

# Riding with the gauchos

*Jim White* hadn't been on a horse since he was twelve but was persuaded by his wife to take to four hooves in the Argentine hills



Gaucho guide Daniel looks out across the ridge towards Cordoba in the valley below

**W**e've reached the point,' said our host Kevin Begg, 'where many of our guests think: "Oh God, I've been kidnapped".'

You could understand why. Kevin had just steered us in his four-wheel drive vehicle off the tarmac, past a chained gate and onto an unmade track, seemingly heading off into the middle of nowhere. There had been no trace of humanity since we had passed a police road block about five miles previously. Phone signal had disappeared. The only sign of life came from three condors circling nonchalantly above the parched hillside, apparently licking their beaks in anticipation of imminent carrion. If my

life were a movie directed by Quentin Tarantino, this would have been the moment when the soundtrack changed to some long-lost surf music as an ironic warning that drama lay ahead.

Except the truth was, we were heading to Kevin's ancestral farm in the hills far above Cordoba, Argentina's second city. And frankly if you *were* kidnapped and taken to Los Potreros, then the moment Kevin's wife, Louisa, met you at the gate with a welcoming glass of ice-cold homemade lemonade, the moment you were shown to a sumptuously comfortable bedroom warmed by a flickering log fire, the moment you read in the notes to visitors open on the antique sideboard that mobile phones

are not encouraged at the dinner table, you would be urgently hoping none of your relatives could meet the ransom demands. After a couple of days relishing the trail rides, the barbecues, the wine, the hospitality and the sense of delicious dislocation from modern life, you will wish you could stay forever.

Kevin's family have farmed in this part of the world for more than a century, since his great grandfather arrived in Argentina from Scotland. Back then, there was a fortune to be made from breeding cattle and sending their hides back to Europe. The invention of refrigeration only increased the financial opportunity as it opened up an intercontinental market for Argentine



meat. For a while it seemed like an eternal seam of gold had been struck on the rolling hillside. However, this being Argentina, where institutional incompetence, government corruption and fiscal cack-handedness is a way of life, after four decades of declining yields, these days the country that once supplied the world with steak is now a net importer of beef. And to keep Los Potreros functioning as a cattle ranch, Kevin has been obliged to open it up to visitors. For the past fifteen years, Britons, Americans, Germans and Brazilians have flocked here, drawn by the promise that they might – for a few days at least – live like gauchos.

For me, there was but one small drawback to Kevin's offer to go out rounding up his herds. Unlike the legendary Argentine cowboys, with their innate horsemanship, my entire history of horse riding was restricted to a pony trek in Wales aged twelve. The second we set off that day my mount, instinctively noting the incompetence of its rider, sauntered to a hedgerow where it munched away, unmoved by increasingly desperate attempts to make it shift. I took the hint. For the next 46 years my only experience of horses was watching the one I'd backed finish a distant last at Cheltenham. Not once since had I climbed aboard.

But my wife had booked us into Kevin's place under some misplaced belief that riding with gauchos across the Argentine pampas was somehow romantic. Which immediately alarmed me. After all, round our way back in the Seventies, growing pampas grass in a suburban front garden was rumoured to be a sign that the householder was a swinger.

None of that in Los Potreros, however. Not least because after returning from five-and-a-half hours riding across the hills you are in such muscular difficulty you are walking like John Wayne.

Yes, five-and-a-half hours a day in the saddle does sound unlikely for a total novice. But at Los Potreros they are not remotely fazed by beginners. Kevin may speak with the clipped accent of the English public school alumnus, but there is no old-world exclusiveness about the riding here. This is a place that exudes a New World evangelism. Kevin likes nothing more than introducing the hapless beginner to the gaucho's craft. There is no age limit to the sense of discovery either: the week before we were there, a woman in her eighties was out cantering across the grassland.

Mind, it helps that the horses are so accommodating. A mix of Criollos and Peruvian Paso, the Beggs' herd of more



The main house at Los Potreros, built in about 1830

than 100 carefully nurtured steeds are remarkably welcoming to a beginner. Quick, nimble, responsive, these are horses much in demand in British polo circles. And visitors ride the same animals that are used to round up cattle and chase after the ball in a chukka. Though the word ride implies you are somehow in control. The truth is you sit there, sinking into the sheepskin-covered saddle while the horse does all the work.

