

**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.

# The Incredible Journey

MAIN PICTURE  
LOOKING AT  
AVDOU  
THROUGH THE  
GORGE OF THE  
GONIES.

BOTTOM RIGHT,  
EVENING AT  
KERATOKAMPOS  
AND THE  
UNPREDICTABLE  
WEATHER

## Riding Unguided Across Crete

Far from the overcrowded, resort-strewn Northern coast, the interior of the island is unspoilt, 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 'filotimo' – the famous Cretan hospitality.

My husband and I were riding the Unguided Lassithi Trail, 160km 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 Keratokampos.

On our arrival, hosts 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.

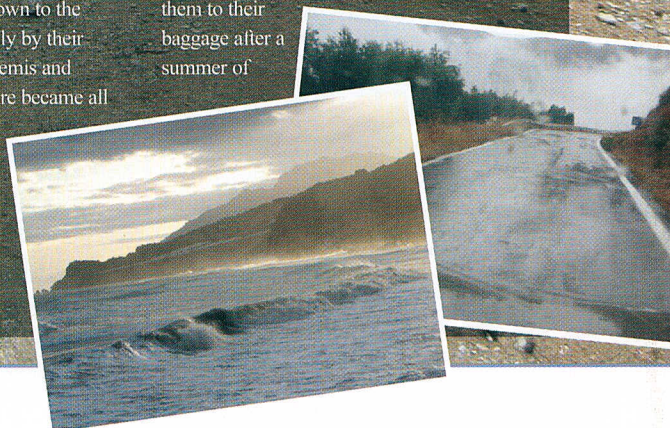
Eagerly we followed Sabine down to the stables, knowing our horses only by their names. Once introduced to Artemis and Hermes, the imminent adventure became all the more real. Artemis, David's horse, was a striking bay mare with lovely, intelligent eyes. In no time at all the two were grooming each other and looked set 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 canter 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 kitted out our horses and lunged them to re-introduce them to their baggage after a summer of





lighter work. Both were eager to go, so we mounted and, with a cheerful wave, we were off into the unknown.

After meandering through the olive groves, the trail begins with an incredible climb (1000m) through the impressive Gorge of the Gonies. The horses never tired, although on

Despite his young age he was a fantastic lead horse; ears pricked forward and leaping puddles, he cantered happily along the paths. We made our way to Magoulas and the Dionyssos 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 is always chillier in the

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 Milliarado 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!

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

reaching the tavern in the village of Kera, they were happy to have their lunch break and a large bucket of water. David and I indulged in a tasty meal of slow roasted lamb from the taverna's wood oven and a couple of glasses of their rustic homemade wine (or Mythos beer in David's case!). We could have sat and admired the view for hours but it was soon time to be off.

Another mammoth climb and we were on the rim of the Lassithi Plateau with 360° views. Behind us, you could see through the gorge to Avdou, and beyond that, the sea. Ahead lay the Lassithi plateau, and the donkey path that guides you down. The donkey path was once the only route onto the plateau; it is very rocky and can only be negotiated on foot whilst leading the horses.

Fantastic flat ground roads lay ahead of us between the furrowed plots and plantations and the horses let us know they were keen on a faster pace. Therefore, without further ado, I touched Hermes' sides and we were off.

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 steeds a couple of windfalls, 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 lull of the goat bell. We found water for the horses and while they drank we watched the Griffon vultures, part of the largest colony in Europe, glide effortlessly across the brilliant blue sky.

After lunch we began our descent and return

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 running next to us, so fast it was overtaking the car. Manolis smiled and explained that this was the 'Afoura' and it was a good sign – his grandfather always said it was a barrier against the rain. He was right! When we reached the horses, the Afoura had circled us and for the first time that morning, the rain had stopped. Quickly we fed, groomed and tacked up. Alas, 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.

BELOW FROM LEFT TO RIGHT DANIELLE AND HERMES IN THE DIKTI MOUNTAINS.

TAVERNA OWNER GIVES ARTEMIS WATER.

RESTING PLACE - HOTEL DIONYSSOS IN MAGOULAS ON THE LASSITHI PLATEAU.

ARTEMIS IN THE DIKTI MOUNTAINS.

DAVID AND ARTEMIS RIDING OUT OF KERATO-KAMPOS.





