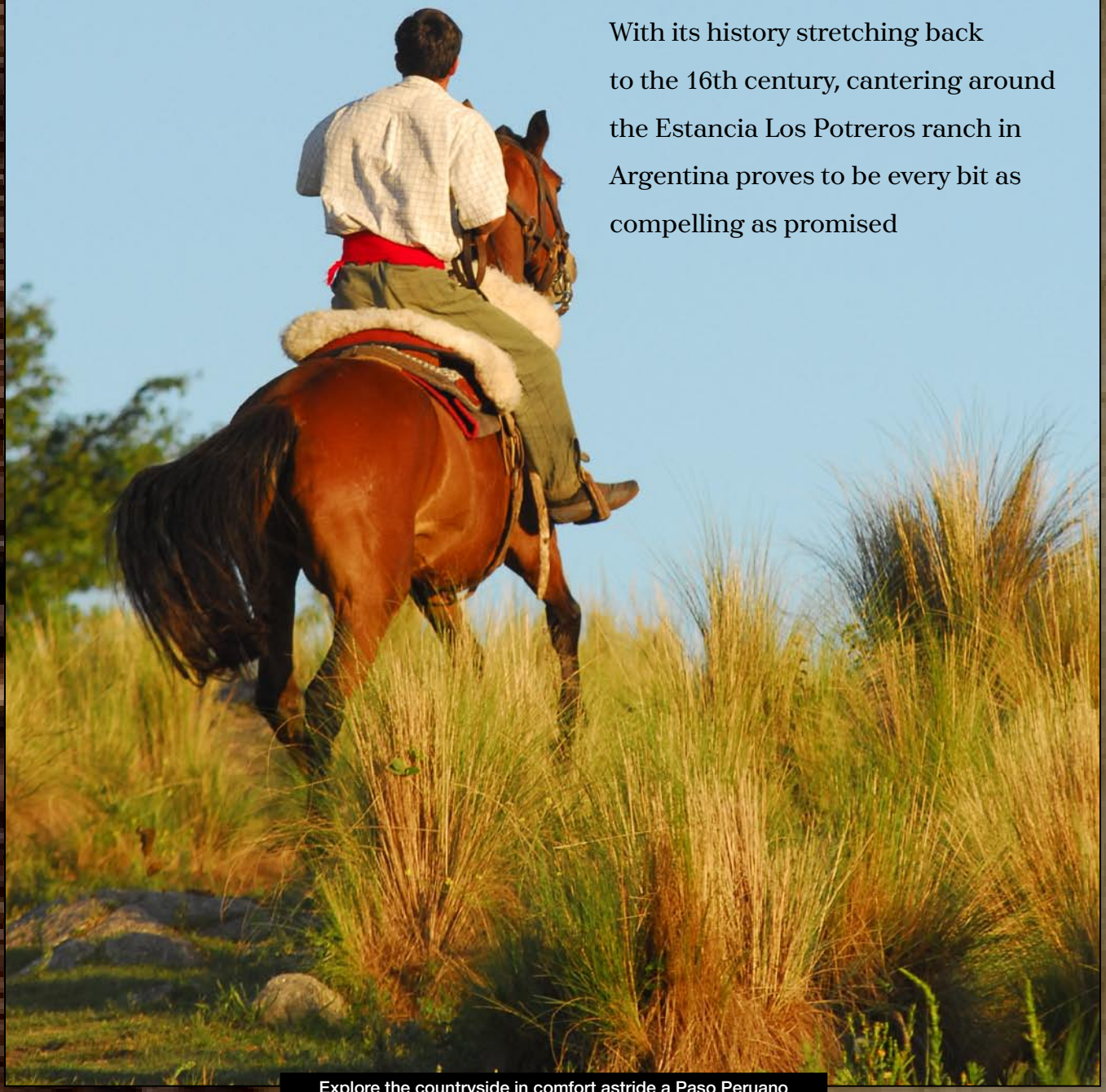
BACK

to the wild

With its history stretching back to the 16th century, cantering around the Estancia Los Potreros ranch in Argentina proves to be every bit as compelling as promised



Explore the countryside in comfort astride a Paso Peruano

GUESTS ... COME TO ENJOY THE VAST OPEN SPACES, ABSORB THE GAUCHO LIFESTYLE, AND, OF COURSE, 'TO RIDE LIKE AN ARGENTINE'

The ground is rocky underfoot, but I am gliding across the golden tussocks as effortlessly as a condor riding the thermals above. It's the smoothest of flights, a seamless takeoff, and no sign of turbulence ahead. Which is odd, considering I am on the back of a horse, not something usually associated with extreme comfort.

