

# High plains DRIFTER

Once home to Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, the rolling pampas of northern Patagonia are a cowboy's fantasy land. On his trusty steed Zorro, **Richard Madden** rode over the Andes from Argentine Patagonia to the Chilean Lake District.



Picture credits: Richard Madden



Argentine Patagonia (foreground) looking towards the Lanin Volcano and the Chilean Lake District

**Z**orro is an inspired name for a horse. Especially when you're slumped around a campfire deep in Argentine Patagonia and the mount in question has just carried you halfway across the Andes. Only an hour before, Zorro and I and our posse of riders had been galloping across the pampas towards our evening camp beside a willow-lined river under a rocky plateau sacred to the local Mapuche Indians.

All day we had been mesmerised by the Lanín Volcano, a snow-mantled deity towering over the rolling uplands. But now our thoughts had turned to our bellies and after unsaddling our horses with the help of Juan and Marcelino, our gauchos, and tearing off our dust-covered boots and chaps, we were in turn hypnotised by the sizzle and spit of a traditional Argentine 'asado', a side of beef cooked over the open fire.

We were realising what for many of us had been a long-standing ambition: to ride over the Andes on horseback. Although – as the condor flies – the distance from our starting point at Estancia Huechahue (pronounced Way-Cha-Way) near the town of San Martín de Los Andes in northern Patagonia to Huife in the Chilean Lake District was only 70 miles, our meandering route over the ground covered more than 200 miles, climbing and descending up to 3,000ft in a day.

Although under canvas and dependent on the freezing embrace of the

snow-fed rivers for our ablutions, we never wanted for life's essentials in this remote part of the world as our hosts went before us, setting up camp and caring for the horses. Every night was party night under the bright stars of the southern hemisphere with a waxing moon, an upside-down Orion and the Southern Cross to light our way back to our tents in the early hours.

Our group of 12 riders had bonded quickly. The glue was our shared passion for horses, adventure and the world's wilderness cultures. But we were also a satisfyingly eclectic band. At one end of the spectrum was Penny, an endurance rider, game for anything from plunging into the limpid waters

of an extinct volcano to draining a pig's bladder of wine at a single sitting. At the other was Cowboy Pete, my tent partner, complete with nipple-ring, an anarchic sense of

humour and the best line in leather equine accoutrements since Billy the Kid.

The rhythm of our days lent a pattern to our lives for our ten days on horseback. In Argentina, where we neck-reined Gaucho-style mounted on wide saddles with multiple numnahs and sheepskin covers, we covered the most ground as we cantered and galloped over the pampas. In Chile, where we were met at the border with fresh horses, we quickly adapted to a different style of riding in the steep cordilleras. The Chilean horses, descended from Andalusian stock brought over by the conquistadores, had shorter necks and were sensitive to the slightest touch of the leg.

**“One day I was a member of the Hole in the Wall Gang joshing with Butch and the Kid; the next, engulfed in a rolling wave of dust and gun smoke, I held up every bank in Christendom.”**



Richard Madden and 'Cowboy Pete' aka Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

Each day brought its own kaleidoscope of memorable sights. A herd of llamas blinking at us in nervous bemusement as we cantered past; condors circling overhead as we ate lunch on a fallen tree trunk above the snow line; yoked oxen pulling carts with Flintstone-patent solid wooden wheels; Indian women holding up their babies to wave at us as we rode by; dozing off in the sun as mare's tails drifted across an electric blue sky.

Our guide on the Argentinean side of the Andes was Yvonne Corbett who still proudly owns the diaries of her Scottish great grandmother who crossed the Andes by pony in the 19th Century. Raised on the estancias of Patagonia, Yvonne has the culture and history of the region in her blood.

On the morning after our night at the Indian campsite, she led us to the top of the nearby Chenque rock. Around us was a landscape of table-top 'mesa' mountains, like a Conan Doyle 'Lost World', whose sheer basalt cliffs fell away into glacial valleys carpeted in tussock grass and the yellow-flowered tendrils of the ubiquitous neneo bush. "Nobody's certain whether this was a Mapuche burial site, a trading post or a strategic look-out point," she told us. "But before La Conquista Desertio when the Indians were suppressed in the 1890s, it was clearly of great significance. Arrowheads and beads are often found here."

Our longest days in the saddle were in Chile where we rode for up to nine hours a day making our way high into the cordilleras through forests of monkey puzzle trees, their trunks covered in Spanish moss clinging to their bark like driven snow.

Our host and guide in Chile was Rodolfo Coombs, jumping coach to the Spanish national team for the Montreal and Barcelona Olympics



Argentine rivers: pure... and cold!



Taking a rest Gaucho style

## IN THE SADDLE

Richard Madden rode across the Andes with In The Saddle (01299 272997, [www.inthesaddle.co.uk](http://www.inthesaddle.co.uk)) who specialise in adventure riding holidays around the world for riders of all levels.

The ten-day ride from San Martin de Los Andes in Argentina to Huife in the Chilean Lake District costs from £1,675 (ride only) and from £2,765 (15 days ex-London) including flights, accommodation and camping, meals and drinks on the ride, transfers and one night in Buenos Aires. Riders need to be under 90kg and experienced riders capable of sustained trotting and long canters through variable terrain.

during his self-imposed exile in Spain during the Pinochet era. A born performer, always elegant, smiling and with a twinkle in his eye, Rodolfo and his wife Carolina live for their horses. He and his team of 'huasos', resplendent in their tassled leather chaps and black broad-rimmed sombreros, taught us to ride in the Chilean style with thick looped reins held in one hand, sitting deep into the canter and riding from the hips.

And so it was that with each passing day, I was able to play out my favourite sepia-stained horse fantasies. One day, passing some tumbledown shacks and long-abandoned corrals not far north of the ranch where Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid once lived, I was a member of the Hole in the Wall Gang joshing with Butch and the Kid; the next, engulfed in a rolling wave of dust and gun smoke, I held up every bank in Christendom.

On our last day before arriving at Huife where we eased our aching joints in some volcanic hot springs, Rodolfo took us high into the mountains above the estancia where he lives. Behind us

were the snow-capped ridges we had crossed on the previous days and beneath us the lush sweep of the deep valleys caressed by a gentle, spring breeze. Disappearing into the trees, Rodolfo led us down into the bowl of an extinct volcano to a lake with a surface like a mirror and surely one of the most exotic swimming holes on the planet.

Our swan-song was a mad gallop around a field on Rodolfo's estancia, clearing a felled tree-trunk as we went. After unsaddling our horses in his corral, I found myself in Rodolfo's tack room. Photos of the young tyro stared back at me from his glory days in Spain surrounded by the exotic paraphernalia of Chilean riding gear.

As he told me the story of my horse's grandsire, a famous rodeo horse, he lifted a pair of antique spurs off the wall, complete with clinking silver-spiked wheels, and handed them to me. "Please. Take these," Rodolfo insisted, "they will always remind you of your horse adventures in Chile." It is a moment I will always treasure. I had crossed the Andes on horseback and I had won my spurs. 