

## **The Trip of a Lifetime by Mariye Inouye**

Last July, I attended DNRT's gala dinner and was the winning bidder for the auction item: A Week in Europe with Peter Wylde. Thanks to the DNRT's summer event, I was honored to spend a week with Peter Wylde, at his training facility and to travel with him and his entourage to a show in France.

Mr. Wylde is a top equestrian on the international show jumping circuit, winning gold medals in competitions all over the world. As a member of the 2004 U.S. Equestrian Team, he won the Team Gold Medal at the Athens Olympics. Born in Massachusetts, Mr. Wylde comes from a family with deep roots in the field of sports. His grandfather created the Mont Tremblant Ski resort and built the first chair lift in North America. His Mother was nominated for the Canadian Olympic Ski team, and his father is an accomplished sailor and a licensed Captain.

I began riding at age four and persisted with lessons through childhood and as an adult. On vacations, I explored the Loire, Alsace, Tuscany, Ireland and Kenya on horseback. For the past two years, I have trained in Merrimac, Massachusetts, with a classical dressage trainer from Portugal. Reckoning with my own abilities and limitations can be a very frustrating process. I looked forward with anticipation to seeing something of the horse world beyond my own horizons.

Mr. Wylde met me at the Brussels airport and drove me to his stable near Dusseldorf, Germany. His stable is tucked into a bucolic area of picture perfect farms and castles reflected in moats. Mr. Wylde leases a training facility with two indoor arenas, an outdoor course, and wooded trails.

The training facility is shared by a small community of horse trainers, occupying separate buildings, surrounded by grass paddocks. The neighbor across the courtyard specializes in carriage driving. I watched him school his team of matching black horses and got a tour of his private museum: a magnificent collection of restored antique carriages and their fittings.

Over coffee, Mr. Wylde outlined his training plans for each horse, and his expectations. Mounting one horse after another, he explained his goals for each ride. I learned by observing these rides, the quiet simplicity of them, as if the communication gap between man and horse was eliminated, allowing them to practice together in cooperation.

There was also, much to learn by observing Mr. Wylde's expert staff of full-time grooms. Each groom handles all the aspects of horse management: riding, lunging, grooming, driving the lorry, barn management, and the care of horses when at a show. The wide, airy aisles of this barn are spotless. The horses exude a sense of calm and security as they await their days activities.

Mr. Wylde trains horses bred to be champions and maintains them at the peak of fitness. The idea that I would be permitted to ride with one of these animals seemed absurd. However, after schooling one of these horses, Mr. Wylde thought I could walk the horse while it cooled off. The horse, Merlin, was exceptionally tall and I needed to climb on top of a large tack trunk just

to step into the stirrup and mount. Perched at this height, I could have been riding around on the top of a refrigerator. As the horse walked around the ring, I briefly imagined what it might be like if Merlin were stung by a bee and took off. I would never be able to stop and would soon see the next town. But Merlin looked friendly, and I put thoughts of bees out of my mind and focused on my good fortune to be riding a real Grand Prix horse, once in my life.

For my lesson, Mr. Wylde procured a quiet horse for me to ride. Yellow was a beautiful Champagne colored palomino with big black eyes and a velvety coat. Yellow walked, trotted and cantered, needing only the lightest of cues, as if his only wish was to understand what I wanted. I hoped I would be able to reciprocate such fine manners. Mr. Wylde said this horse was leaving soon, going to a new owner in the U.S. The thought that this dream horse would find a home, here in the U.S., made me very happy.

The next day, we flew to Lyon, France to attend Equitalyon. Mr. Wylde's grooms, Wendy and Lado, drove his lorry with the horses: Merlin, Fein Cera, Jake and Quo Vadis. Equitalyon (Concours Hippique International de Lyon,) was held at the Lyon Eurexpo Center. The competition would last for four days, with over 40 riders from 17 countries competing. Concurrently, Eurexpo would host a gigantic horse fair, filling six exhibition halls. The horse fair featured performances of the Portuguese School of Dressage, sales and demonstrations of horses representing the entire encyclopedia of breeds, hundreds of vendors, and French food. The size and quality of the show was astonishing.

As a guest of Peter Wylde, I was privileged to enter the restricted stabling areas for the show jumping teams and observe the riders, grooms, horses, and dogs that comprise the horse show family. There are so many more shows in Europe than in the US, that riders may compete every week and make the road their home. The resulting atmosphere is both glamorous and homelike. Riders' had a separate dining room, lounge, and viewing stand. My identification bracelet gave me access to all areas of the convention center. I stayed in the modern Radisson SAS Lyon where all the participants were staying, and rode to and from the show grounds in courtesy cars provided by the show.

Each horse has a passport that describes its appearance and chain of ownership. A show official inspected each horse's documents while a veterinarian checked its physical condition. The riders were allowed a chance to school horses in the arena and had the use of two warm-up rings. Wendy and Lado prepared each of the horses, in turn, for practice and competition. International show jumping is a hair raising spectacle, but when you know the competitor and the horse, it is heart-stopping. Thursday evening, on his horse Quo Vadis, Peter won the Grand Prix jump off. After the awards ceremony, Mr. Wylde on his winning horse, galloped around the arena, while disco music blasted through speakers, cameras flashed and horns blared.

It was a great pleasure to spend this week with Peter Wylde. And I still cannot believe it happened to me. Visiting a truly professional training operation proved to be an inspiring experience. While I expected to observe, I did not expect to be so royally entertained for the week. Mr. Wylde was, throughout, so very generous with his time and knowledge of food, local customs, culture and of course, horses. He was a gracious host who put thought into every aspect of my stay, making it the trip of a lifetime.