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(clockwise from W): **H** at Los Potreros are well-trained and sure-footed. Local gauchos are ready with the smiles. Minnie and her horse Sol head for home.

GOING GAUCHO

Live the romance of riding through the stunning Argentinian landscape. **Minnie Burton** saddles up

We drive for an hour from Cordoba, Argentina's former colonial capital, climbing into the hills of the Sierras Chicas mountain range until the roads become dirt-and-stone tracks. On a high, secluded spot, we find Los Potreros, a 6,000-acre working gaucho estancia, owned and run by an Anglo-Argentine family, the Beggs.

With 1,000 Aberdeen Angus cattle and more than 100 horses, the Beggs' estancia dwarfs English farms. Its traditional farmhouse with deep sofas, bright woven rugs, shelves of books, wooden floors and whitewashed walls is an idyllic setting for a romantic, pampered version of the cowboy life, where you spend most of the day in the saddle. This is a beautiful landscape and our aim is to complement it with top-notch horses, food and accommodation: says Robin Begg.

IN THE SADDLE

There's plenty to keep you entertained from dawn to dusk. Try early morning rides to see the sunrise, or visits to old Jesuit churches. Follow streams through valleys, stopping to pick wild cherries or swim in a rock pool. The terrain varies hugely, from open spaces and winding tracks to wooded areas and steep, rocky climbs, and travelling on horseback is an ideal way to experience it.

Riding my horse, Sol is a blissful experience. His chocolate coloured mane falls gracefully over his large brown eyes. Exceptionally well-mannered, agile and responsive, he picks his way over the rocky terrain with a

gait so smooth it feels as if we're floating. His hooves crush herbs and grasses, and the air is filled with aromas of mint clover, rosemary, sage, fennel and lemon. With the condors soaring above us, Sol silkily changes up a gear and we fly over the brightly-coloured flowers.

The horses, all bred on the farm, are strong, gentle and sure-footed - perfect for beginners or more advanced riders. Sol carried me without a qualm up and down the steep and stony paths, so I felt secure and confident. The British army saddle, padded with suede and covered with a luxurious sheepskin, made me feel like I was riding in a comfy chair.

We ride to a ridge known as 'The Top of the World', where the views stretch for miles. At a height of 1,360m, this is the highest point on the Beggs' land. The wind rustles through the long tufts of grass. Above us, a condor appears, with a massive nine-foot wingspan: it twists, turns and gracefully circles. In the distance, Cordoba stretches out on the valley floor.

When our horses acquire an extra spring in their step, I know we've turned for home. They say that if you ever get lost out here, give your horse a long rein and it will take you home.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Whether you're ambling or galloping, your days can be punctuated with picnics, cool drinks, siestas under the shade of a tree or swinging in a hammock on the veranda. As I indulge in the latter one lunchtime, the family's black lab, Pippa, snoozes contentedly at my side. While across the lawn I can hear Jose,

one of the estancia's gauchos, singing as he polishes riding boots and tidies the tack room.

Staying at Los Potreros is not like staying in a hotel - it's more like a friend's house party. Robin Begg, his wife Teri and his brother Kevin treat their guests as friends. Good food and wine is a hallmark of the holiday, and most of the ingredients - beef, eggs, apricots, green gages, plums, apples, wild cherries and freshly baked breads - come from the homestead. If you want, you can even get involved in the life of the estancia, rounding up cattle, mending fences or branding.

The guest book is testament to the family's success: it is filled with glowing reports of days spent out riding, swimming in waterfalls and sipping drinks at sunset. There's such a great mix of gaucho lifestyle and luxurious living - hot baths, deep armchairs, roaring log fires, superb food and wine - it's very hard to leave.

FACT FILE

- Los Potreros is open all year round. A seven-night stay costs £1,050 per person when sharing full-board accommodation, plus all riding, drinks and return transfers from Cordoba airport. Flights to Cordoba with Aerolineas Argentinas (via Madrid and Buenos Aires) cost from £50.
- Contact In The Saddle, on 01299 272997, or see www.inthesaddle.com.