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The wild south: on horseback in a Patagonian estancia

A riding tour in a 50,000-acre estancia offers home cooking and sprightly horses



Riding at Estancia San Juan de Quillen, Patagonia

JANUARY 27, 2017 by: **Saskia Burgess**

Ever since returning from Argentina, whenever I feel even a twinge of stress, I imagine myself back to an estancia in the middle of nowhere — in Lanín National Park, northern Patagonia, near the Chilean border — belonging to the family of Agustina Lagos Mármol. This was the most luxuriously idiosyncratic riding trip I have ever been on (and I have ridden in Brazil, Uruguay and Chile). It was like mysteriously discovering Argentine relatives you never knew you had and staying on their estate for spectacular riding, fishing (if you fancied it) and idling. From the balcony of my bedroom, I could see the snow-capped Andes and apparently unending space. The exhilarating sense was of the end of the earth as a beginning of pastures new.

But no matter where you start, Patagonia is a far-flung destination. And what is delightful about this trip is that it breaks you in benignly, beginning in Buenos Aires. We (a friend and keen huntswoman who came along for the ride) saw off our jet lag in Hub Porteño, a boutique hotel so exclusive it does not have its name on its Art Nouveau front door. The only potential snag (though it did not affect us directly) was that the president had — after recently enjoying a dinner at the hotel — stolen its chef.

We had a day in raffish BA in a mauve haze of jacaranda blossom — our quartier, Recoleta, resembling Paris of yesteryear. We dropped in on Eva Perón's mausoleum in a cemetery crowded with competitively ostentatious attempts to survive death in stone (the city's journalists seem to have gone in for particularly exaggerated memorials). More frivolously, we could not resist a raid on the upmarket gaucho emporium, Arandú, with three storeys of covetable boots, belts, hats and gloves. And, that evening, we were picked up in a Model A Ford from 1929, so we could fancy ourselves in Buenos Aires's heyday.

We were headed for a theatre/restaurant in the former home of the legendary tango singer and songwriter Carlos Gardel (1890-1935). There, after dinner (the first in a week of outstanding steaks), we sat back to watch a tango show. I loved the moments when the women, somewhere between dolls and protesters, slid across stage in the arms of their partners, as though on coasters.



We left the city the following day for our next Patagonia-bound staging post, La Bamba de Areco — a dazzling estancia just outside San Antonio de Areco, 120km from Buenos Aires on the pampas. Built in the 1830s and painted sealing-wax red, it is a shrine to horses. As we drove up to it, we glimpsed polo practice finishing — wonderful to see the skilful skirmishing of gleaming chestnut horses and frisky polo sticks against emerald grass. A gaucho at the gate and a line-up of staff awaited us. Eight handshakes and a cold flannel later, we were ready for a lavish barbecue.

The place's tranquility was disrupted only by the racket of birdsong. I spotted a red-crested cardinal but gaucho-watching was to prove an even more compelling sport. One, Martín Tata, gave a display of his skills, some of which would make the British Horse Society faint. At one point, he lay supine with one of the horse's hooves daintily placed on his chest (a potentially torso-crushing arrangement), while the horse looked nonchalantly sideways. Later that afternoon, we had a pleasantly unadventurous ride, a swim in a pool surrounded by cedars, tea

with unearned chocolate brownies and a tour of the estate in a horse-drawn carriage. After only a day at La Bamba, we felt indecently relaxed.

The flight to San Martín de los Andes takes two hours, followed by a three-hour drive north along the Aluminé River basin. Distance contributes to the sense of liberation on arrival (do not bank on a continuing relationship with your mobile phone). I had been speculating about whether we would encounter descendants of the Welsh farmers Bruce Chatwin entertainingly describes in his classic *In Patagonia* (1977), but Agustina's family turn out to have come to Patagonia from Italy.



An aerial view of the estancia

Estancia San Juan de Quillen was built in the 1920s and has remained in the family ever since, its land extending to 50,000 acres in what is now a national park. The original house burnt down in 1982 and the replacement, designed by Argentine architect Ernesto Estrada, is built in wood the colour of *dulce de leche*, the caramel sauce to which Argentines seem unanimously partial.

Agustina is an elegant, smiling chatelaine, anxious to ensure our enjoyment. She does not go in for formal speeches, with the result that one feels agreeably unhassled and at home. Her shy, industrious sister Isabel oversees the estancia's superb homemade cooking (with plentiful fruit and vegetables to offset the carnivorous Argentine norm). We also sampled tasty empanadas — traditional pasties with daintily scalloped edges (which Agustina taught me how to make). And we met her gallant father and beautiful mother, both delightful.



