

Free riding

If you're happy in a saddle and weigh less than 80 kilos, a canter across the unspoilt Condroz could be what you need. **Deborah Forsyth** filled her pockets with sugar lumps and set off

'We don't do dressage here. And we're not a beauty school for horses," says Hugues Latteur as he brushes down one of his three Arabian horses in a light drizzle. It's Saturday afternoon at the end of summer, and Latteur has just been out riding for three hours with two customers of his year-old venture, Galopsnature.

In spite of the weather, Karina, a German, and Michael, a Briton, both down from Brussels, look unfazed. "It's great to escape the bars of Brussels and ride in the open country," says Karina. "It's good riding land around here," adds Michael. "The Condroz is unspoilt. I could imagine life here 100 years ago."

The Condroz (the 'z' is silent) is the region between Namur, Huy and Dinant. Ciney is its capital. Most people bypass it, which is odd – it's an attractive mix of lush woodland and open meadows crisscrossed by narrow winding roads. Fat cows lie lazily in every other field and low-lying limestone farmhouses and châteaux nestle in leafy copses. It is picture-book countryside.

Galopsnature's headquarters – a paddock and a hangar – are situated bang in the middle of the Condroz, at the far end of a farm belonging to the Château de Wagnée. "Life around these parts still has a whiff of Medieval times," says Latteur, 35. "Most of the land is owned by one or two aristocrats who rent it to tenant farmers, who in turn rent it to the likes of me."

His idea to rent out Arabian horses for rides – he has three, one of which he rides when accompanying clients – came to him in the mid-1990s. "I was on holiday in Provence and I went on a riding trip with my wife, and just fell in love with horses

and riding again." Latteur hadn't been on a horse since he was a child, but as soon as he got back home, he enrolled at a riding school and re-learned the essentials. He bought three horses from Provençal horse-breeder Louis Chardon, brought them to Condroz in 2000, broke them in, tried them out on friends, and launched the business last summer.

"I had some trouble with one of them – the largest, a thoroughbred. Compared to half-breeds, they tend to be more skittish. He threw me regularly. In the end, though, he was walking behind me obediently and responded to orders."

In keeping with their origins, Latteur has given his chestnut horses Arabic names – Im'Raguen, Indou and Ispahan. He is clearly very fond of them. "I don't believe in the Western-style of riding, of guiding a horse by rein-pulling and whipping. I like to talk to them as much as possible. I don't put bits in their teeth, either. My horses have known each other since they were young – they're six years old now – and they'll get worried if one goes off without the other. They're very gentle."

On most rides, he explains, customers go at a canter. "Galloping is thrilling, but it makes the horses excitable. Their eyes roll more and they can look frighteningly mad."

Renowned for their endurance, Arabian horses are relatively small, and so Latteur imposes an 80 kilo weight limit on riders. For customer Michael, it was touch and go: "I was borderline," he says. "But after a lengthy correspondence, and some reflections on my weight, Hugues decided to accept me."

This is not a riding school. "Anyone wanting to go for a ride must be comfortable in a saddle and should know how to trot, canter and gallop," says Latteur. It's easy to see why he wouldn't want to waste time. The riding mostly takes place at the weekends, outside his work as adviser to State Secretary for the Environment and Sustainable Development Olivier Deleuze, and family life in Namur.

On my way back to Brussels, Latteur shows me some of the sights that can be seen on the rides, including the environmental artworks of La Fête de Mai



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Lifestyle Sport

— a semi-permanent art exhibition dotted around the fields of the Condroz. The first exhibit, he shows me, has been eaten unexpectedly by the cows, but others include three wooden men tied to stilts and an impressive "sleeping giant" of slate in a disused quarry.

"There's so many things to see here when you look," says Latteur. "But it's

strange — here we are on a summer's day, and there's not a soul about. Sometimes, I wonder where everybody is."

Galopsnature, Château de Wagnée, Florée (near Namur), tel 0478.25.31.57, email galopsnature@ibelgique.com. Ride, accompanied by Latteur, cost €25 for two hours (per person), €35 for three hours, €65 for six hours.

Saddling up

"Meet Im'Raguen," said Latteur. I gulped. There he was. Big. Bigger than me, with twitching ears and large teeth.

Im'Draguen, Latteur and I walked down a path away from the paddock. "Rags" didn't like leaving his friends behind and stopped now and then to sulk by the wayside. "Don't worry — he's just confused," said Latteur.

This didn't sound like the beginnings of a beautiful friendship.

"One, two and up you go," said Latteur, helping me to swing up into the saddle. Not since I was nine, when a pony had rolled on me, had I been this close to a horse.

"Chest out, lean back and — *Allez!*" Rags chewed the grass. "Louder. Say '*Allez!*' louder and give a little kick."

I obeyed. Rags didn't budge. Latteur approached and patted his ears. "*Allez, fiston!*" he said. Rags moved forward. When Latteur wasn't looking, Rags threw me a glance over his shoulder. Cool-like.

"You have to show them who's in control," said Latteur, leading Rags by a rope. I nodded meekly. My riding hat wobbled, my eyes looked straight ahead.

Clip, clop, clip, clop. Suddenly the ground loomed closer. I let out a yelp. My hands tightened around the reins. Rags' legs were grappling to find a footing in the mud. Then Rags raised his head, gave a snort and, with one swish of his tail, calmly walked on. Clip, clop.

"See. Wasn't that easy? Look how he's walking faster now. He can sense he's nearly back with his friends. I'll drop the rope so you can walk the last two metres alone." Rags stood still. "*Allez,*" I said. Rags put his head down and began to chew the grass.

"*Allez.*" Nothing. Latteur whispered something in his ears and Rags agreed to walk the final metres home.

"Now, how about a trot?" Rags and I looked at each other.

"Maybe not today," I said.



Hugues Latteur, with Im'Raguen: who proved a challenge for our writer