"It's like being upgraded from economy to first class," my host, Louisa Begg, had warned as I swung my leg into the sheepskin-covered military saddle. "And you know once that happens, there's no turning back."

This is modern ranch but it always has an eye on its past

Now it's too late. My equestrian future has been forever altered, thanks to a 20-year-old gelding named Negro El Once, or Black 11. Named after the luckiest of numbers in Argentina, this handsome steed is a fine example of a Paso Peruano, or Peruvian Paso, a rare breed renowned for its fifth gait. Most horses have four standard gaits: walk, trot, canter and gallop. The Paso Peruano is one of just a handful of breeds that possess an extra gear, a fast amble that slots in between the walk and trot. Although a lateral, four-beat motion like a walk, the *paso*, delivered with a distinctive flick of the foreleg, is an entirely natural action that is not only incredibly smooth, but as speedy and exhilarating as a canter.

This journey to equestrian heaven is taking place at Estancia Los Potreros, a rambling 2,600ha ranch in the windswept Sierra Chicas overlooking the city of Cordoba, Argentina. Owned by the Anglo-Argentine Begg family, who settled in these hills a century ago, this cattle and stud farm also welcomes international guests, who come to enjoy the vast open spaces, absorb the gaucho lifestyle, and, of course, to "ride like an Argentine".

The *estancia* ('ranch') itself oozes history, dating back to 1574 when Jesuit priests enslaved the indigenous people in order to get them to construct the distinctive dry-stone fences that snake across the landscape. In those days, the land was used to breed pack mules for the Bolivian salt mines, the beasts kept within the stone *potreros*, or enclosures, that leant their name to the property.

The whitewashed adobe walls and sagging timber beams of the 300-year-old homestead evoke a turbulent time when continents collided in the name of religion; but it's the personal touches in the sitting and dining rooms – old photographs, antique furniture, local textiles and original oil paintings – that bring the history of the estancia to life.

A family home for four generations, brothers Robin and Kevin Begg opened its doors to paying guests in 2001, just as the economy of Argentina was plummeting. Surviving continuing internal troubles and a wave of subsequent global crises, they defied the odds to create one of the most highly regarded ranch experiences in the country.

This is due largely to the reputation of their horses: around 150 home-bred Paso Peruanos and their cow pony Criollo counterparts. Paddock-dwelling, grass-fed and unpampered, these are unlikely equine superstars and are working horses ridden by gauchos overseeing a herd of Aberdeen-Angus breeding cattle. Having a real job keeps these ponies on their toes, however, and under saddle, every one is impeccably behaved, responsive and unflappable. For experienced riders, they are a revelation; for novices, the ultimate confidence builders.

But it's not just world-class riding that makes Estancia Los Potreros unique. With a maximum of 12 guests, it offers an intimate rural ➤

HAVING A REAL JOB KEEPS THESE PONIES ON THEIR TOES

The main role of the working horses on Estancia Los Potreros is to work with the Aberdeen-Angus cattle

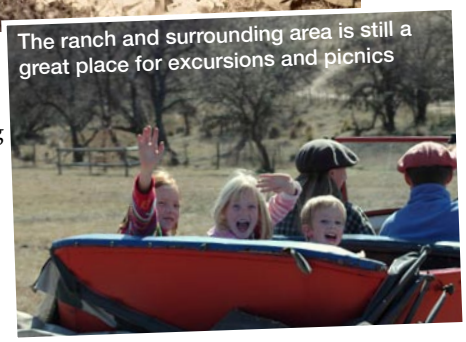
Visitors have the opportunity of experiencing first hand the full gamut of tasks on a working ranch, as well as taking in some wonderful views

Accommodation at Estancia Los Potreros is comfortable rather than luxurious while the area has interesting flora and fauna

LIKE STAYING AT A FRIEND'S COUNTRY RETREAT, WITH EVERY

experience, with gourmet meals, personal service and a relaxed ambience. It's a little like staying at a wealthy friend's country retreat, with every nicety at your disposal including en suite bathrooms, fluffy robes, wood-burning stoves, and a turn-down service complete with hot water bottle tucked under the blankets.

