

THE ANDALUCIAN SCHOOL OF EQUESTRIAN ART



One of the stallions being worked in hand

Located within easy walking distance of the town centre, the school puts on regular performances which, not unnaturally, proved a sell-out during the WEG. In fact, such was the demand for tickets that fighting almost broke out amongst the queues of would-be visitors – frustrated by the inadequate ticket sales facilities! Hopefully, most of those who had waited so long, with varying degrees of patience, were rewarded with tickets. The evening performance, entitled, “Como bailan los caballos Andaluces”, is essentially aimed at pleasing tourist audiences rather than aficionados of classical riding. There

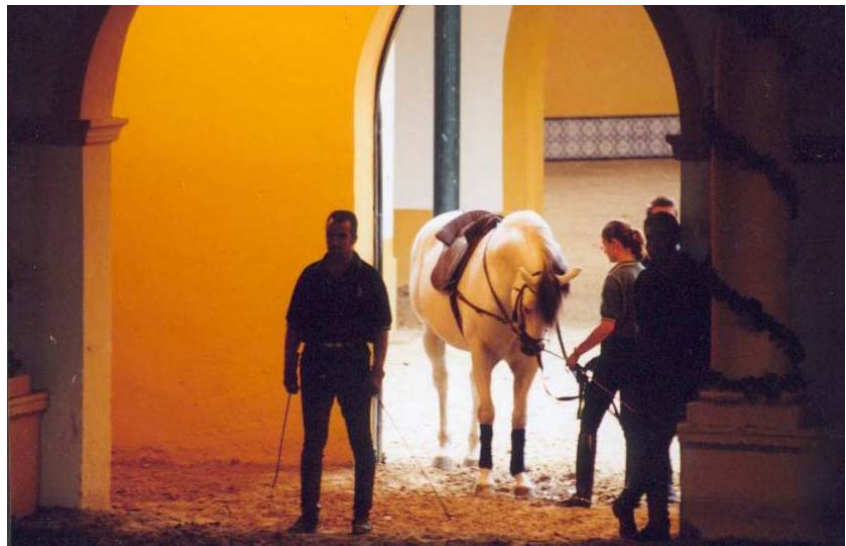
is a subtle difference and at times I found it rather frustrating since the school should surely aim at the highest possible standard of horsemanship regardless of the level of awareness of its’ audience?

Nevertheless, the programme was an entertaining blend of ridden and in-hand work – even carriage-driving and the horses were, of course, superb. Despite my slight reservation, it still has to be a “must” for any visitor to Jerez.

In addition to the evening performance it is possible to visit the school on certain mornings to watch training of young horses and riders. This is fascinating and I would happily have attended **every** morning! Older and “established” stallions were exercised alongside the young horses in the earlier stages of their training. It seemed quite informal as senior riders obviously had particular trainees assigned to them and we were able to watch their lessons. It was hard not to feel slightly envious of the young riders and of the wonderful opportunity offered them by the school.

It was fascinating to see one of the senior riders taking great pains to help his horse overcome his nervousness of the garlands of greenery adorning the walls of the school. In fact, he showed great tact and patience in everything he did and it was a joy to watch.

It is also possible to see the magnificent stables and carriage museum on these visits but I could not tear myself away from the schooling sessions so I shall reserve those treats for a future occasion!



Waiting in the wings - a student prepares for her lesson

THE AUTUMN FESTIVAL



Not only were the World Equestrian Games being staged in Jerez but they coincided with the town's autumn festival. Special exhibitions and events were laid on which reflected the theme of the horse – as well as nightly flamenco performances (this was the genuine article, by the way, not the “nightclub” variety!) in one of the plazas in the centre of the town.

It was rather sad that these exhibitions were not promoted more widely as many more of the WEG visitors staying

locally might have enjoyed injecting a little culture into their WEG “experience”. There was, for instance, an exhibition entitled “Caballo Español – Caballo de Reyes” (Spanish Horse – Horse of Kings) which we managed to track down despite not finding a single poster or sign to the effect that it was being held in a building which we had already passed by a couple of times! However, persistence brought its reward and there was an extremely well staged exhibition showing the huge importance of the role of the Spanish horse in the development of the Spanish civilisation. Admittedly it was a great advantage to be able to read the captions and explanations (which were only in Spanish) but even from a visual level alone it was well worth a visit. Renowned as the “Horse of Kings”, not only in Spain but throughout Europe, the Spanish Purebred and its’ development also played a vital part in the history of Jerez itself. In addition to some magnificent photographs there were beautifully made costumes, decorated harnesses and carriages to see as well as videos reflecting the breeding of the horses.

In the Alcázar – the ancient fortress with its’ Moorish architecture and gardens, there was an amazing exhibition entitled “**Aperos Criollos en las Tierras del Plata**”. “Aperos” are trappings; decorated pieces of saddlery etc., and there were several rooms filled with the most incredible saddles decorated with intricate silverwork, monstrous bits (rather more instruments of torture), not to mention every conceivable design of spurs and stirrups.

The Spanish conquistadors set out to impress the natives with their wealth and “superior” culture. Since most of their time was spent on horseback, the elaborate trappings on their horses gave an immediate and unmistakable indication of their social status. The breastplate and bib side pieces in particular gave the opportunity for great artistry and above all this exhibition traced the development of the saddle. The earlier purely wooden examples looked quite excruciating for both horse and rider!

