

EAT  
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ESCAPE

# FOOD & TRAVEL

ARGENTINA

## GET ON YOUR HIGH HORSE

*Rosalyn Wikeley saddles up with South American gauchos in the Sierra Chicas*



Take to the hills for an Argentine adventure



Exploring on horseback is the best way to experience the magnificent Sierra

## BOOK IT

Norwegian flies direct from London to Buenos Aires daily from £250 one way (with spacious premium seats), and has recently launched domestic flights throughout Argentina, including Córdoba from Buenos Aires. [norwegian.com](http://norwegian.com)

Doubles at Estancia Los Potreros from \$780 all-inclusive. [estancia.lospotreros.com](http://estancia.lospotreros.com)

An hour south of Córdoba, wedged between the Pampas and the Andes, lie the Sierra Chicas, Argentina's ancient range of hills, with their kaleidoscopic carpet of wildflowers, jagged rocks and soft grasses that billow in the hot wind. Occupying this magnificent landscape, along with eagles, condors and iguanas basking in the sun, is Estancia Los Potreros, a 6,000-acre working cattle farm and off-grid paradise that has been in the Begg family for four generations. It's this same wildly romantic corner of Argentina that Che Guevara grew up in and Jackie Kennedy escaped to in 1966.

Louisa (Lou) and Kevin Begg endeavour to keep it that way and, with the Estancia's unparalleled trail-riding into the undulating land-before-time scenery (there are over 90 Criollos and Peruvian Pasos to saddle up), Los Potreros satisfies every bucolic myth associated with rural Argentina. Guests sleep in traditional farmhouses with stand-alone baths, mustard-yellow walls and quaint wooden shutters.

Hearty Malbec lunches roll out across a wisteria-clad veranda and on into drowsy afternoons coated in dandelion fluff. Evenings are made of slightly smarter, candle-lit stuff:

you'll be lucky if the greyhound offers you up the sofa for 8pm drinks, but tapping into Kevin's encyclopaedic knowledge of Argentinian wine and history is less of a challenge. The panoply of unfussy dishes emerging from the 400-year-old kitchen tells the story of Argentina's heritage, with Italian and Spanish influences

as well as legendary Argentine fare, with beef, eggs and vegetables from the Estancia's own estate.

The Begg serve up an enlightened take on luxury, and guests are encouraged to tap into the social mores and rhythms of rural life. This includes riding with the gauchos, herding cattle on horseback, rounding up foals before nightfall – to keep them safe from the mysterious puma – and neatly folding empanadas in the kitchen with the chef.

Their refreshingly inclusive approach to the riding side of the operation pulls in equestrian fanatics, fair-weather riders and absolute beginners, with equal enthusiasm. My plus-one arrives as an equestrian 'fresher', yet is herding stray cattle and scaling the dusty tracks carved into the Sierra Chicas at a gallop by day three, much to my irritation.

Clipped pony club etiquette has little purchase in these parts – it's about leaning back into your saddle, holding your reins with one hand, John Wayne style, and connecting with your sure-footed steed as it weaves through the acacia trees. These handsome Pasos and Criollos have sharp senses and a connection to the ecosystem enveloping them that can direct you to that condor circling above the ride or the foxes and hares bouncing through the soft valley beyond. A twinkley-eyed proposition – '¿Galope?' – from the gaucho is rarely declined as the vast, verdant landscape unfolds ahead. Their visceral horsemanship and skill is truly a sight to behold, as is the guides' casual mastery of their mounts, diligently monitoring stirrups, girths and guests' stamina as they go.

Following an exhilarating canter through the hills, we tie up our horses in the shaded orchard and enter Kevin's



Out of office: Rosalyn rode several of the Estancia's horses



The Begg's family home is steeped in history and filled with yesteryear trinkets

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Swimming in the natural pool



The Estancia's friendly gauchos teach guests to lasso and herd cattle

late father's escape: a quaint, colonial-style house, with views of the hills' relentless beauty, that inside wears the trinkets and décor of yesteryear Argentina. Wine, olives and a large, ever-rotating spread of meats and salads miraculously appear, as they did yesterday on the warm rocks of the Estancia's enchanting natural pool (and as they will tomorrow, on a rustic table at the cattle ranch, where guests' lasso techniques are merrily scrutinised). Few things can prepare you for that swell of awe while cantering home towards slashes of vivid pink, as the sun bids farewell for another day.

The ponies undergo an elaborate makeover for Saturday's polo day, their tails wrapped and manes roached for the big game. A fierce Argentine sun beats down on the Estancia's magnificent polo field and an optimistic border collie eyes the ball Lou Begg is using to demonstrate their diluted version of the game. 'Don't hurt yourself, don't hurt my horse, don't hurt each other.' Any flagrant abuse of the rules and it's a red card. And rightly so. Unlike the enigmatic, protracted and financially draining world of British polo, the Beggs' morning tuition for their version fast-tracks the process, resulting in a fun (and at times fiercely competitive) game to be had between guests. 'No crossing, go, HOOK!' Never has applied learning had more impact. Spectators begin to behold something vaguely resembling the sport of Kings. 'Yes Dave, vamos, vamos, GOAL!' The gaucho pelts his steed up the line in rapture.

Avid polo players or fresh disciples can sign up for an intensive 'Learn to play Polo' week, run under the expert supervision of a local professional, but all guests will have one day during their week's stay to lift a mallet.

Despite the equestrian bias, Estancia Los Potreros more than delivers on the out-of-saddle aspect, with walking, wild swimming, wine-tasting and exploring Jesuit churches and villages on offer for reluctant riders or those wanting a day off. It's also a feast for bird-watching enthusiasts, from vultures and eagles down to tiny effervescent hummingbirds. For some visitors, though, it's simply about soaking up the rural idyll with a book, relishing the chef's exquisite Argentine classics, and enjoying Kevin's wine-tasting soirées, where he showcases his Salta favourites.

Ultimately, whether you're there to relax, feel engulfed by the Sierra Chicas' desolate beauty on horseback, or be at the mercy of the guides' savage wit, Estancia Los Potreros is one of those far-flung places whose magic presses in your memory, months, even decades, after your visit. ■