

Paradise FOUND

JANE THOMPSON rewinds with a riding holiday at Estancia Los Potreros in central Argentina

Endless views of pampas grass hills from the back of a perfectly behaved and incredibly comfortable horse, and the knowledge that a claw-foot bath, a fantastic meal, world-class red wine and a comfortable bed await after your ride.

Sound like bliss? It is. Argentinian bliss. Riding bliss. Foodies' bliss. Travellers' bliss.

From Buenos Aires, the first part of the journey to get to this blissful place was a 10-dollar taxi ride from my hotel to the airport. Just over an hour later, after gawping at the huge expanse of flat countryside below me, (think Canterbury plains x 999,000), I was greeted by Louisa Begg at the shiny new Cordoba airport, and a few minutes later we were winding our way up the hills to the 6000-acre beef and horse farm, Estancia Los Potreros.

The ranch (or estancia in the Portuguese language) has been in the Begg family for many generations, and Lou became part of the family when she came out from England for a riding holiday, and never left, marrying her host, Kevin. Los Potreros is located in the Sierras Chicas, the small range between the Andes and the pampas.

Between them, the very sociable couple have further developed the estancia's accommodation business, and built up an

impressive number of Angus cattle and 130 plus horses. There were vague murmurings of breeding horses to sell, but not a lot of selling seems to have gone on. Instead, they have a great number of lovely horses who are all beautifully trained by the gauchos.

Having this many horses means their workloads are light, which is sound management given that the pasture is poor – the stocking rate is about one cattle beast to 10 acres, and supplementary feed is exorbitant, if you can source it to buy in the first place. So, the horses are run in herds in huge paddocks – 1000 acres plus! – to forage what they can.

On my arrival at Los Potreros, a refreshing glass of home-made lemonade greeted me, along with the smiling assistant chef Claudio, who was in his first week of employment. Pato, the always-smiling head chef, has been with the Begg family for more than 15 years.

The other guests returned from their ride, and two more arrived just in time for lunch. We now had the full crew who I was to spend the next three days with. Riz and James were from London, both riding for only the second time, and loving the experience. Jenny had ridden a lot, but her son Robbie had only limited experience. He was soon right into it, and having him there was like having our



MAIN IMAGE Many of the estancia's mounts are Criollos, a sturdy, compact and muscular breed who are South America's main working horses
FROM LEFT Looking over the pampas. Hosts Kevin and Louisa Begg. The verandah at night.



FROM TOP LEFT A beautifully detailed bridle. BBQ, estancia-style! Bringing in the herd. Sheepskins are used for comfort over the saddles. Guest accommodation. Paso Peruano horses showing their special fifth gait, the paso LEFT Riding through a stream

own junior David Attenborough, as he was very interested in the considerable bird life around, being part of his way through a zoology degree. By the time lunch was served, we were all ravenous, as we had been teased by the lovely smells of the meat being slow-cooked on the BBQ. A nice glass of local wine to have with lunch? Why not?

My first ride was scheduled later that afternoon, just what was needed after such a wonderful long lunch. We met at the tack room, were kitted out with helmet, boots and chaps, and had a lesson on riding, gaucho-style. This involves reins in one hand, and a more Western approach including neck-reining.

The horses were amazingly responsive and soft-mouthed, and at no time did they pull or resist. My first horse was Margarita, a small bay mare about 14 years old with easy brakes and accelerator. The gaucho style doesn't involve a gentle nudge or application of the leg aids; a short quick kick worked instead, then it

was legs forward, sitting as deep as you could in the saddle, weight back. I rode on a loose rein the whole time.

Margarita was a good horse for the two-hour ride; her preferred paces were walk or canter. She'd march along at a good pace, and had no issues stopping while I took photos or admired some of

the bird life that Robbie had spotted. Daniel, the head gaucho, led the way and opened all the gates. On our return, we helped bring the youngstock into the yards overnight to protect them from marauding night-hunting puma, who apparently have quite the taste for foals and calves.

