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COVER STORY

WHERE PATAGONIA

HOOF IT: IT'S THE LAST GAUCHOS

Craig Tansley joins the true cowboys for an adventure on horseback through the most remote and often rugged parts of Patagonia.

"Courage is being scared to death - and saddling up anyway..." - John Wayne

No one's ever used the word cowboy to describe me - I've never had a horse riding lesson nor owned a pair of Levis in my life - and yet here I am in Patagonia in chaps. They'd arrived by post from Horseland the week before. Anxious to test the fit, I'd pulled them on over board shorts, donned my new black felt cowboy hat, YouTubed the Eagles' *Desperado* ("Desperado, Why don't you come to your senses, You've been out riding fences for so long now") and posed bow-legged in front of the mirror.

I feel only slightly less ridiculous here at San Martin de los Andes Airport - my chaps have been in place since I left my hotel room in Buenos Aires this morning - but time is of the essence; the moment our driver outside drops us off, my eight-day/seven-night horse safari across Patagonia begins.

I'll be in the saddle for up to eight hours a day - chaps will ease the leg chafing; but nothing, I'm warned, will save my backside. We make our way south by road through the heart of Argentina's pretty Lake District, the Andes on my right, the huge glacial lakes of Argentina's oldest national park - Nahuel Huapi - to my left.

This safari by horseback will take us through 12,000 hectares of privately-owned land bordering Nahuel Huapi, and the 400,000 hectare Lanin National Park. We're deposited beside an almighty lake - under this big, blue Patagonian sky and, without a hint of breeze, the lake's surface reflects the forests and snow-flecked mountains fringing it - then we're loaded aboard a speedboat.

As we ease onto a pebbled beach flanked by ancient beech forest, I see horses saddled, ready to ride. These Criollo are the native horse of the Argentinian pampas, renowned for their sure-footedness and stamina - one was once ridden from here to New York, a three-year saga of 22,000 kilometres, across the Andes, the world's driest desert, and the Amazon.

I imagine mine will have a fetching Spanish name, one which suggests courage, strength ... or perhaps an element of unpredictability and danger. No, I get Pork Chop.

Left: There's no way to get closer to the world's largest flying bird, the Andean condor. Opposite page, from the top: Rivers fed by glaciers prove a challenge to riders wishing to remain dry; map of the trail. PHOTOS: ALICE GIPPS/ THE CLASSIC SAFARI COMPANY



LESSONS FROM A GAUCHO PIN-UP

Jakob von Plessen is a modern-day gaucho (traditional Argentinian cowboy) with Argentinian, French and Austrian heritage, and Johnny Depp's cheekbones. When I paraded in the mirror the morning my chaps arrived, it was von Plessen I saw staring back. He wears the loose trousers - bombachas - favoured by gauchos and has a dagger (facon) tucked into his belt. His beret is pushed to the side; while it casts scarcely a hint of shade onto his face, it looks damn cool. He arrives so gracefully on horseback it's as if he's levitating. His ride - I imagine - is called Diablo (Devil). If it isn't, it ought to be.

Von Plessen was practically raised by horses on these Argentinian pampas; when he embarked on a university career in veterinary science, a local gaucho coerced him to abandon his studies and build a life around riding horses instead. So at 18 he left for Kenya to work for a horse riding safari company. He brought the concept back to Patagonia, establishing Jakotango Riding Safaris.

"I wanted to show people the untouched side of Patagonia," he tells me as I climb aboard my horse. "This is one of the remotest areas in all Argentina, in all of South America. I wanted to show people how gauchos live in this wilderness."

I'm beside him on the first leg of our journey, hoping like hell his style rubs off. We ride through paths within a conifer forest where branches scratch at our faces - till we reach a wide-open glacial valley. We trot between glacier-fed rivers where our horses sink to their bellies and I have to lift my legs high out of the stirrups to keep my boots dry.

We're surrounded on all sides by 1000-metre high volcanic ridgelines which filter the afternoon sun. This region was discovered by Spanish conquistadors who rode across the Andes looking for the mythical City of the Caesars (Trapalanda) - said to be full of gold, silver and diamonds.

