



So you want to buy abroad?

ANDREA HESSAY LOOKS AT HOW TO REDUCE THE RISKS INVOLVED

Probably the first question you should ask yourself is, why buy abroad? Good horses with proven continental bloodlines are being bred in the UK by serious breeders who put a lot of effort into producing their youngstock. Others import horses with the intention of selling them on.

However, what you don't get is the scale of choice, not only of youngstock but of well trained, good moving older horses. The choice in Germany is huge – everything from licensed, graded young stallions to international grand prix horses.

It's getting better but, in the main, British-bred horses aren't produced and ridden with the same degree of professionalism and experience that the Germans bring to the job. It's often the case that one has to travel many miles to see one or two horses that might suit. In Germany, it's much easier to see several horses that match up to your specification on one visit.

Germany has a countrywide, state supported, breeding and producing programme that spans many decades. Warmblood horses, with the exception of Trakehners, aren't a breed, they are a type. Their names — Hanoverian, Oldenburg, Westfalen — relate to the region in which they're bred, or at least the region from which their immediate relations hail. Each region has horses that are typical of their region but, confusingly, many Hanoverians, for example, can have Holstein, Rheinland and other bloodlines and vice versa. In fact, this is a strength of the programme that outside bloodlines are factored in to increase quality in one direction or

another; sometimes this includes Thoroughbreds, sometimes ponies, Trakehners or Arabs; breeders are always searching to improve their horses and, thus, their saleability.

BREEDING TO SELL

And this is the point. It is a breeding, and selling, operation. Horses in Germany are sold because that's why they're bred. This is sometimes a problem for UK buyers who are used to the idea that a horse is on the market for a reason other than this simple one and often want chapter and verse as to the horse's history and why it's for sale. This is something that the Germans simply don't understand or consider. If it's for sale, it's for sale and it is up to the buyer to try the horse and decide to buy, or not. Take care though – there is a lot of junk out there and a continental horse is not a guarantee that you are getting either value for money or a good horse.

RESEARCH

Do your homework. Acknowledge your limitations of size, shape, age, ability, ambition, temperament, knowledge, experience and finance. Make a check list and go through it again with your ideal horse in mind. Go to competitions and see which horses appeal to you and find out how they're bred (asking the rider is the simplest way!). You'll start to get a feel for which bloodlines gel with which, and which ones to avoid. Some bloodlines produce very good horses but they're professional rides, so it's important to keep temperament and trainability very close to the top of your wish list.

It's not only the fashionable lines which produce good stock – in fact, the fashionable lines are often just that – fashionable, for a season or two. The proven lines, some of which are dual purpose, producing jumpers and dressage horses, are the ones on which to focus. What you're after, presumably, is a horse with the physical and mental capabilities to be trained on in the discipline you favour – well put together, in proportion, with good limbs and three correct paces, a good temperament, kind and sensible. Unless you want to breed, bloodlines are only part of the equation – look at what's in front of you.

By the way, this is the horse that most people are looking for; they're not two a penny and you need a reasonable budget – otherwise, buy at home.

BUYING AT AUCTION

Auctions offer a wide choice but it's easy to get carried away during the bidding and it's always true that the horse you want is just a bit more than you wanted to pay (a bit like cars and houses). Stick to your budget. Bear in mind that, more often than not, the horses you will see are ridden by professional riders; they can make ordinary horses seem wonderful and the wonderful ones look like megastars. They have the horses going in a way that's generally beyond their natural level and this seldom lasts beyond the first couple of weeks. When you get them home and they've worked out that you haven't got the legs, seat, contact and experience of the 6'3", mid-20s German bereiter, anything can happen! Hence the importance of homework.

USING AGENTS

There are lots of agents/dealers ready to help you find what you're looking for. The established ones with good reputations need repeat business, and recommendation, and so will try to find a selection of horses that fit your criteria but it's important to be honest and realistic – people who have gone to look at older horses with established lateral work and changes (but can't actually ride at that level), or just broken three-year olds when they have no experience of young horses, make agents despair and the whole deal is likely to end in tears. Most continental horses don't hack out, never mind alone on the roads, and they're not used to being ridden in the middle of a large, windy, muddy field; quite often, they're not used to being turned out (they can, of course, learn all this, but they're mostly ridden in arenas, whether indoors or outdoors, and go from stable to arena, perhaps via a horsewalker, but that's about it).

THINK WITH YOUR HEAD

The second major piece of advice is to leave your heart at home. Of course you must like what you see – you're the one who will look at that horse every morning. However, you need to ask yourself; will I look forward to riding that horse or am I buying something that's too much for me and that eventually I won't want to, or can't, ride? If you're not knowledgeable, or have little or no experience of buying abroad, take someone with you who knows what they're looking at, knows your ability, won't be swayed by the first good looking horse that comes along, and who is preferably a native speaker.

Big, flashy and stunning looking is only OK if you know you can cope. If you can't ride one side of it, or sit to the movement, what makes you sure that you will learn to do so? Ride some warmblood horses at home to find out what you can deal with in terms of movement. If you're 5ft and 7st soaking wet, buying a big framed 17hh horse is probably not very sensible.