After the ride, just in case we were

hungry again, it was into the sitting room for a really good cup of English tea and cake. There was just enough time to clean up for dinner, and get back in time for the special entertainment. Two local lads entertained us with Argentinian songs, played with many instruments, all with a lot of gusto. The music was beautiful,

especially the tango. No, we didn't spoil it by trying to dance!

Dinner was perfect: tasty nibbles, followed by a beautiful risotto and salad, dessert and fruit and a truly lovely local Malbec wine.

I got up early the next morning to take advantage of the camera-friendly light and watch the older horses coming in

and the young ones heading out, and looked forward to a full cooked breakfast.

My ride today was Terros, a Peruvian gaited horse who is one of the most comfortable I have ever ridden. The gait was fabulous for the long distances, and his transition from walk to canter was Valegro-like. He didn't do trot; it was walk, amble, or canter. He was, and needed to be, very sure-footed as we picked our way up and down rocky hills.

We headed towards the city of Cordoba, which we could see in the distance once we reached the top of the hills. Our mission was to bring in a herd of horses from one of the biggest paddocks on the place, about 5000 acres. It took a bit to find them, and they were in three separate groups, so we helped herd the groups together, and shepherded them towards the large yards some kilometres away.

The horses had obviously done this before, and obliged us by heading directly there, but for me, this was a first, galloping

HORSES OF THE ESTANCIA

The horses at Estancia Los Potreros are either Criollos or Paso Peruanos (crossbreds). Percheron and thoroughbred bloodlines as well as quarter horse have also been introduced.

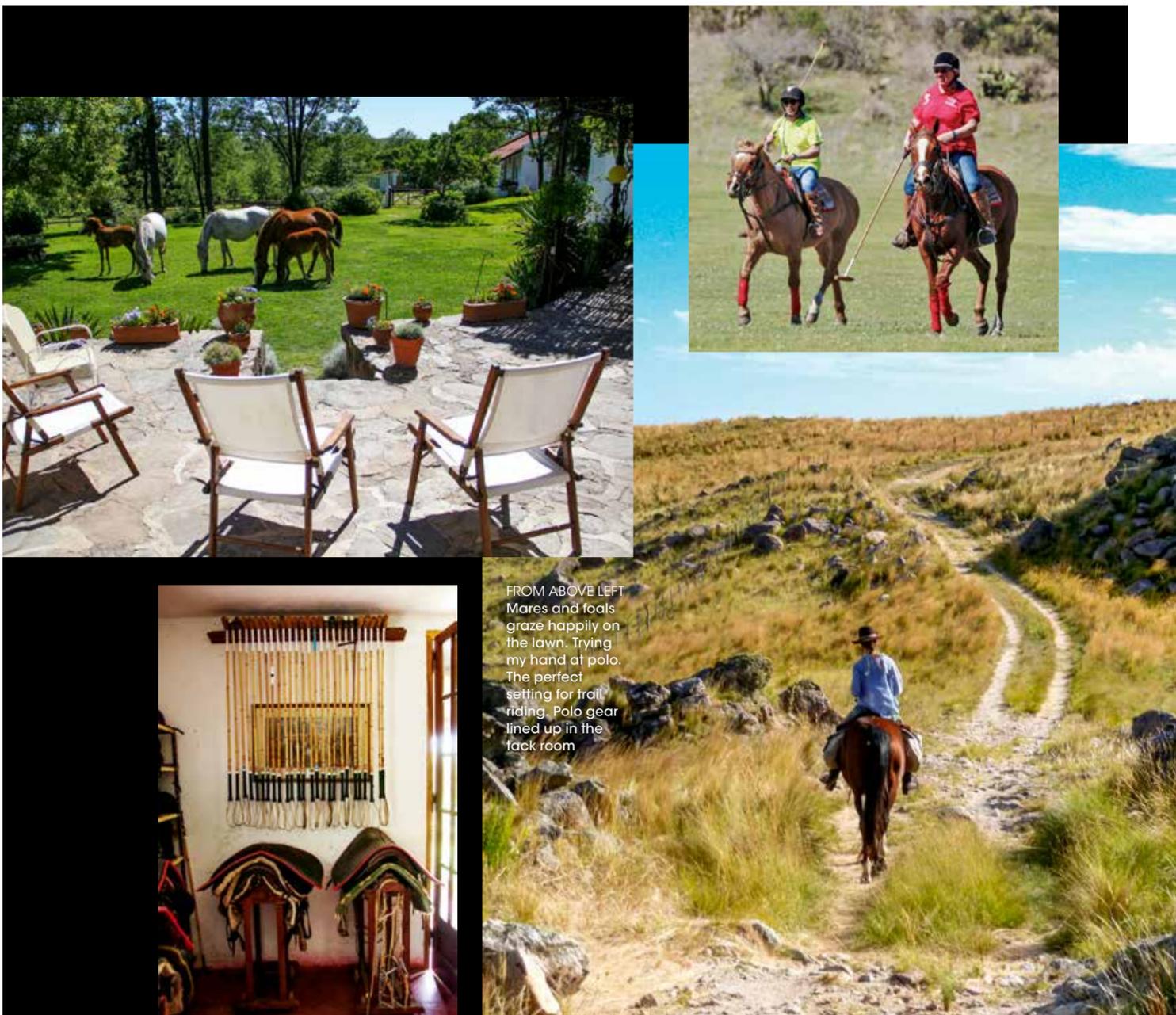
The Criollo is sturdy, compact and muscular, making them ideal for being South America's main working horses. Hardiness, endurance over tough terrain and ability to carry weight are useful on the estancias as well as on the polo field.

