



# Argentinian adventure

**F**ollow the line of the valley and then look up. Then you'll see them.'

'Yes, yes, now I see them. Wow!'

Excitedly, the instructions were passed down the line of riders. Many pairs of eyes turned skywards and, inevitably, broad grins broke out across the riders' faces. The cause of all the animated activity was eight condors, sweeping effortlessly, almost nonchalantly, through the air against a background of bright blue cloudless sky. Condors have a massive nine-foot wing span yet they twisted, turned and soared with a grace that we humans can only envy and dream about.

However, the reason for the presence of the condors in such numbers was much less romantic. It's the calving season so

Riding sturdy sure-footed horses in the oldest mountain range in South America, with condors circling overhead, is an awesome experience, writes **LESLEY BAYLEY**

it's a good time to see the condors,' explained Kevin Begg, one of the owners, with his brother, Robin, of Estancia Los Potreros in Argentina.

Indeed, when we reached the spot where the condors were, there were several head of cattle, including a few gawky calves, grazing. As we approached, the condors landed on outcrops high above the valley, but it felt as if they were watching our every move. As soon as we moved off, the condors took to the air

again and resumed their circling above the cattle.

I stayed at Estancia Los Potreros in early November last year and it was my first visit to South America. I'm sure it won't be my last either! The flights are quite long, but I love flying so it certainly wasn't a hardship. There's a fantastic treat en route too – we flew to Santiago in Chile and then to Cordoba in Argentina, which meant that we flew over the snowy peaks of the Andes – awesome!





I travelled with Sue Maling, from specialist equestrian holiday company Unicorn Trails, and her husband Jon. We were met at Cordoba by a taxi company for the hour-long journey to the estancia. Initially, we were on normal roads but as we climbed higher into the oldest mountain range in South America, the Sierras Chicas, the roads became dirt highways and then stony tracks. At this point we all reflected that back home we'd only consider driving a 4x4 along these, yet the taxi was a Peugeot saloon, merrily bouncing along, with the driver neatly avoiding potholes and sudden changes in road level, with all the aplomb derived from years of experience.

We arrived at the secluded estancia in time for lunch, served on the veranda. The table was laden with plenty of home-cooked tasty food, accompanied by excellent locally-produced wine. Seated at the table we looked out across a stunning view, the breeze was deliciously warm and there was a great sense of tranquillity and peace, broken only by birdsong or

infectious laughter from the kitchen. All in all, a superb setting and a great introduction to the enjoyable times ahead.

Good food and wine are hallmarks of this holiday – the estancia is pretty self-sufficient supplying beef from its own herd, eggs from the chickens that wander around the homestead and delicious home-made bread.

'We have tried milking cows but it wasn't that successful as we usually need more than can be supplied,' explained Kevin, adding that the cows hadn't been particularly co-operative either. 'We don't grow our own veg, but go to town for locally-produced vegetables'.

Electricity is provided primarily from wind power and a little from solar power. It's a new addition to the estancia though, a pair of wind turbines being installed in the last couple of years.

It's a sensible way of utilising nature's bounty as the wind was ever present, although in varying guises. The estancia has a homely yet dignified ambience and I must admit I would have loved to have

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Riding out from the estancia; a gaucho and child; enjoying the freedom of being on horseback; a leisurely ride through a stream; a gaucho rounds up cattle for branding; heading back after a good day's riding**

visited when the only form of lighting was kerosene lamps.

Estancia Los Potreros is the kind of place that gets under your skin without you realising it – which is perhaps why the guest book is full of enthusiastic comments and promises to return. Which is what people do, but for a variety of reasons, as not all the guests are horse riding aficionados.

Although horse tourism is a major income stream for the estancia, non-riders also come to enjoy the food, to walk, watch birds, and go shooting or just to de-stress. It's not surprising that the estancia features in a book called *Heaven on Earth* about 'divine hotels around the world'. But staying at Los Potreros is not like staying in a hotel – it's more like being part of a house party at a good friend's wonderful home.

The rooms are furnished with antique beds, with traditional local rugs on the wooden floors. There is a feeling of authenticity, simplicity and style, with plenty of warmth thrown in (provided by





the attentive staff and the wonderful log fires). Members of the Begg family and a member of staff join the guests for each meal and look after everyone extremely well. In fact, the most difficult part of being on this holiday is pacing yourself, as far as food and drink goes.

If you are a rider though, there is a feast to enjoy. The estancia is surrounded by 6,000 acres of land with varying terrain, from wide open spaces, to winding tracks bounded by trees on either side, to wooded areas, to rocky climbs up steep mountain sides. Then there is the polo field where many people have their first taste of playing a chukka or two – a sport which is great fun and very addictive!

Plus, of course, this is the land of the gaucho – the great horsemen who have a long, proud tradition and attachment to their horses. The gauchos like their horses to be forward-going and to carry their heads quite high. They train the horses to stop at the lightest touch on the rein and to go anywhere and do any job without hesitation. Jose, one of the gauchos who rode out with us most days, was amazing to watch – he was as happy working cattle as he was leading guests on rides, when

often he would quietly break into song. His singing voice and talent for emotive story-telling was proved later in the week – before dinner one night we were treated to traditional music and dance. Jose sang, danced and also recited a gaucho's poem – despite the language barriers there was no doubt about the emotion and love a gaucho feels for his horse.

The riding style is different, but can soon be picked up. For English-style riders the major contrast is that the horses respond to neck reining and if you try to use the reins as you would normally, the horses just do not understand. However, once you get this sorted in your head, the horses are very responsive, being just as easy to stop as they are to get moving. One practice which all of us loved was the habit of having sheepskins over the saddles – these were just so comfy.

