

Salzburg - a groom's view

At the end of last season, when driving home from the National Championships at Windsor, Margi and I agreed jokingly that we'd go to Salzburg, never thinking it would become a reality.

The journey to Salzburg took us 4 days. The horses coped amazingly well and were far less phased by the whole Channel crossing experience than we were. Day 3 was a long 12½ hours in the lorry, so the fact that it was followed by day off before doing the last few miles to Salzburg was a welcome relief. It allowed horses and humans alike to chill – literally, us humans went for a wonderful swim in the nearby lake – and relax before the rigours of Salzburg.

We arrived in Salzburg on Monday morning, feeling very 'novice' and somewhat like country cousins with our very undersized lorry and open trailer, and from then on it was all systems go.

The British 'encampment' seemed quite spacious with the lorries, trailers, and in my case tent, arranged round a large central space. The site was level with a wonderful backdrop of distant mountains (with a smattering of snow on the peaks on a couple of mornings). The main drawback was that it was under the flight path to Salzburg airport, and with aircraft on short finals coming in to land, starting every morning at 6am prompt, there was no need for any alarm clock!

The stabling, arranged by country, was close by; the stables were spacious and well ventilated which was a blessing, as those of you who know Margi's horses know they are BIG, and the weather was HOT. Security into the stable area was very tight throughout the competition and passes were regularly checked.

Being Austria, everything ran like clockwork. Vettings, practice time in the dressage/cones arena (a huge football stadium which had been resurfaced for the occasion), dressage, marathon and cones times were all adhered to with military precision. It was wonderful having a chef d'equip (in this case Terry and Danni Selway shared the job) and a team trainer (Boyd Exell) on hand to tell us what to do, where to be and when and after the daily drivers' meeting our plan of action for the day ahead was mapped out.

Although I sat on the back for the dressage and cones, Richard did the leaping about on the back step for the marathon section. Thank goodness he did, as with the amount of course walking and harness cleaning that had to be done - thank goodness for synthetic harness - it made life easier to share the duties (especially as Richard was cameraman extraordinaire at every possible opportunity).

The opening ceremony on the Wednesday evening was a truly memorable event with all 78 participating pairs parading in all their finery in front of the Casino building with its fantastic formal gardens. Orlando and Othello behaved moderately well as the welcoming speeches went on... and on... and not being fluent in German ... on!

The dressage on Thursday was quite an experience. We were posted down the tunnel into the arena by Boyd who had spent the previous 5 minutes pummelling Margi on the back in his effort to get her to relax (she went on to do what I think was her best dressage test to date).

On Thursday evening there was an outing to the centre of Salzburg for anybody who wanted, or had the time, to go. I teamed up with Penny and Ray Bragg (Ray was out there in official scoring capacity) and

we had a wonderful relaxing evening viewing the sites of Salzburg byhorse drawn carriage! We then went on to have a viener snitzel (we were in Austria after all) before walking some of that off on our way to the Hotel Sacher where we sat overlooking the river consuming delicious sacher torte.

Having done our dressage on Thursday meant that on Friday we didn't have to 'perform' and the pressure was slightly less, although there was still plenty to do – watching the others do their dressage; exercising the horses; taking our 'spare' (kindly loaned to us by John Attenborough) for a ride; more harness cleaning; etc.

For the marathon on Saturday I was a spectator. The Brits all went at reasonable intervals which meant it was possible to watch all of them through all the obstacles which were great, although it involved a few quick sprints! I rushed off to help Margi water her horses at the vet stop (chauffeured by the team vet, an Austrian called George) and then having watched them cream through the obstacles met them at the finish, only to be confronted by two horses who could happily have done the whole thing all over again.

At the end of the marathon Margi was leading the British contingent, so it was all to go for in the cones. With only 1 hour to walk the long and technical cones course on the Sunday morning, and the tension of performing in front of a packed stadium meant that she unfortunately dropped to No. 3 Brit by the end of the cones; however it was a fantastic learning experience for horses, driver and grooms as none of us had done anything at this level before.

It was great to see and hear all of you who came over to support us. The Union Jacks and loud cheering through the various stages of the competition was much appreciated. Thank you.

The horses were fantastic. This was the first time they had stayed in 'hotels', travelled such distances or performed in front of such crowds, and they were magnificent. However all credit must go to Margi. All the hard work she has put into Orlando and Othello over the past few years has paid off. Salzburg was hard work, but also huge fun, and without her unstinting efforts I would not have been able to participate in such a fantastic event.

Liz Richards