The ranch and surrounding area is still a great place for excursions and picnics

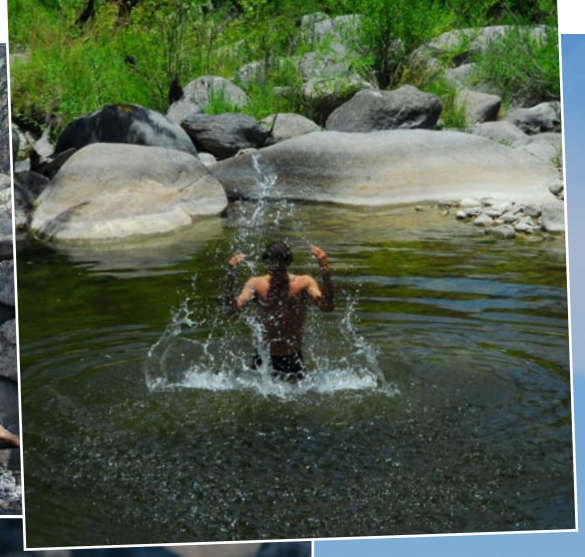


The key to success, Kevin Begg tells me over a glass of the estancia's own label, Malbec, is keeping it real, allowing activities to follow the natural rhythm of estancia life. During branding season, for instance, guests ride to the cattle yards, where they participate in the action before partying with the gauchos at the end of a dirty day's work.

During my visit, it's foaling season; our ventures into distant hillsides include bringing in youngsters each evening for protection against pumas, checking on heavily pregnant mares and cooing over newborn babies, still wobbly on spindly legs. As we ride, Kevin and his English wife, Louisa, share their passion for the land, pointing out native birds, explaining local traditions, and, of course, imparting knowledge about their horses. While exploring the ranch on horseback is an essential part of the experience, guest itineraries are flexible and can be tailored to individual requests. Between sumptuous feasts, wine tastings and lazing in the sunshine by the swimming pool, there are a range of self-guided walks available, with rock pools and waterfalls providing perfect picnic locations. This is also a bird-watching paradise, with enthusiasts scouring the skies for birds of prey and carrion, including the majestic condor. There are art lessons and materials available for those inspired by the moody scenery, while history lovers can take the Jesuit trail, visiting baroque churches and estancias dotted around the Cordoba region. In addition, there are three golf courses within an hour's drive from the estancia.

By far the most popular activity, however, is another local tradition: polo. With the best players in the world from Argentina, this physical game borders on a national obsession, making it the ultimate place to learn. "We don't teach polo here, we play polo," Kevin Begg says as we size up the ranch's competition-size pitch. "You could pay AUD150 an hour to learn to play in Australia and spend the first ten lessons sitting on a wooden horse. But here, the idea is to get you into a game within an hour. It's all about having fun – just get out there and do it!"

The basic rules to polo, Kevin emphasises, involve safety – don't hurt yourself, don't hurt your horse and don't hurt other



Straight from an exhausting horse ride into the cool, refreshing water, before finishing the day with traditional local or European fare

NICETY AT YOUR DISPOSAL

players. Considering during my previous attempt at riding a polo pony I ended up biting the dust, it's Rule Number One that resonates the loudest and I am more than a little nervous as I mount my hogged-maned, plaited-tailed Criollo to take my first clumsy swing at the ball. My mare's name is Polera, meaning Polo Girl. I'm reassured that someone knows what they are doing, because as I make my way up the field, hacking at the ball, it's obvious I don't have a clue. Not exactly one for eye-hand coordination, I connect perhaps 50 per cent of the time, even less when we gather speed, first trotting, then cantering tentatively up the pitch. Fortunately, I'm not alone in my embarrassment. New Swedish guide, Hedder, is having her first attempt at the game, while one of her workmates, Holly, hailing from the UK, is quite an expert, having played the week before. After half an hour of fumbling around, Kevin announces it's game on: the two staff girls and Louisa versus head gaucho, Luis, Kevin and myself.

Our team strategy is simple: I am to ride ahead, go for the ball, and if I miss, simply continue forward. Luis and Kevin will cover my mistakes and shoot the ball to me. Which is exactly what happens – I ride, I aim, I miss … while behind me Luis whacks a perfect pass in my direction, hollering, "Julia, Julia, your ball – *avanzar*, go!" With the goal-line open before me I aim, swing … and miss again. Kevin taps the ball forward, which stops just before the line, allowing me to ride in triumphantly and score! Clearly, it's "be nice to guest time" … and as Kevin points out, it's all about clients having a positive experience. Come their annual polo weeks, however, where guests play every day culminating in a final tournament, it's "take no prisoners – then we play for real!" Despite my feeble attempts, I find the experience totally exhilarating; and I dismount half an hour later trembling with adrenaline and joy. I can't help but feel I have just developed an addiction, and an expensive one at that. I fear my only choice now is to move to Argentina, and spend my life travelling first class – on the back of some of the finest horses in the world.

Julie Miller

PHOTOS ASTRID HARRISSON (5), COURTESY ESTANCIA LOS POTREROS (10)