The Paso Peruano shares a common ancestry with the Criollo in that the breed originates from Spain. They were developed and bred in Peru with little cross-breeding, which is part of the reason that their fifth gait, the 'paso' (pace or amble), has been preserved over the centuries.

- The fifth gait is genetic rather than learned and is a lateral four-beat gait. It can look as though both legs on one side are moving forward together, although in actuality there should be a slight difference in timing of the hoof hitting the ground. The pace can sometimes be faster than a canter, and some Peruvians lose one gait altogether, usually the trot.

- The horse is typified by a high extravagant flicking action of the front legs and they can stay in their paso at some speed over long distances and varied terrain. The pace is extremely comfortable for the rider.

- The tack used at Estancia Los Potreros is English, with sheepskins over polo or British army saddles, but the riding style is more Western.



FROM ABOVE LEFT Mares and foals graze happily on the lawn. Trying my hand at polo. The perfect setting for trail riding. Polo gear lined up in the tack room

best steak I have ever eaten, with cheeses and dessert wine to finish.

I was sad to have to pack up the next day, and because of having to get to the airport late morning, there was no time to go for one last ride. Or was there? Our host Kevin brought out two of his prized possessions, his highly decorated and engraved show saddle, complete with wooden stirrups, and his lovely Paso Peruvian stallion, Super Mario (proper

“A game of polo for the guests was great fun and enjoyed by everybody.”

name Andariego Corregidor). With one of the gauchos on another fine young filly, the horses showed off their paces.

When Kevin offered me the chance to have a ride, I couldn't get on fast enough. Just a couple of twirls around the paddock, and oh, I was impressed. What a fabulous horse to ride.

I reluctantly handed Super Mario back and it was then off to the airport to head back to Buenos Aires for some city time. In hindsight, I would have preferred to stay at the estancia for longer, so I'll know for next time! ■

FACT FILE

WHEN TO VISIT

I was there in winter (late August), and had the most glorious week of sunshine.

- While the days were perfect, it did get a bit colder at night, so the big fireplace in the sitting area was a welcomed feature, and rooms are warmed by small woodstoves. The hot water bottle tucked into the bed was a nice touch too!
 - Winter is the dry season, and after early spring rain, apparently the place greens up and the wildflowers come out. In summer the pool is available, but you don't have to worry about the temperatures getting too hot for riding, as it remains very pleasant.
 - Electricity is generated through windmills and solar power. Only limited internet was available but frankly, to enjoy all there is to offer at the estancia, you'll quickly get over having no internet!
- GUIDES**
The gauchos are also assisted by guides on the rides. These guides are volunteers who stay for about two-three months at a time, working (which includes helping with some kitchen work) for their board and keep, and getting the experience of a



lifetime! If I was younger...

