Danielle Wittman, and her husband David, experience an altogether different anniversary, but nonetheless romantic, holiday.

When I first set eyes on the Dikti Mountains above Crete’s Lassithi plateau, their majesty astounded me. With peaks in a blanket of swirling cloud, they towered above the green Lagada valley, dwarfing its whitewashed villages.

Filled with excitement we made our ascent to Avdou village set in the Dikti’s foothills. Just beyond, alone and peaceful on the hillside, was the charming Hotel Velani.

Riding Unguided Across Crete

Far from the overcrowded, resort-strewn Northern coast, the interior of the island is desolate, rugged, and incredibly beautiful. Suffice to say, there is no better way to see it than on horseback, and in the sleepy mountain villages, you will encounter the true Cretan filetime – the famous Cretan hospitality.

My husband and I were riding the Unguided Lassithi Trail, riding across Crete over the Dikti Mountains and down to the Libyan Sea on the south coast, so close to Africa that its desert winds sweep the coastline, whipping up the waves on the beaches at Kefaloskamoos.

On our arrival, host Sabine and Manolis welcomed us and together we enjoyed a drink on the terrace overlooking the valley. From the terrace, you can see the horses so it wasn’t long before we asked to meet our equine companions for the week.

Eagerly we followed Sabine down to the stables, knowing our horses only by their names. Once introduced to Artemis and Hermes, the imminent adventure became all the more real. Artemis, David’s horse, was a striking bay mare with lovely, intelligent eyes. In no time at all the two were grooming each other and booked to get along very well! My horse, Hermes, was a beautiful 5-year-old strawberry roan with the most gentle and affectionate disposition.

After dinner, Sabine laid out a large map and took us through the route. The general idea would be to follow the blue arrows painted at every cross roads, but we had additional info on where to walk with and water the horses and suggestions on where was good for a coffee or a picnic. We were to have two sets of saddlebags and every other day we would return to Velani while the horses stayed out on the trail.

Mountain weather is unpredictable at the best of times, and we were pleased to see some shafts of sunlight glinting through the mist as we enjoyed a hearty breakfast early the next morning.

Down to the stables, we groomed and fitted out our horses and tended to their baggage after a summer
Riding Holidays

The Equestrian

When we woke the next morning the heavens had truly opened. As we drove through the drizzle we suddenly saw a dramatic sight - a huge mountain of thick white cloud was passing towards us, so fast that it was zipping past. We then discovered that the Afoura had created us and for the first time that morning, the rain had stopped. Quickly we fed, groomed and unpacked, As we had no sooner had we mounted, the Afoura passed over and the rain began again in earnest. Within minutes, David and I were soaked to the skin despite rain gear. It wasn't cold though, and the horses actually benefited from the absence of strong sun. They were keen and on their toes so we were able to move quickly through the olive groves. Our belongings were wrapped in plastic bags and we had rain sheets for the horses. The weather was spectacular – great bolts of lightning and deafening cracks of thunder reverberated around the hillsides. We felt very small in this wet wilderness, but the sense of adventure heightened tenfold.

AFTER MEANDERING THROUGH THE OLIVE GROVES, THE TRAIL BEGINS WITH AN INCREDIBLE CLIMB (1000M) THROUGH THE IMPRESSIVE GORGE OF THE GONIES.

Despite his young age he was a fantastic lead horse; ears pricked forward and leaping puddles, he cantered happily along the path. We made our way to Magoulas and the Dionysios taverna, our hotel for the night. We fed and settled the horses before enjoying a lovely hot shower. After dinner we checked on the horses, and as it was always chilly in the mountains and rain was forecast overnight, we rugged them up in rain sheets and wished them goodnight.

Next morning, with the sun warming us, we headed east, allowing our trusty steed a couple of windhills, before our ascent into the Dikti continued. We entered the higher reaches of the mountains, some 1800m above sea level.

I'm not sure what I expected, but where I thought I would find this atmosphere imposing it was actually liberating - to be alone in the wilderness, just you, your horse and nature, is an amazing feeling, and all around us the mountain teemed with life - birds sang, insects hummed, and in the distance the gentle call of the goat bell. We found water for the horses and while they drank we watched the Griffin vultures, part of the largest colony in Europe, gliding effortlessly across the brilliant blue sky.

After lunch we began our descent and return to civilisation, riding through small villages. The horses are a spectacle and everyone comes out to see them with smiles of pleasure. Whilst the horses stayed in Millariko for the night, we returned to Velani and enjoyed a delicious dinner of fresh calamari, peppers stuffed with feta, and tender souvlaki, and not forgetting the famous Velani salad - a must for all who visit!
Only for intermediate or experienced riders, this adventurous trail of 100 miles takes you through the remote mountains and friendly villages of Crete. There is an unguided trail option anytime for experienced riders able to care for their own horses. In this case you are equipped with maps and route descriptions and the trail is already clearly marked. Guided trails take place once a month. This truly is an opportunity to explore another culture on good horses with secure back up. The countryside lends itself to good riding with many dirt tracks winding through olive groves and mountains.

Unguided Lassithi Trail: £905 p.p. in 2010 (based on 2 people sharing) Dates to suit throughout the year excluding July and August (due to heat)

For further information contact Unicorn Trails Ltd by phone 01767 600 606, email sales@unicorntrails.com or visit www.unicorntrails.com