

**G**alloping a horse along miles of golden sands, hooves splashing through the waves and salty wind whipping through mane and tail, is something many equestrians dream of. For other beachgoers, chancing upon horses being ridden in such stunning surroundings can be an equally memorable experience.

Brean and Berrow are the perfect beaches to live that dream. They're one of the longest stretches of sand in Europe, horses are allowed all year round and you can even park your horsebox right on the beach.

Julie Richardson keeps her horses on the Somerset Levels and has been riding on the beach here for over 20 years. 'Every ride is different, from galloping along the water's edge with the sea spray, to walking peacefully in front of the dunes with the horses on a long rein watching the most stunning sunsets.'

As an amateur event rider, she finds the beach is a great place to get her horses fit for competitions. 'It's a fabulous place to train them, as there's so much space, you can work through all the paces and get them used to water too. There really is no other place like it. Most UK beaches have relatively short stretches of sand and are often too soft under foot for faster work.'

Jenny Winslade is another local rider, who often rides out with Julie. 'One of the best

feelings in the world is a canter in the waves and the horses enjoy it too. We park at Berrow, either on the beach or in one of the car parks, and head north towards Brean Down.'

The beaches here are just as famous for their mudflats as for their sand, so regular beach riders like Julie know to time their excursion around the tides. 'It's really important never to approach the sea more than an hour either side of high tide, so we always check the tide times carefully on the beach guide website.'

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It's not uncommon to see horses and riders in pairs or even groups, as horses are herd animals and take reassurance from each other. 'I always try to go with a more experienced horse for the first time as sometimes the wide open space can be daunting for them, not to mention the noise of the wind and the waves,' says Jenny.

Most horses, even if a little overwhelmed at first, will soon relax and enjoy the experience, even paddling in the waves.

And while there are no rules for beach rides as such, there is an unwritten code of conduct. 'If there are other horse riders on the beach, it's good etiquette to pass slowly and take a wide berth to avoid upsetting nervous or novice horses,' says Julie. 'We always try to be courteous to other people and riders on the beach, it's a recipe for disaster to gallop flat out,' adds Jenny.

In the summer, the beaches are a hive of activity, bustling with tourists, dog walkers, ice cream vans, children flying kites and playing football. Many riders try to avoid peak times, riding later or earlier in the day to avoid the crowds. 'Summer is great, and people love seeing the horses,' says Jenny, 'But you also get a lot of loose dogs, and an out-of-control dog is a rider's worst enemy.'

For some riders, the quieter winter months are the best time to hit the beach with their horse.

Karen Washer rides out at Brean every New Year's Day with the Quantock Riding Club. 'We started our tradition about five years ago. Everyone is welcome come rain or shine,' she says.

The only downside of a winter beach ride is, of course, the weather. 'It's usually very cold but we wrap up and bring all our Christmas leftovers plus flasks of tea and hot chocolate.'

Whatever the weather or the time of the year, a beach ride is guaranteed to blow the cobwebs away and unwind from life's stresses and strains. And not just for the riders – Karen likes to bring a long 'lunge' line for her horse. 'They love a roll in the sand after being untacked!'

Somerset is renowned for its incredible riding country, but these beaches are perhaps its most unique feature.

'We're very lucky to live in such a beautiful part of the country, with the open moorland and tranquil forests of the Quantock Hills. But the beach across Berrow and Brean is truly magical,' says Julie.

Jenny couldn't agree more. 'All in all, the beach is one of my very favourite places to ride,' she says. 'I feel incredibly lucky to have it on my doorstep.' ●

**right:** 'It's really important never to approach the sea more than an hour either side of high tide, so we always check the tide times carefully on the beach guide website.' Photo: Helen Marriott

**below:** Being able to explore Somerset's coastline on horseback is one of the county's draws in the equine community. Photo: Julie Richardson