Each day we rode twice, after breakfast until lunchtime, then a break

“Although I rode several different horses, I did have a special place in my heart for a gelding called Barry”

#### DINING AL FRESCO:

Eating at the estancia was a communal event that often took place on the verandah and included barbecued locally-produced meat.

POLO POWER: After a little instruction guests can enjoy a chukka or two

during the heat of the day, before enjoying a late afternoon/early evening ride. The open landscape, with large tufts of paja brava grass, was quite unlike anything I'd ever seen before. We had some fantastic canters across this landscape though, with the horses being foot-sure and confident.

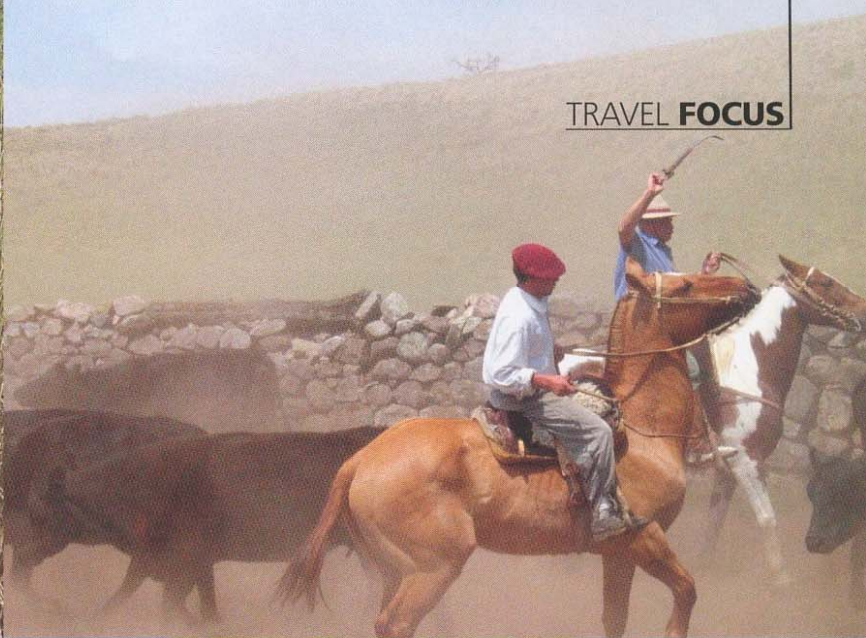
Although I rode several different horses, all of which were fun, I did have a special place in my heart for a Paso Peruano gelding called Barry. He was much smaller than my normal mounts, but he had attitude and character in great abundance.

Barry did not believe it was worth being on a ride unless he was at the front – even when we had a pit stop and he appeared to be snatching a few minutes to doze, he instinctively knew when Jose made a move. Without me even asking, we'd be right there behind Jose, ready to lead the next canter.

Woe betide any other horse that tried to sneak in before him – the ears would indignantly flash back and Barry would muscle in, putting any miscreant in their rightful place with just a small adjustment of his body position.

I spent most of my time on him





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: White cactus flower; rounding up the cattle; a verberna; riding out to explore the dramatic scenery

enjoying his comfortable paces and chucking away at his wonderful sense of self.

With so much land to ride over, each day's riding was a revelation. One morning we rode over to the estancia where Kevin and Robin were brought up. It wasn't until we were in the garden of the estancia that we realised there was a building there. Kevin explained that his grandfather built the estancia and that it was designed around one feature – the view. Once inside the house Kevin drew back the curtains at one window to reveal a breathtaking panorama – one that sadly, his grandfather did not live to savour, dying shortly after the house was completed.

There's a beautiful garden at this estancia, which is looked after by a Chilean man who is in his 80s, but does not know how old he actually is. The man has no papers and therefore cannot get a pension – so he is reliant upon the kindness of the Beggs, who provide him with a home and income in exchange for his gardening skills.

Something that sets a holiday at Los Potreros apart from any other trip is that you have the opportunity to learn about another culture, without actually realising that you are doing so. Both Kevin and Robin answer guests' questions frankly, discussing everything from how

agriculture operates to the fact that as the police in Argentina are some of the lowest-paid workers, corruption is inevitably present.

Some aspects of Argentinian life can be frustrating, as Kevin explained. On the run-up to the last election, the government suddenly started to build a road through the Beggs' land, without any prior notice or consultation. Once the election was won, work on the road stopped and will probably not recommence until the next election.

Many people have moved out of the countryside to find work in the towns. In their area, the Beggs are major employers and it's a tribute to them that a lot of the staff have been with the family for many years. They support the community in a number of ways – for instance, the sale of polo shirts to guests produces cash for the local school. The Beggs paid for electricity to be put into the school and for an oven to be built in the school grounds so that the children could learn to cook.

We rode to the school one day – as two of the four children currently at the school do every day. Pupil numbers can vary, but there is just one teacher and her charges can range from five to 13 years.

On another occasion, we rode to the cattle station where some of the animals had been herded together so that they could be vaccinated.

The noise was ear-splitting as the calves had been separated from their mothers and the dust raised by the fast-moving cattle and horses assaulted our eyes. The gauchos skilfully guided their horses, matching the movements of the cattle so that they could herd them into the crush. Here, five at a time, the cattle were checked and vaccinated.

The brochure for Los Potreros does promise a 'true insight into rural life in Argentina' and you do get exactly this. It's much more than a holiday, it's an experience you should not miss.

It all came to an end far too quickly and instead of sitting on our horses looking down, from our vantage point in the mountains, across the pampas to Cordoba, we were driving to the airport. Getting on to that plane was difficult. 🌿