All very grand it may have been but it was impossible to view this exhibition without reflecting just how **much** horses have put up with in their long history of service to mankind. This was a terrific exhibition which offered a fascinating insight into the blending of two cultures (old Europe and the Americas) and a great way to spend a grey and damp afternoon. Violent thunderstorms disrupted sleep on the Sunday night and the morning of the Endurance Ride commenced with torrential rain. This combined with the total absence of transport to Garrapilos left a free day. Presumably the authorities had taken the view that Endurance Riding is not a spectator sport and had therefore planned no bus service to the site. It would have been very disappointing on a lovely day but given the extremes of the weather a day in town did have much to offer.



A cool spot for a hot day - a courtyard at the Gonzelez Byass bodega

It was partly spent in an enjoyable private tour of the Gonzelez Byass bodega – one of several who open their doors to visitors, and surely a ‘must’ if you are ever in Jerez. Fascinating and steeped in a history which is interwoven with that of the town itself, the bodega has a wonderful atmosphere and would offer a cool haven on a more typically baking Andulcian day – with high ceilings over walls stacked high with great oak casks (signed by the rich and famous – not to mention royalty!) and the dappled shade of vine covered courtyards. Perhaps most famously of all it is often possible to see the resident mice take a morning ‘copita’! Incredibly the mice will climb a miniature ladder to reach the top of the glass of sherry which is served to them daily with

accompanying tapas on the floor of the bodega! Fortunate enough to witness this at close hand I could only lament that I did not have my camera handy so you will have to take my word that this really does happen and that the generations of mice have become addicted to the local ‘brew’. It isn’t difficult after all and opportunities to sample it for oneself abound... in fact every day during the WEG a group of very striking young women (undoubtedly hand picked for their good looks) attired in the highly flattering costume of wide brimmed hat, short jacket and high waisted trousers so typical of the area, set off in a small convey of cars to tour the town. Visiting prime locations i.e. the most frequented bars and restaurants, their purpose was to promote the Tio Pepe brand by handing out some rather tasteful gifts carrying its’ distinctive red, yellow and black logo to anyone spotted consuming the aperitif. During the hotter days of the WEG especially in the stadium, which was a cauldron of heat on the sunny afternoons, a fan seemed a most desirable item to acquire – the smart Tio Pepe version especially so. However it took 2 weeks of determined consumption before the seniorita in our location deigned to present us with one each – sadly a gift bestowed too late to be of serious use!

Thinking of visiting Jerez in the future? If so, make a note of the narrow side street leading from the Plaza del Arenal to the Prescaderia Vieja. Known as Las Almenacitas it comprises only restaurants; the tables sprawling across the paving and although ‘outside’ it is in fact under a light cover which provides invaluable shade or shelter from rain. Well patronised and with good reason, the combination of good food and a lively atmosphere provided a great attraction for locals and tourists alike. Great pains had been taken to translate the names of the local specialities for the benefits of overseas visitors, the result of which were highly entertaining although no doubt this was not the original intention. They included the following delights:

‘Coquinas a la Marinera’ – translated as ‘Coquinas to the seafaring one’!

or *‘Pimiento del Piquillo relleno de Marisco Bacebo’* – apparently none other than ‘peppers of the padded ‘piquillo’ sellfish.

Or waxing even more lyrical was:

‘Gallo a la plancha empanada a la Marinera’. Obviously this was none other than ‘Rooster (which turned out to be a fish) to the iron, misty or to the seafaring one’! A literal translation of plancha turning a grill into a flat iron but ‘misty’? Who knows...!

Adios, y Hasta La Próxima...

My two weeks in Jerez de la Frontera provided many lasting happy memories and impressions of both the place and a great event. True, the WEG will not return to Jerez, but other major equestrian competitions will be held there in the future. The Chapin Stadium with its' excellent facilities has now become a permanent equestrian complex and together with the site at Garrapilos it will be used to host both national and international events again. A rewarding visit will surely include visits to the Royal School of Equestrian Art – both for performances and training sessions, and possibly some local studs.

Initially I was disappointed not to have had time to visit the Yeguada de la Cartuja but on the other hand it does give me something to look forward to next time! Just outside Jerez this stud is one of the most renowned in Spain with its' history of breeding some of the country's most magnificent horses over the centuries and it is possible to book to see one of their weekly displays (www.yeguadacartuja.com). Other studs **may** open their doors to you providing a request is made in advance.

Lastly, and by no means least, there is the great Spring Fair. Held each year in May it is the time when anyone and everyone gathers together either on horseback or in richly decorated carriages near the centre of the town. Enormous pride and dedication to detail goes into turning out both horses and riders in immaculate fashion. It provides not only the ideal opportunity to socialise with friends (courtesy of apparently endless 'copas' served in the 'casetas' erected especially for that purpose) but also for showing off a new horse – or maybe two!



Many carriages such as this can be seen at the Spring Fair

It promises to be a truly memorable experience but be warned – in order to enjoy it to the full you will need the following: a hotel room booked up to a year in advance, a very strong liver and a general constitution that enables you to survive several days with little or no sleep... With all the right ingredients you will be ready to enjoy a magnificent equestrian extravaganza that will live in the memory for ever. Personally I can hardly wait...