Fishing on the river Quillen

The idea is that guests stay at the estancia for a minimum of four nights — and ride and/or fish each day. My friend skipped the first afternoon's riding and took off with the estancia's experienced fishing guide, Lucas Rodriguez. They returned ecstatic from the river Quillen with souvenir snaps of 15 hefty trout.

That same afternoon, I met the Criollo horses, superbly managed by Agustina's brother-in-law Santiago Uriburu, ex-polo player and sparky raconteur. After some discussion about riding experience, I was given a sprightly roan named Ferrari, a tearaway in her youth but now said, at the ripe old age of 10, to be more settled. "This is a very nervous horse. Very nervous," Agustina said to me darkly, as I got on board. But Ferrari did not — nor did any of the other horses — put a hoof wrong.

My visit was in November — springtime in Patagonia, but it was unseasonably warm and mercifully windless. For a European, the pristine landscape of mountains, forests and lakes feels almost supernatural, as if you are witnessing the moment after God created the world. Three volcanoes on the Chilean/Argentine border are nearby; Mount Lanín, its conical form dusted with snow, is especially striking, too perfect to be true.



A picnic lunch

The idea is to ride for about five hours a day — but everything here is ad hoc and adapted to changeable weather and riders' abilities. The first day, we stopped for a picnic and a swim in Lake Quillen, surrounded by snow-capped hills. Underfoot, the sand on the beach was hot, but when Agustina dived in she warned that the water was “very cold”.

My ankles were in agony after a preliminary paddle. I scampered out repeatedly before dunking myself for 30 seconds of breaststroke. The exhilaration on emerging justified the immersion. Prosecco was on offer as we stepped out of the water (the local wines are excellent) and fresh brown bread and prosciutto never tasted better — the body rejoicing at its survival. What followed was a slap-up lunch of steak and vegetables cooked over a fire and stylishly presented.

It was a dreamy meander of a day, perfect in its unhurried way. Santiago proved a clear, unbossy, safety-conscious guide with a black-hatted gaucho in tow. But I could not help wondering, as the trip is aimed at experienced riders — might the pace pick up? The following day, it did, and Ferrari was given the chance to live up to her name. We sped past monkey puzzle trees, cattle, Arab horses, orchids, lupins, roses and wild strawberries. I had a taste of “Indian bread” — a doughy cream and orange fruit. “You can eat the peel,” Agustina said (more command than invitation). We sped towards our second tremendous lunch: an *asado* — lamb cooked slowly over a fire.



The estancia's dining room

On the last morning (our taster trip involved two and a half days of riding), Agustina's sitting room looked briefly like a bazaar — she sells magnificent ponchos, made by her Indian neighbours, and hand-knitted gilets, and everyone was tempted by them. And it was there, chatting to Isabel, that I learnt more about the fire that destroyed the estancia. All her mother managed to rescue was a fridge and a statue of the Virgin Mary. "I still have the fridge," Isabel said, with a rueful smile. She and Agustina then showed me a handwritten message from their great aunt, Ofelia, and translated it from the Spanish: "We must never neglect, for any reason, the wellbeing of this house or this area." This hangs on their wall: a framed promise.

It was a wrench to leave the estancia and bizarre to find ourselves back in Buenos Aires. Our last night was spent at the Faena hotel, designed by Philippe Starck with a hyperbolic playfulness that made us gasp in disbelief: red-eyed unicorns dominate the dining room, silver cygnets dispense soap in the bathroom and there are mirrors everywhere that offered us unwelcome glimpses of our Patagonian hair.

The contrast was hard to process — from the wildest place on earth to this knowing, metropolitan swank (the delicious champagne breakfasts at Faena are especially decadent). I dug out my recently acquired Patagonian poncho from my suitcase and spread it across the hotel bed. I knew exactly what I was doing: as at the end of a children's story, I needed visual proof — I wanted to be certain that Patagonia was more than just a dream.

Details

Saskia Burgess was a guest of [Caballadas](http://caballadas.com/en/home.htm) (<http://caballadas.com/en/home.htm>), which is part of by Dolomite Mountains, and [British Airways](https://www.britishairways.com) (<https://www.britishairways.com>). Caballadas offers riding trips like the one described from November to mid-December, and March to mid-April. Prices start at \$750 per person per night, all inclusive. Optional add-ons are available via Argentine agency [Mai 10](http://mai10.com.ar/) (<http://mai10.com.ar/>). British Airways flies daily from Heathrow to Buenos Aires, from £720 return

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