Anyone who discovered it would ride away rich. Herds of red deer and wild horses feed on the rich green grass of the plain, and when the sun finds a gap in the escarpments everything looks so golden that this might indeed be Trapalanda. When von Plessen's sure we're ready, he leads us into a canter.

And while I hardly float through the air as he does - indeed, it's all I can do just to hold on - this is my cowboy movie playing out in real time (and guess who's starring in it?). My heart beats so fast it's all I can hear, and the frantic drum beat that is my horse's hooves.

I can't fathom this high, I feel like screaming out loud - I know when I analyse

this moment later, I won't be able to recreate it in my mind - so I go with it now for all it's worth, because right now I'm not sure anything will ever feel quite so good again.

"We travel to become young fools again ... to slow time down and get taken in," Pico Iyer writes in his essay, *Why We Travel*. Or maybe cowboy film star Will Rogers puts it more succinctly: "A man that don't love a horse, there is something the matter with him."

A PLACE TO LAY YOUR HEAD

It doesn't get dark till 10pm this deep into

summer, so when we make camp, I still have hours of dusk in which to stare open-mouthed at the setting. Home is a set of rustic timber cabins von Plessen built beside a bend in a slow-flowing river.

This is all part of a privately owned estancia (cattle ranch) owned by three brothers, passed down through generations. Gauchos tend to cattle that feed across the property. Some of my riding companions head straight to the water's edge with fishing rods - there's no better fly fishing anywhere on earth - but I find it takes all my concentration just to look at my surroundings.

Our chef, Oscar, has spent an entire afternoon preparing an obscene amount of beef to be cooked on a grill he balances on coals in an open-air fireplace. It's as good a place as any to sit in these last moments of daylight. When it fades out, the night sky is impossibly clear - beaming planets shine down, auroras of tiny star grains sparkle and pint-sized blinking stars shoot across the sky.

When it's too brisk, we go inside a hut where lamb's wool covers seats set beside an open log fire, and bottles of local malbec adorn the walls, beside stag skulls. I wonder if Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid had it so good when they built their ranch 200 kilometres-or-so south of here, after fleeing the US by ship. They raised 300 cattle, 1500 sheep and 28 horses. Cassidy wrote to a friend back home: "I like this part of the world so much I think I've settled down for good."

They were, however, soon back at what they did best: robbing banks, travelling back and forth across these treacherous mountain passes for their next payday. They made a full return to banditry, then died for it in Bolivia in 1908. If only they'd found contentment out here in this dreamy landscape, they might have lived to be old men, fat on barbecue and local lager.



'I IMAGINE MY HORSE WILL HAVE A FETCHING SPANISH NAME ... NO, I GET PORK CHOP.'

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FROM PAGE 24

THE PASS OF TEARS

You don't have to be an experienced rider here; just don't be scared of heights. While my dreams of cowboy grandeur are fulfilled on jaunty sprints across the steppe, the reality is almost all the work on this safari is done by your horse.

"Think of Pork Chop as a big woolly armchair," co-host Daisy Soames tells me. "Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

What the Criollo horse can do better than any other is balance on mountain tops. Don't even think about steering it. Van Plessen built the trails we'll ride today. He looked out from the valley below and plotted a course across the mountain that he dubbed the Pass of Tears, after discovering it brought some guests undone. It's almost impossibly steep just getting to it through the conifers, but Pork Chop finds a low gear and powers up slopes no horse ought to.

We pass the tree line, and trudge across a ridgeline of volcanic ash that's as crumbly underfoot as sand. Up here, I can see out to enormous blue lakes and mountain passes that continue on to the Andes. There's not another person, nor homestead, in sight.

Here, cows scramble beyond the steppe to freedom, with \$1000 bounties on their heads. An Andean condor circles above me in the thermals; it's the largest flying bird in the world, with a wing span of 3½ metres. Charles Darwin wrote that he had watched one flying for 30 minutes without seeing it

once flap its wings. As I stand on top of a rocky outcrop high in the mountains, the condor flies 20 metres above. "I've never seen one this close," van Plessen says.

As we journey further along the pass, my horse steps blindly into thin air, trusting its strength to stop us sliding hundreds of metres. It's as if I'm riding through ski-fields on horseback – double-black diamond slopes fall away below us on both sides. The wind's building now, whistling along the ridgeline.

