

RIDE THE WIGHT !

by Rebecca Parsler

What an adventure, my first ever “overseas” competition as well as my first visit to the Island. Completely different terrain and new challenges to our home turf, as well as the longest multi-day class we’ve done to date.

Polly has really been getting the hang of this whole endurance thing over the last year, we made it to advanced at the end of last season and she's shed many fat rolls to reveal a surprisingly fit looking if not exactly streamlined horse. Polly (really Iberica Paloma) is a 13 year old Hispano Arabe mare who I've been riding for the last couple of years. She was loaned to me from the Epona Stud so I could help them prove the breed as a competition horse in the UK. The breed is well known as a sport horse type in Spain although I have to admit I'd never even heard of a Hispano Arabe before turning up to try Polly. She is very different from your typical endurance horse (and about twice the size) but I can't fault her stamina and attitude towards the sport. When we first brought her home she was just backed after spending her first 11 years as a brood mare, these days she looks very different, lots of hard work and running around Milton Keynes has trimmed her right down!



Even so, this ride was a real challenge for her. At home we have flat, artificially surfaced tracks littered with pedestrians, underpasses, canal boats and sometimes giant flags, banners or bouncy castles. Polly must be bomb proof right? Ready for anything? Not so much.

Although at home she happily strolls past motorbikes, roller coasters and the infamous concrete cows, we don't have all the normal countryside things like gates, fences, trees or farm animals.

The Isle of Wight has all these things in spades, for most of you reading this it probably wouldn't be a problem but for a complete townie like Polly it was all a bit exciting!

The terrain was hilly although not excessively steep. The map was almost completely orange with contour lines which gave me a fright when it arrived in the post but I'm glad to say you mostly follow the tops of the downs so it's not as bad as it looks! Saying that though, if you come from flat country like I do it will still be a hard ride, totally worth it for the amazing views from the top though!

I'd entered the 3 day 126km with my Dad, it was a pretty long journey for us as well (we come from Milton Keynes) so we showed up a few days early to make a holiday of it. The organiser, Karen Whittington, very kindly let us borrow one of her paddocks for the horses and as her son was trialling a new caravan business, Hillside Retreat, and needed guineapigs we got to stay in a lovely caravan instead of our trailer, luxury!

We spent a few days sightseeing (who knew Britain launched it's own satellite? Prospero for those interested) before the competition, despite being such a small island there's an awful lot to see without taking away from the big open spaces. We had a few little rides around the village too to keep the horses sane and flexible, nothing major. Unfortunately on Thursday (the day before competition started) Dad and I were riding the horses around and came across a herd of cows. Cows are Polly's kryptonite, these were in a field at the side of the track though so I thought we should be able to carefully edge past them without causing a crisis. Unfortunately Polly had other ideas, clearly these were the lesser known carnivorous horse-eating cows only found on the Isle of Wight so she took off in a flat out gallop. Polly can be a nutcase so I spend a fair amount of time galloping about and swearing blue murder but this time we had a bit of a problem: barbed wire! The track was quite long but had a narrow gate and a section of barbed wire fencing at the end. I tried my best to stop before we got there but unfortunately my pathetic noodly muscles against 500kg of angry Spanish horse is a losing battle, Polly dodged the gate, aimed for what she thought was an open space and did a front flip straight over the barbed wire fence. My seat is pretty good, but not good enough to fight against gravity and stay on an upside down horse so I went flying off face first into the chalk downs (I'd advise putting your arms out, heads aren't very soft) and had to be rescued by my parents. I took a trip to A&E but luckily we both got off very lightly in the circumstances, I was completely out of the running for Friday's ride though!

On Friday morning Polly was sound but I couldn't even sit up in bed so Dad had to ride without me. The weather was pretty rotten but he and Tally made it round in a very good time and no one smashed their face into the chalk which always helps. We had a very sociable evening out at the local Buddle Inn with other people from the ride before turning in in our nice cosy caravan. (much better than tents!)

On Saturday I gritted my teeth, took some painkillers and got Polly out to ride. At home I probably would have left it a few days but given how much training I had done for this ride and how far we had travelled I decided to ride while I knew Dad could still accompany me. At one point on the route there was a duathlon event, with mountain bikers doing jumps, cheering spectators and

huge flappy banners all over the place. Luckily Paloma wasn't fazed at all and led the way right through the event and up part of their bike route.