Warmbloods are often not mature until they're seven, or even eight, years old and they keep on growing. A 16.1hh, four-year-old can often end up at 17hh or more. Don't join the ranks of people who buy their dream only to have it end up in training livery, or in a field, as they're too scared to ride it. Buy three correct paces; if a compromise is needed, buy the best walk and canter you can; the trot is one pace that can be improved – ask any trainer.

ARRANGING THE VETTING

Just as in the UK, there are vets and vets. If you have no contacts, you are likely to use the vet that the dealer/breeder/agent recommends. If this is the case, make sure that the X-rays are emailed to your own equine vet in the UK, having already had a conversation about what X-rays they want. Additionally, make sure that the British and German vets speak to each other about the clinical inspection and what was found; X-rays on their own don't tell the whole story. British insurance companies have very strict criteria about what they will and won't accept; continental vets are sometimes inclined to put less emphasis on some defects than their UK counterparts, so be aware.

Auction horses typically have X-rays and veterinary reports for potential purchasers to look at, and a vet on hand to explain the contents; if you have any doubts, find a way to discuss them with your own vet. This stage of the proceedings is very important – it is up to you and your vet to be satisfied that the horse you are considering purchasing is, in fact, going to be up to the job. A clinical examination is not a guarantee that the horse will suit you, or do the job you want; it's an indication of the horse's physical condition on that day. Once the hammer has gone down, the horse is yours, and you don't want any nasty surprises. Auction houses often offer a limited insurance policy, for the transport and/or a six month period.

ORGANISING TRANSPORTATION

Transport to and from the UK is commonplace and it's easy to have your horse brought over (the paperwork will be done for you). A shared load is the cheapest option, but that can mean that your horse is on the road, with overnight stops, for anything up to several days. A dedicated load is much more expensive but your horse will be with you much sooner. One feature of insurance is transit cover – make sure you have this in place, and that it is valid, before your horse sets out on his journey. Accidents and/or transit fever are not common, thank goodness, but can happen and, if you're covered, it's still very worrying but at least not financially.

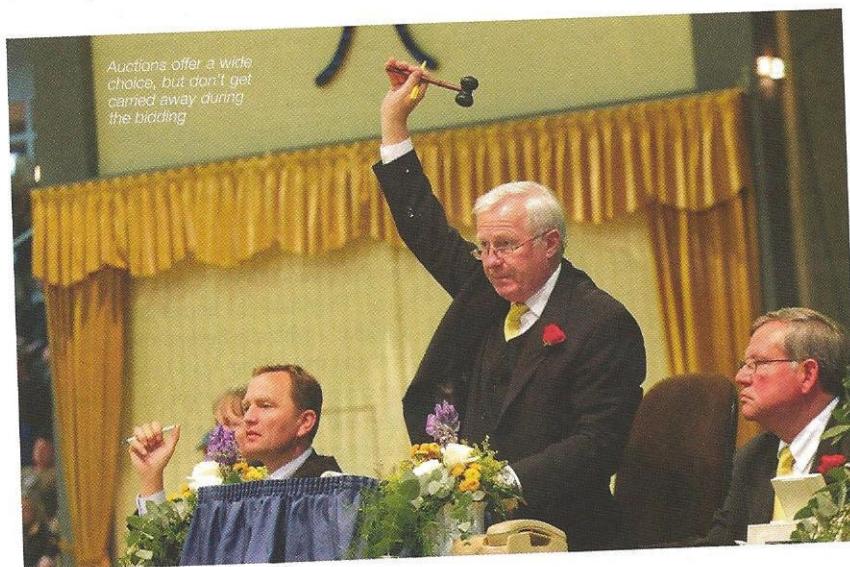
UNDERSTANDING THE LEGAL REDRESS

One aspect of buying abroad is the perceived difficulty of any redress if the horse turns out to be a maniac, permanently lame, or otherwise unsuitable for purpose (this does not necessarily include that you can't ride it unless you can prove any of the above!). Reputable dealers will do their best to exchange such a horse and the following information, from a German equine lawyer, might be of interest.

"Since the last EU-based change to German Civil Law in 2002, it has become legally impossible for horse dealers, auctioneers and breeders to exclude or restrict liability for any kind of defect in the sales contract health or character defect, obvious or latent - over a period of at least one year after the purchase of the horse (two years after the purchase of a foal).

*Consumers who buy in Germany have a wide range of possibilities to send a horse back at the seller's expense, including transport costs. The most important thing to know is the fact that, if a defect shows in the first six months after purchase, the professional salesperson has to prove that the horse was healthy, well mannered, or whatever, at the time of purchase. Buyers from abroad should know about the rights they have in Germany and that it's neither too expensive nor too difficult to get claims recognized and upheld."**

There are unscrupulous people in all industries. "Caveat emptor" (buyer beware) still applies; base your selection on knowledge, experience, instinct and your expert's advice. However, their advice is only any use if you take it. In the end, the responsibility is yours.



Auctions offer a wide choice, but don't get carried away during the bidding

*This information comes from Frau Rechtsanwältin Dagmar v. Stralendorf-Gruettmeier on 0049 1722 322050 or via email ra@stralo.de. (As a lawyer, she specializes in Equine law and is also an officially assigned expert witness for the breed and taxation of horses; registered by the Government of Upper Bavaria, the Munich Law Courts and the Bavarian Ministry of Agriculture. She is a horsewoman and her English is excellent).