

RIDING *Lipizzaners* IN HUNGARY

Experience a breed and region rich in history with a visit to Hungary's national stud, which offers riding, driving, and a variety of other activities.

BY JESSICA MORTON

Two hours' drive from Budapest in the picturesque Bükk National Park lies Szilvásvárad, a beautiful little village that is home to one of Hungary's premier facilities for equestrian sport: the Szilvásvárad State Lipizzaner stud. It's a perfect vacation destination for history buffs, nature lovers and horse enthusiasts alike.

Lipizzaners are a protected breed in Hungary. They were first established by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy four centuries ago by crossing imported Spanish and Italian stallions with local mares. While the breed today is often associated with the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, few people realize that there were once two Royal Spanish Riding Schools: one in Austria and the other in Hungary. Budapest's Hungarian training facility operated on an equal footing with Vienna's institute until 1945. Sadly, the school closed due to World War II.

On March 24, 1945, the Russian army waged a fierce battle against the capital, killing or imprisoning most of the Hungarian riders and grooms. Four of the school's Lipizzaner stallions were stolen and used to pull heavy munitions into combat, never to be seen again, while another 18 stallions were shot and eaten.

There was one positive result from this horrific episode, however. The advance warning to Colonel Alois Podhajsky in Vienna helped him escape and save most of the Austrian Lipizzaners.

The Hungarian government spent over 21 million Euros restoring the grounds of the stud, which include a floodlit international arena.

Dávid Cseri, director of Szilvásvár, with one of the stud's breeding stallions.



SOPRATZ VIVANSZISZ

SZILVÁSVÁRAD

During the Austro-Hungarian era, horse studs were established all over the empire to improve local breeding practices. Most of these studs closed due to military and social upheavals and agricultural motorization, but a few are still standing thanks to government support. One of the largest (with 300 horses) and most interesting is the Szilvásvár stud.

The Hungarian government recently funded the complete restoration of the stud facilities, and the new, improved complex has several structures split into four separate zones. There is a central area in the village where horses are trained and competitions take place, a mare and foal stable, a stallion station, and summer pastures and stabling for juvenile stallions.

The restoration was the largest equestrian development project funded by Hungary in decades, costing over 21 million Euro to complete.

Facilities include a floodlit international arena, large permanent stables, two covered arenas, and a world-class cross-country course for marathon driving.

TRAIL RIDING

The Bükk Mountains are an ideal trail riding destination, thanks to their well-maintained tracks and lack of fences.

The Bükk National Park contains more than 1,000 ancient caves, thermal springs, waterfalls, and lush beech forests. The area is home to fallow deer, wolves, and Eurasian lynxes.

From the saddle, you can visit churches and historical buildings that reflect the region's history, and you will be entertained by Attila, the head rider, who is knowledgeable about the local area.



JESSICA MORTON

Visitors are guided on scenic trails through the Bükk Mountains by head rider Attila, who is knowledgeable about the local area.



COURTESY JESSICA MORTON

Jessica gets a driving lesson from Dávid. If you prefer a guided carriage ride, those are also available.

Along the marathon driving tracks used to host the 1984 World Driving Championships, there are frequent opportunities to canter or trot. During my stay, I rode Fátyol, a 12-year-old mare who handled the steep inclines, descents and twisting turns effortlessly.

The most adventurous riders can book an overnight adventure to Csipkésút, a lodge near Hungary's northern border with Slovakia, to visit the young stallions.

It's here that future dressage and driving stars spend their first three years of life, enjoying the mineral-rich soils and hilly terrain of the Bükk Plateau, which contribute significantly to their mental and physical development.

DRIVING LESSONS

If trail riding is not your thing, carriage driving lessons are a fantastic alternative or additional activity to add to your trip.

The Szilvásvár drivers are renowned for their accomplishments all over the world, and if you have ever wanted to pick up the reins and try carriage driving, this is the place to give it a go. Spoiler alert: It's harder than it looks.

For those who prefer not to ride or drive when on holiday, another way to experience the surroundings is to take a private carriage tour with a guide. During carriage tours, visitors can ob-

serve staff working with and training different horses and even watch Hungarian Hussar units practicing drills with their cavalry mounts.

Dressage, jumping and driving competitions are regularly held at the stud, and historians will appreciate the Lipizzaner Museum, which features artifacts, sculptures and saddlery pieces from the past, along with antique carriages.

Accommodation and meals can be booked as part of an all-inclusive package directly with the stud, taking the guesswork out of where to stay and what to do, all while helping contribute to the preservation of the Lipizzaners.

For more information on the stud, visit www.menesgazdasag.hu/hu.

JESSICA MORTON is a freelance writer and equestrian journalist from New Zealand.

HOW TO GET THERE

The nearest airport to Szilvásvár is Budapest (BUD). The easiest way to travel is by hiring a car at the airport (the drive takes around two hours), but if you are taking public transport, Volanbusz operates a bus from Budapest to Szilvásvár once daily.