TRIP DETAILS

Air New Zealand flies into Buenos Aires directly from Auckland. I'd suggest staying a few days in the city before and/or after your visit to Estancia Los Potreros. Recoleta is a very central place to stay in Buenos Aires, handy to all the main tourist attractions, good restaurants and I felt very safe there. Palermo is the place if you are keen to try out a wide variety of bars and restaurants and experience the vibe of the nightlife.

If you have the time while in South America, Iguazu Falls are supposed to be amazing, and Mendoza is a beautiful wine region. Both will require you to fly from Buenos Aires.

CONTACT DETAILS:

www.estancialospotreros.com

alongside a herd of about 60 horses. It has gone down as one of my most exhilarating equestrian activities ever!

Our work wasn't done, as there was one bunch of stragglers still to come in, and it took a bit more skill convincing these last 10 or so to relinquish their freedom.

The horses were checked over in the yards, and assessed in case any were in need of closer scrutiny. Meanwhile, we enjoyed a picnic lunch of home-made empanadas (a kind of beef turnover) and an opportunity to try the local Mate tea which was a bitter concoction served in a traditional gourd cup.

The horses were released again and we made our way back to the ranch. The cup of tea and cake on arrival was much welcomed, and then dinner that night was another magnificent meal, topped off

with poached pear in red wine with crème anglaise. We all enjoyed a wine or two, but didn't last past 10pm, after the day's physical exertion.

The next day was the much-anticipated game of polo. The trek down the road to get to the polo field was a chance to warm up and get to know our horses. I had Adela, who was a quick and responsive little chestnut, perfect for the game. After a quick lesson from Lou, we were divided up into teams, with one of the gauchos, Enzo, making up numbers in the boys' team. He was handicapped by riding a horse that had never played polo before, and he wasn't allowed to 'tackle' the guests. Just as well, or Enzo would have won the game single-handedly. We all had a great time and I absolutely loved it. Perhaps I did get a bit enthusiastic, and

perhaps I did inadvertently foul a couple of times... and the girls triumphed. It was a lot of fun.

We went out for what I thought was going to be my last ride late that afternoon. We headed at a fast pace to the 'Top of the World' – the highest vantage point on the estancia. Unbelievable views, and my horse for this ride, Garancho, was one of the bigger ones, and that bit of thoroughbred in him enjoyed the hoons up the hills. But still no problems with any brakes!

That night we also had another treat, helping cook some of the dinner in the magnificent kitchen. Well, if that's what you call making empanadas and ravioli with all the carefully laid-out ingredients. As well as eating our own unusually-formed creations, we had some of the

IMAGES: TONY CLERKSON, ALICE GIPPS, ASTRID HARRISON & JANE THOMPSON



~KAIMANAWA~

CLASSIC

Event Dates: Friday 9 – Sun 11 Dec 2016
Registrations Open September 16 2016





www.offlimits.co.nz

for more info -
ph: 021 844 737 or 021 710 733
or visit our website

The dates shown are confirmed but subject always to NZ Army requirements regarding Army activities. All bookings must be made online. This guided tour is strictly limited in numbers and bookings are on a first received basis.

The Kaimanawa Horse Treks
explore the home range of the Kaimanawa horses, inside the Waiouru Military Training Area.
The treks follow horse trails and tank tracks, winding their way across valleys of tussock grasslands, along alpine ridges, and through beautiful native beach forest and mature manuka stands.

This year day one of the three day Trek will be based at the Sports ground just down the road from the Army Museum. On Friday afternoon we will join the members of the Two Day Trek and travel out to our camp along the banks of the Moawhango river, with the comprehensive Kaimanawa horse yards as our base, providing overnight security for your horse. We have several different route options available to us. Weather conditions will predicate which of the routes are used on which particular day. The Kaimanawa Horse Trek requires riders and their horses to be reasonably fit and competent. This will ensure you gain the most satisfaction from the ride. It is **NOT** a suitable trek for beginner riders, or unfit/undisciplined horses. All riders **MUST** be capable of mounting and dismounting their horses in the field unaided, and walking in rough country if required.