Your apprenticeship begins with a day of trail riding. Accompanied by a cowboy and an enthusiastic British guide (ours was a delightful woman called Kelly, who at the age of 41 had decided to pack in her job in office administration and unleash her inner gaucho), you head off into the depths of the farm. Covering 6,000 acres of scratchy, scrabbly Argentine scrubland, it makes the average Scottish sporting estate seem cramped. And the trails across it take you to astonishing places, from mountain ridges affording views over Cordoba thirty miles away, to astringently cold waterfalls (where the gaucho wisely remains fully clothed as his foolhardy guests dive straight in).

Occasionally the gaucho will ask you if you fancy '*uno medio galope*'. And off your horse canters, picking up speed as it goes, allowing you for a moment to imagine you are Clint Eastwood in pursuit of a black-hearted bounty-dodger.

As you go, you pass all sorts of wildlife, from Pampean grey foxes to ring-tailed

parakeets, all of it head-turningly exotic. Then, as the sun begins to set, you return exhausted to dinner, a heaving banquet of chargrilled steak, accompanied by the estancia's own Malbec.

A couple of days of that, and Kevin reckons you're ready to help the gauchos work. So out we went with Daniel and Enrico. It wasn't hard to tell us apart as we set off. We were in travel-insurance-friendly riding helmets, the gauchos in casual Basque berets. We sat erect and rigid in the saddle, they slouched with an easy relaxation.

Yet I soon convinced myself I was blending in. After we had galloped across the flatland behind a dozen or so charging thoroughbreds, encouraging them towards a corral where they could be counted and checked for signs of the ever-present danger of puma attack, for a moment I thought I had somehow found the wherewithal to take on gaucho ways.

I was quickly disabused. Our next task was to round up some of the Aberdeen Angus cattle that lead the Life of Riley in the hills. My job was to ride in a wide arc behind them and encourage them through a gate. But they took no notice of me and scurried off in the opposite direction. I gave chase, kicking my horse into action, certain I was approaching maximum possible speed in the pursuit. Then I felt a whoosh of air as Daniel swept past me, moving across the ground like a South American Ryan Moore, chasing after the cows to block their exit route and send them back the way he wanted them to go. When his horse swished past by me for a second time, it farted extravagantly in my direction. As a critical notice of my riding ability, it could not have been more pointed.

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**'As the sun sets, you return to dinner, a heaving banquet of chargrilled steak'**



# The stable door opens

Newmarket has long been the HQ of British horseracing. With the revamping of its museum and opening up of its Jockey Club Rooms, life's also-rans can now get a look-in, too, found *Nigel Richardson*

**B**eneath a morning sky as blue as Godolphin's racing silks, clusters of horses and riders took the Newmarket Gallops up Warren Hill at a swinging canter. Standing by the fence on Moulton Road we caught them on the down stretch. 'Morning!' said my companion, Nigel Wright, to one of the riders, adding sotto voce, 'That's James Fanshawe, the trainer.'

Wright, a former jockey and stud farm manager, now works as a tour guide, explaining Newmarket and its arcane equine ways to non-devotees like me. I was in town principally for a preview of the revamped National Horseracing Museum, which has just re-opened as the National Heritage Centre for Horseracing and Sporting Art in appropriately historic

premises just off the High Street: Charles II's former racing stable and what is left of his palace next door.

But the real story of Newmarket is out here on these lush acres of training grounds. Nigel Wright pointed to the crest of the hill. 'This is where it all started,' he said. 'You'll see the painting in the Jockey Club Rooms.' The painting in question shows Charles II, who put Newmarket on the map as a racing town, and his entourage on Warren Hill watching pretty much the same scene as the one in front of me (bar the padded body protectors and bobble-topped helmets worn by the stable lads and lasses). It hangs in the private members' club where I had managed to wangle a room for the night.

These gallops are what distinguish

Newmarket from every other racing town in Britain. More than fifty towns have racecourses – Newmarket has two – but none has a heath where thoroughbreds can open their legs and show their class (to quote the late Ron Pickering in a different context).

Newmarket sits in a region of fenland on a band of well-drained chalk that rolls out in smooth, gradual hills and open valleys. This is ideal for the training and racing of horses, which is why the area has long been established as the HQ of British horseracing, with key institutions – the stables, studs and the bloodstock auctioneer Tattersalls – located in and around what is otherwise a standard-issue Suffolk market town.

