and bar, with terrace and direct access to the beach. Enjoy tapas and cocktails with your feet in the sand.

WHERE TO EAT

Restaurant La Côte d'Argent
 16 Avenue du Courant
 40200 Mimizan
 Tel: (Fr) 6 40 70 80 98
 Riverside location with the option to dine inside or outside. Wonderful service and food, innovative

cooking. One of the more expensive places to eat in Mimizan, but also one of the best. Menus from €24.

L'Escale Gourmande

2 Rue du Vieux Marché
 40200 Mimizan-Plage
 Tel: (Fr) 5 58 09 07 89
 Popular restaurant with fast, friendly service, menus from €16 to €26.

Le Bistrot de la Mer

8 Avenue Maurice Martin
 40200 Mimizan-Plage
 Tel: (Fr) 5 58 09 08 56
www.bistrot-mer-mimizan.fr
 Seafood specialists, menus from €12.90 to €34

IN THE SADDLE Centre d'Équitation de Loisirs 'Le Marina'

40200 Mimizan-Plage
 Tel: (Fr) 5 58 09 34 25
www.centre-equestre-marina.com
 Instruction, showjumping training and riding holidays,

from two hours to six days, throughout Aquitaine. Guides and instructors fully qualified. Two days' riding and one night's accommodation from €235.

ATTRACTIONS

Dax
 On the left bank of the River Adour, Dax is a spa resort (in France it's second only to Aix-les-Bains in importance), specialising in thermal springs and mud treatments since Roman times. Dax also has a lively market and a Roman/Gothic cathedral.

Mont-de-Marsan

Administrative capital of Landes and bullfighting centre, Mont de Marsan has its own variant, *course landaise*, in which the aim is to vault over the horns and back of a charging cow. It is also a centre of foie gras production.



TOURIST INFORMATION: Mimizan tourist office, tel: (Fr) 5 58 09 11 20, www.mimizan-tourisme.com; Landes tourist board, tel: (Fr) 5 58 06 89 89, www.tourismelandes.com