

Ride Across the Andes

Margaret McKiddie is a former UK National Endurance Champion. One of her horses - Bonnie Anne – has just been awarded a 7,200km Distance Award (competitive miles successfully ridden).

She tells us about her trip in December 2009.

As December is now the easiest time for me to fit in a holiday, the Southern Hemisphere is best.

This year I was tempted by the idea of riding across the Andes from Argentina into Chile and had a great time. The ride began at the Estancia Huechahue run by Jane Williams, English but married to an Argentinean.

The horses are mainly Criollos, home bred and about 15.2, strong and very forward going. The tack was very different to ours. I did learn to take it off but never to put it on. Bridle and headcollar were of rawhide with a curb bit but we were only supposed to use that to stop the horses, steering was strictly by neck reining. The saddle was built up from an underblanket with 2 pads of underfelt and leather, on top of which was placed the tree, all this then held firmly in place with a surcingle pulled tight through a series of rings. A large sheepskin was then placed on top and held in place with a second surcingle. Stirrups were conventional metal ones. The Canadian couple had brought their own Endurance stirrups (I never thought of that but actually did not miss them) and found the saddle remarkably comfortable.

There were nine of us in the group, seven British and a Canadian couple, who had been to the ranch several times before. The first afternoon and the following day we rode over the ranch, to get used to the horses and for Jane to assess our capabilities and also to enjoy some amazingly fast canters. The next four days were spent riding into the most impressive countryside dominated by snow covered Mount Lanin, a dormant volcano.



There were several long ascents through forests of monkey puzzle trees and some incredibly steep descents, in comparison to which Exmoor is like a picnic. I would have hesitated to take Bonnie down some of them, but the horses knew their business and were extremely footsure.



On the day that we crossed the slope of the volcano, the snow in some of the gulleys was so deep our guide decided it was not wise to ride across them nor even to lead the horses, so they were sent across on their own with we riders then making our way as best we could behind them. Great Fun!

At nights we always camped by a river so that there was water for the horses and those brave enough could have a swim, but the water was VERY cold. Food was cooked over a huge open fire. Most nights the campsite could be reached by a vehicle carrying our kit. On one night only we had to make do with what we could carry in our saddle bags and used the various layers of the saddle as a mattress (quite comfortable).



On Day 7 we had to leave our horses 2 miles before the border. Argentinian horses are not allowed into Chile without a long quarantine period. Chilean horses can go into Argentina but cannot return without going into quarantine!

After crossing the border we met our Chilean host, Loth, a colourful character with a red beard and long curly pony tail, long tasselled boots and vicious looking spurs which I never saw him use. We were allocated our new mounts, all of which were about 14.2. Much smaller

than those we had been on, but equally strong and forward going. The saddles were more conventional, but with a second girth behind the belly because of our very steep descents. Stirrups were leather bootee type, again very comfortable.

That first day we had to do quite a lot of road work but then steep down hill tracks through the woods and, to our surprise, beds in a house. An unexpected luxury. Our second day began with a long slow climb up followed by an even steeper, longer downhill through the rainforest to our lunch spot, where we could look back up in amazement at the steepness of the mountain we had come down. From there it was a more gentle down hill to Loth's Ranch where there was a final party evening before returning by vehicle to the Estancia in time for a final afternoon's ride with some very fast cantering round the ranch.

A truly remarkable trip!