Racing is still the sport of kings here – it's just that the kings with the real



## Racehorse training on the Gallops, one of Newmarket's key features

clout and money tend to be from the Gulf States (the Godolphin racing stable, for example, is owned by one of modern racing's most influential figures, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Emir of Dubai). But in its more rarefied corners Newmarket maintains an air of patrician loucheness that befits its former status as the Merry Monarch's country playground (he even imported his stable of mistresses for the season). And few corners come more rarefied than the Jockey Club Rooms.

Its pre-war façade, set back from the High Street behind a statue of Hyperion, the 1933 Derby winner, belies its mid-18th century origins and the warren of chambers and galleries that unfolds as you step deeper inside. Charles Howard, the general manager, likened it to Narnia – ‘the door opens and it envelops you’ – but it felt to me more like a ventricle of the British Establishment: the gilt-framed paintings of horses, both in shiny repose and doing that pre-photographic rocking-horse gallop; the copies of *Tatler* and the *Field*, fanned like hands of cards on occasional tables; the hooves, for God’s sake, gold-mounted and disguised as snuff boxes, inkwells and paperweights,

but still, unmistakably, things filched from the ends of horses’ legs.

The Jockey Club Rooms is the members’ club for the oldest institution and largest commercial group in horseracing. It is every bit as exclusive as the clubs of Pall Mall or St James’s but, like the Establishment itself, has had to make discreet accommodation with economic reality in recent years. ‘On the key sacrosanct days – such as when Tattersalls are busy – we revert to being a niche members’ club,’ Howard told me over fruit cocktails next to the chequerboard lawn. ‘Outside that we have the licence to be slightly more commercial. But the H-word is never allowed to be used. The members want it to remain a little oasis for them but they’re astute in turning a blind eye to the right sort of non-member activity.’ Got that? You can have a bed for the night but it’s not a hotel; it puts on ‘fine dining evenings’ but is not a restaurant; displays priceless art (we’ll come to just how priceless) but is not a gallery. And this is the compromise by which life’s also-rans such as myself get to stay here and poke about.

I had already done a fair bit of poking – locating that painting of Charles II on Warren Hill (it’s in the Morning Room) – before Howard gave me the tour. The Morning Room, he said, is the heart of the club, where ‘the greatest art’ hangs. This includes, over the fireplace, ‘Gimcrack on Newmarket Heath’ by George Stubbs, the sister painting of which sold at Christie’s five years ago for more than £22 million.

The Dining Room is hung with paintings of Derby winners and their owners, and on a table sits the club’s hottest hoof, probably once attached to the white-stockinged right hind leg of Eclipse (eighteen starts, eighteen wins in 1769–70), which was lined with a solid gold snuff box and presented to the

Jockey Club by William IV in 1832. ‘That is always placed in front of the most important guest,’ Charles Howard told me.

This evident obsession of the racing fraternity with the off-cuts and mortal remains of their champion nags extends to the new museum, five minutes’ walk away. The museum has moved from more cramped quarters and been updated with interactive and audiovisual displays, notably on the ‘biomechanics’ and genetics of thoroughbreds (all of which are descended from just three Arabian stallions). But it still contains a couple of old horse skeletons, of Hyperion and of the most ludicrously named horse ever, Potooooooooo – the clue to its pronunciation lying in its alternative spelling, Pot8os.

There is also an exhibit with a faintly Sicilian air – the stuffed, mounted head of Persimmon, winner of the Epsom Derby, the St Leger and the Ascot Gold Cup in the late 1890s, which is on loan from the Queen (then again she is the head of the firm, the *capo di tutti capi* you might say).

After my night in the Jockey Club Rooms I descended to the Dining Room where I found a small breakfast table set for one beneath the gaze of the 2nd Marquess of Rockingham (whose horse, Allabaculia, won the first St Leger in 1776). I was beginning to wonder if everyone had gone racin’ when a Frenchman appeared to take my order. And in the clubby silence that preceded the arrival of perfectly poached eggs I swear I heard the thud of ghostly hooves. 

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*The Jockey Club Rooms (jockeyclubrooms.co.uk); the National Heritage Centre for Horseracing & Sporting Art (palacehousenewmarket.co.uk); book tours of the town at discovernewmarket.co.uk.*



**The Jockey Club Rooms, the heart of British horseracing**