Traffic, bridges and flags don't bother Polly at all but we did have some issues with the 3000 sheep we had to pass. Chalk downlands are FULL of sheep, we had to go past half a dozen fields and through another 3. One of them had the track in a big chalk gully so the sheep were all invisible but the other two had sheep and lambs scattered all over the track. One of them even had a woolly welcoming committee blocking up the gateway for us. Poor Polly isn't as scared of sheep as she is of cows but getting through each gateway took some bullying and we flounced through each field with her doing her best impression of an angry Spanish stallion.

My favourite part of Saturdays route was a huge grass slope up onto the downlands as part of the Tennyson Trail. It was wide and level with no gates or stones or sheep, so after our crew stop at the bottom we had a lovely canter up onto the hill. Paloma still seems to think she's the fastest horse in the world so took off at a good lick, she did seem to regret it about 2/3 of the way up though! The top of the downland was mostly level and grassy so we had a good long canter along the top before scrambling back down. Luckily all the training Polly has been doing lately seems to have made her better at navigating slopes without tobogganing down on her face.

Mum met us just before the end to see how I was holding up, she must not have liked what she'd seen because when I slid off Paloma at the finish Bryony came up and took her off me, leaving me to stagger along behind them while she took care of untacking and crewing. (I tried to help but I'm not sure I was much use!)



We finished the loop at around 10kph but the hefty gate allowance boosted it up to 12kph. Dad was still doing the 126km multiday class so he had a vet gate style vetting and had to get in nice and quickly. I'd downgraded to a one day 42km but to avoid stress I just vetted along with Dad, Paloma had a fairly high heartrate but after her trot up it turned out she had just been desperate to roll. Arena sand is just too tempting so she dug herself a big crater and scrubbed herself around in the middle of the vetting area; thanks Paloma, how to win friends and influence people!

Both horses passed, Mum sent me off to the caravan to lie down and took Paloma back to Karen's paddock for me. I had a short snooze before going to another pub meal with the rest of the riders.

I was debating whether or not to ride on the Sunday but came to the conclusion I'd only be disappointed in myself later if I didn't, so I dragged myself back out of bed and got Paloma ready. I was expecting her enthusiasm to be somewhat dampened after all the hills the day before but it wasn't until most of the way around the loop that she started slowing down a bit. The Sunday route was the Saturday loop but backwards, so sadly we missed the lovely canter up the Tennyson Trail but we did get a decent canter in the field on the other side. Again, Paloma tried to sprint straight up it, she never learns!

Dad brought his camera this time so we took some nice photos off the tops of the downs, you could practically see the whole island. The sheep were less of a problem this time around, we still didn't make much speed but we managed to walk or steadily trot through them rather than stop-gallop-stop-jump in the air that we had done the day before. The biggest problem with them we had was in one of the smaller fields that was full of ewes with very new lambs. It was a lovely sunny day so some of the (off-white) lambs were sunning themselves on the (off-white) chalky track which gave poor Polly a bit of a shock when bits of the path jumped up in front of her and ran off bleating.

I spent a bit of time on foot on Sunday as well, we did a lot of trotting on both days so what with Paloma's extravagant high knee action over the stony tracks and roads on the Saturday her shoes were a bit worn down. The farrier had warned me to be careful on the tarmac which proved to be good advice when she started sliding on the downhill sections. I didn't fancy riding around on a half ton toboggan so I hopped off and led her for the slippery bits. One of the downsides of fancy Spanish horses!

We completed the ride with very few problems and got back in a similar time to the day before. Both horses coped very well with the hills and were perfectly sound. Paloma decided to roll in the sand before being vetted this time, her heartrate was taken immediately afterwards (I should have distracted the vet for a few seconds :P) so she finessed it a bit with a heartrate of 63. 63 is still a pass though and that's all I needed!

Tally passed with a grade 1 for his whole ride, given we were considering retiring him this time last year it's an excellent result! Both still looked good at the end of the ride, not dehydrated or tucked up even after all those miles and the hills we just aren't used to. Dad and I were both hobbling but the riders don't have to be vetted! (just as well)

So, all in all, a successful if slightly dramatic week. Top marks to Karen for organising such a lovely ride and keeping it all together with a smile on her face even through road closures and rider accidents.

Ride the Wight was a big challenge, but definitely an adventure!