

Lost in translation

A 120-mile expedition through the mountains of Crete by a self-confessed hack-hater should have been hell. Instead, **MARTHA TERRY** finds herself smugly content

TAKE two slightly ditzy girls, one incomprehensible language, a brace of strange horses and dump them on a Mediterranean island. Then tell said girls to navigate through 120 miles of impenetrable terrain and come home safely. Sounds like a recipe for disaster?

Well, perhaps. But I also thought it sounded fun — and had no trouble conscripting my flatmate, Caroline, for the trip (solo travel is not allowed on the unguided Lasithi trail).

I'd never been to Crete and, though I officially hate hacking, one sniff of adventure has me snared. But as Odysseia Stables manager Manolis handed me some saddlebags and a curious rope attached to a crooked horse shoe before directing me to a pony half the height of my own titchy eventer, my confidence began to waver.

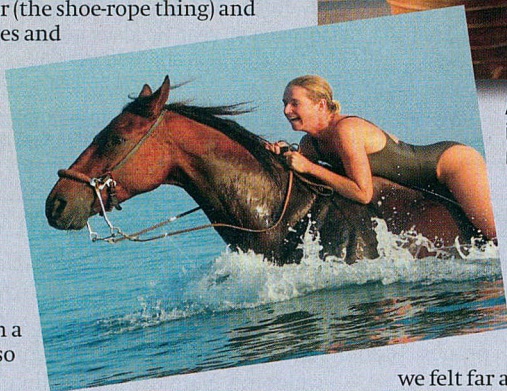
The saddlebags, explained Manolis, heaving them over Macho's back, contain a 24hr supply of oats, a tetherer (the shoe-rope thing) and three days' clothes and necessities for ourselves. We just had to follow blue arrows marked on stones along the trail, keep an eye on the map and pitch up at a taverna every evening.

I can get lost in a dressage arena, so I delegated navigating to Caroline. Manolis promised we would find hay and evening oats at each guesthouse, and urged us to let the horses drink wherever we could find water. We exchanged mobile numbers, with his plea that we would call if ever we were unhappy with one of the ponies — either in temperament or soundness — and he would bring a replacement. With that, he tapped Macho on the rump and waved us off.

We set off in fleeces, heeding the locals' warnings about the chilliness of the Cretan peaks (1,800m) — they get snowed in during the winter. But just two blue arrows into our ride, we decided it was bikini time. Amid secluded hectares of olive groves ribboned with rugged mountain paths, only a lone eagle circling ahead, we stripped and changed — just



Above and left: seven hours in the saddle is rewarded by a rest and a dip in the Libyan Sea



before Manolis's Jeep purred round the corner.

"I forgot your lunch!" he grinned, stuffing hunks of bread, ham and cheese into our bags.

But for most of the trail, we felt far away from any civilisation.

No two days of the six are the same — one day was spent amid rocky, red and Arizona-esque isolation; another day we rode along a fertile, fruity plateau flecked with quaint white-sailed windmills; one we spent on the balmy southern coastline, another up in the cool of the Dikti mountains. Some days we trotted through villages where clusters of gnarled, toothless old men willingly hobbled up from their roadside benches to offer our horses water; other days, the only glint of a community would be the lively chime of a goat's bell.

As Pony Club camp veterans, Caroline and I thought we'd cruise through six day-long rides, tending to our ponies. Although the Cretans are oblivious to B-tests and conventional stable management, I was struck by quite how much Sabine and Manolis, the couple who

run Odysseia Stables, care about their horses.

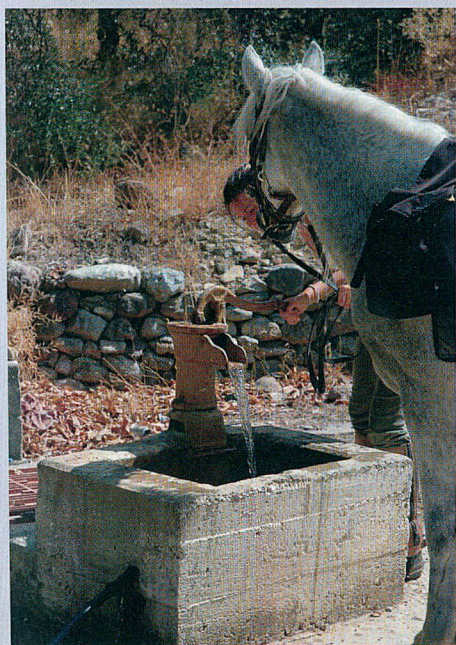
In fact, they once dismissed a rider on day one — not on account of his ability, but for treating his horse like a machine. Manolis admitted to me later that he watches the way his clients throw their bags into his truck at the airport to glean signs about which of their 14 horses would suit them and whether they are caring riders.

But there is no farrier nor vet on the island, and consequently some of the horses' toes were uncomfortably long. And forget all those rally rules about "safe tying up" with baler twine and quick-release knots — here, we simply attached the horses to trees by the tetherers and they ate, slept and rolled as happily as my mollycoddled Pony Club pony. My District Commissioner would have exploded.