In the village of Kato Viannos, the rain channelled by the steep, narrow streets created a river! However, the horses never faltered, they marched on, un-phased by the meteoric deluge. We stopped for lunch in an olive grove and I reached into my pocket for our map. A great foam of watery white matter spilled out and a tiny fragment of map stuck to my finger. David and I laughed so hard we cried!

We re-mounted and, once atop the hillside, there was the sea sparkling in sunlight! In that instant the rain stopped. In Keratokampos we fed the horses and put on their cosy rain sheets. That night we sat by the sea and dined on succulent fresh fish.

We were facing the longest ride the following day so decided to have an early night.

Around 3am David woke me, "Did you hear that?" The wind was up and we listened in the darkness. Suddenly the urgent, shrill cry of Hermes was heard on the wind. We threw on our clothes and rushed out. My heart was thumping as we ran into the yard panicking at what we might find. As soon as he saw us, Hermes calmed down. He came up to me and put his nose under my arm, hiding his eyes. David put an arm around his neck and Hermes just sighed and stood quietly. He was only a baby, this was his first unguided trek, and he'd been frightened by the wind. We comforted him for a time, until he began to munch hay again, and then returned to the hotel. Unfortunately, on reaching the hotel, we realised that, in our rush, we had left the key in

the room. We were locked out!

Next morning we were quite tired! However, the sun was shining so we set off in high spirits. We rode alongside the sea and turned inland, climbing up again. The views were stunning. We then entered a dramatic canyon with a 2000ft drop down to the Anapodaris River. I had a touch of vertigo looking down into the chasm, whilst goats skipped on the mountain above our heads. In the village of Skinias I asked a friendly-looking man for water for the horses, and while the horses drank deeply his wife came out with glasses of water for us and some delicious little cakes too!

Time and time-again, we were struck by people's generosity and goodwill. With a simple 'Yaasas' even the surliest of mountain shepherds would crack a smile and return the greeting. After lunch, we picked up the pace

spirits, knowing they were nearly home. We stopped for lunch at a small church opposite an olive grove. The horses rolled happily while we ate our sandwiches and basked in the peacefulness. We pumped water for them from the adjacent well and then, back on board, we passed the village of Lyttos and were on the home strait.

Following the mountain paths, with the Lagada Valley stretched out to our left, we enjoyed the last few 'tinkles' of the goat bells. Hermes led the final canter home and David and I felt sad that our epic adventure had ended. Hermes and Artemis had been our perfect companions on this trip. They both had an amazing work ethic, but also appreciated a cuddle and responded well to praise. It was hard to say goodbye to them, but good to know they would now enjoy a well-deserved rest.

**WE ENTERED A DRAMATIC CANYON WITH A 2000FT DROP DOWN TO THE ANAPODARIS RIVER, WHILST GOATS SKIPPED ON THE MOUNTAIN ABOVE OUR HEADS.**

and enjoyed many long, fast canters through the olive groves. Tired but happy, we met Sabine just outside Arkalochori, the biggest village of the ride. A long soak in the bath with a good book was just the ticket that night, and more delicious Cretan fare, courtesy of Velani, stood us in good stead for the last day.

The final ride was through scenic rolling countryside and again allowed for some speedy riding before we began our ascent back into the mountains. The horses were in high

For anyone wanting a unique riding holiday you simply cannot do better than this trail. The freedom and responsibility of being alone in the wilds with your horse is unbeatable and it is certainly an anniversary we will never forget! All experiences are heightened when riding unguided and you finish every day with a great sense of achievement. It was a truly extraordinary adventure and I am so grateful to Sabine and Manolis that they should offer such a rare and rewarding experience.

**DID YOU KNOW THE SUPREME LASSITHI TRAIL RUNS OVER THE MOUNTAINS TO THE COAST AND CAN BE DONE GUIDED OR UNGUIDED FOR THOSE WITH MORE EXPERIENCE, INSTRUCTION FOR THE LESS EXPERIENCED AND SHORTER HOURS OF RIDING IN THE HOTTER TIMES OF THE YEAR ON THE SUN, SEA AND RIDING PROGRAM TO ALLOW FOR BEACH TIME. MORE DETAILS BELOW.**



## LASSITHI TRAIL

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: £905p.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](mailto:sales@unicorntrails.com) or visit [www.unicorntrails.com](http://www.unicorntrails.com)