

A SNOW SAFARI ON HORSEBACK

Words and photography by Brigitte Kilian de Wolff

Looking for a unique way to spend our Christmas holidays, we hired the holiday home of friends Yvonne van der Velde, her husband Jan Schaafsma and their teenage son Ruben. Together they run Dutch Joy, an equestrian centre for tourists and a training centre for successful competitors. The house is fully booked throughout the riding season; riders come to learn how to become a better endurance competitors, improve their skills and enjoy a wonderful horse riding holiday.

We embarked on our hazardous journey through the snow storm, keen to get to our festive getaway. We almost got stuck in the snow and ice on a steep hill near Liege; that would not have been a good way to spend Christmas Eve! Finally we arrived at the holiday house, relieved to once again be in one of my favourite places in the world – the Ardennes mountains.

Two of our own mares, the Arabian Manara Samira and the Lipizzaner Nasheeta Fadra, had been raised here. Both were also backed and started under saddle by Yvonne and she has been a good friend for many years. My visits to her home and her horses have always been happy times and we have enjoyed many trail rides together. She taught me how to ride in the mountains, a skill that would have been difficult to acquire if I had continued riding only the flat terrain in Holland.

At 49 years of age, Yvonne has competed at high level for more than 20 years. She started her career as a florist and the success of the business



meant she could relocate her sporting stables from the Dutch-German border to the Belgian area of the Ardennes. It is a picturesque region near Luxembourg, famous for its natural beauty and challenging hills for riding, hiking and cycling. Her first horse, Joy Jashin (Fahred x Mantari), proved to be very talented in the endurance field and introduced her to the sport she now loves. Together they won titles and prizes in dressage and showjumping too, but it was over long distances that he excelled. Perhaps if Jashin had been a more gifted jumper, her life would be quite different.