Our first day was an eye-opener. From the Gorge of Gonies, we clambered from sea level to 1,100m. Six hours into the ride, and the horses were straining under the effort. Macho's fleabitten white coat blackened and glistened as he toiled up the craggy path. But Macho, a tough little Berber pony, is bred to cope with this sort of vertiginous, rocky terrain. I just had to learn to cope with his way of going. He



Taking it in their stride: the ponies are extremely versatile, even when faced with 100 concrete steps



Feeling the heat: an antiquated watering-hole

likes to surge on at a pace, then take a break, panting and looking round rather helplessly.

I couldn't fathom what he was trying to achieve — he could scarcely go home for a bran mash only 20 miles in. But no sooner had I resigned myself to the idea of tethering him to the nearest olive tree and bedding down for the night than he strutted on again with renewed purpose.

Caroline's ride, Billy Diamond, was a different proposition. Diamond was bred for the flat, but has less affiliation to a racehorse than a tadpole. He likes to amble along at his own pace, his noble head lobbing metronomically as he slithers down the asphalt tracks and climbs methodically uphill on his long legs.

After a gargantuan effort like this, horses need their R&R, but on a different evening, when we'd only spent a couple of hours meandering through the orchards of the Lasithi plateau in the morning, we decided

that a dusk hack was in order.

The horses seemed delighted to be out in the cool of the evening, without their cumbersome saddlebags. While we plucked figs, grapes and pomegranates from the trees fringing the sandy tracks, the horses snuffled around in the dust for windfalls like pigs searching for truffles. It beats my typical

blackberry-fuelled hack. This carefree attitude abruptly translated into a mad homebound gallop, hurtling round the unfamiliar bends — Macho's blood-sugar levels had evidently

soared due to the over-ripe figs.

On the hottest day of all, warmed by the drying African winds, we rounded off seven long hours in the saddle with a dip in the Libyan Sea. The horses initially seemed reluctant to tackle the breaking surf, but once they were confident we weren't going to take any contact on the reins, dragging them underwater, they bobbed around happily. »

▣ No two days are the same, some days spent in isolation, others trotting through villages ▣

COSTS AND CONTACTS

■ THE Lasithi Unguided Trail is available from March to June and from September to December. We visited in September, when the thermometer hit 28°C most days.

■ SEVEN nights/six days' riding costs £613 (unguided) or £650 guided. Single supplement costs £75. This includes bed and breakfast, dinner at local restaurants, all riding activities. Transfer from Heraklion airport is not included (taxi costs €30).

■ CHEAP flights from local airports to Heraklion via Athens can be booked through low-cost airlines. Prices vary according to the season.

■ LUGGAGE is carried in saddlebags and a change of clothes is brought to you at the end of the third day. Half-chaps are suitable, and bring your own crash cap. In September, sun-cream was a must, but in the colder months be prepared for rain, sun and even snow.

■ THIS trip was organised by Unicorn Trails. For details, contact Sue Woodbine, 2 The Acorn Centre, Chestnut Avenue, Biggleswade, Beds SG18 0RA (tel: 01767 600606) www.unicorntrails.com

Right: one of the blue arrows, which directed the entire trek



Back at the ranch: 120 miles and six days later, we return to the stables. The horses are given 10 days off to play and recover



Tourism has yet to take over the deserted south coast of the island



Tucking in: the fertile Lasithi plateau is a vast orchard of apples, pomegranates, figs and grapes

« Again and again, these horses surprised me with their versatility. Macho is an all-singing, all-dancing circus pony. The trail winds through a sleepy whitewashed village, incorporating a descent of 100 chapel steps. Admittedly, Diamond got his lanky legs in a twist, but Macho strutted down as if to the manor born.

The guesthouses and villages, like the trails, vary enormously, from hotels and tavernas to a family spare room — while the horses are patiently tethered to any nearby tree. The accommodation isn't exactly salubrious — spartan, clean and with a private bathroom, but far from plush five-star deluxe. But the hosts, without exception, were charming and helpful, despite the insurmountable language barrier.

We ate local Cretan fare — breakfasts of yoghurt and honey, and suppers invariably incorporating lashings of olive oil, vine leaves, Greek salads, lamb and fresh grilled fish. Every night we would be plied with a carafe of raki — “the Cretan spirit”, ominously translated as firewater — and two shot glasses, often from an anonymous donor in the taverna.

Mercifully, we were warned that it is the height of impropriety to refuse the offer, even if you have no intention of drinking it. And you don't — raki tastes like tequila mixed with petrol. But possibly rather worse.

At the end of the trip, Manolis and Sabine generously took us out to supper in the bright lights of Heraklion to celebrate our safe return. The sudden immersion into a buzzing tourist city, with neon lights, gaudy sarongs and sunburnt Englishmen, pitched a stark contrast with the rustic, peasant-like idyll we'd so enjoyed.

A 120-mile trek is far from a “happy hack”. It was adventurous, challenging and at times remote — with only a good friend and dependent pony as company for an entire week. The rich tapestry of landscapes was compelling, the people delightful and — when each extraordinary day is over — you slept with that smug contentment of time well spent. **H&H**