"Some people need whiskey to get them through," van Plessen tells me. "But all you need is trust, these horses won't fall."

DON'T TOUCH HIS HORSE

There are rest days when we ease our hindquarters with strolls and lethargic yoga sessions (did John Wayne know half-pigeon is a great hip-opener?) and long sessions on the verandah of the cabin, where the bar is. But we can't stay long ... for Filipe Chandia, one of Argentina's most authentic gauchos, awaits.

No one is romanticised in Argentina quite like the gaucho; though today, there are few genuine gauchos left. These cowboys of the Pampas flourished in the 18th century, when their outlaw tendencies and superior animal-handling skills made them rich, mustering livestock across Patagonia.

By the late 19th century, however, livestock were mostly fenced into huge estancias, and gauchos became mere farmhands. The industrial revolution reduced their purpose even more, and many left for cities. The gaucho became an almost

mythical figure and today most gauchos work in tourism.

Yesterday, von Plessen sniffed at the air and warned that rain ... perhaps even snow ... was coming. So we start our ascent to the heavens in ponchos. This trail takes us through knee-deep snow, among Jurassic beech forest and along ridgelines where Pork Chop clings onto mountains with nothing but good genetics holding him there.

Chandia has no way to hear a message from us and even though we're forced by the weather to change our path, he has a gaucho's sixth sense of navigation. He's waiting for us where we must plot a course through snow. Surrounded by his three mangy dogs, he rides a stout pony which looks as tough as a mule. We stop for lunch and I pat his ride. "Don't ever touch a gaucho's horse," von Plessen warns me.

Chandia's orange beret makes him look quite dandy; but don't let appearances fool you: In *Cowboys of the Americas* Richard A. Slattery declares gauchos, "strong, silent types; proud and capable of violence when provoked". Chandia's facon is tucked into his bombachas; and his rebenque (leather whip) protrudes from his saddlebag.

Chandia lives on a homestead two hours' ride from the nearest estancia. Many gauchos have embraced modernity, but Chandia is still living in 1850. We'll be staying with him there, in his lonely world; just a five-hour ride from here through the wilderness, on trails etched onto the sides of mountains.

From left: Riding the Pass of Tears is like skiing on horseback; a modern-day gaucho. PHOTOS: THE CLASSIC SAFARI COMPANY/ ALICE GIPPS

‘WE STOP FOR LUNCH AND I PAT HIS RIDE. “DON’T EVER TOUCH A GAUCHO’S HORSE,” VON PLESSÉN WARNS ME.’

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FIVE MORE ADVENTURES IN PATAGONIA WORTH TRYING

THE W HIKE, TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK

Take one of the world's most famous hikes between mountains and deep blue glaciers within Patagonia's most famous park. Keep your eyes open for the elusive puma, and to the skies for the Andean Condor.

FLY FISHING

New Zealand may argue, but there's no better place on earth for fly fishing than Patagonia – especially Argentina's Lake District, where anglers must catch-and-release to ensure rivers and lakes teem with rainbow and brown trout.

WHALE WATCHING

Watch Southern Right whales and their calves play 10 metres from where you stand on the shoreline at one of the world's premier whale-watching destinations, Puerto Madryn. Its enclosed waters provide prime breeding zones between June and December.

DIVING

You'll want a thick wetsuit, but Argentina's diving capital, Peninsula Valdes, is worth the brain freeze. Its World Heritage listing protects the animals who come here. Dive with Southern Right whales, elephant

seals who calve in October, sea lions, penguins and orca.

ROCK CLIMBING

El Chalten is the epicentre of Patagonian climbing – not just because it's every climber's dream, with routes to suit novices, and multi-day climbing routes for crazies; but because the village of hostels and bars is completely rock-climbing crazy.

The beautiful Andes mountain range and lake at Torres del Paine National Park in Chile. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK



FROM PAGE 26

LIFE LESSONS

“When castrating a horse, do it on a full moon ... they bleed less. When castrating a cat, don’t worry about the moon. When cooking a lamb on a crucifix, do it on an angle so its fat melts onto everything.”

These are life lessons I learn from Chandia, who lives in a fairytale. On arrival at his homestead, we’re joined by two lambs, Dolly and Enzo, who follow us wherever we go. There’s no electricity, nor Wi-Fi, but showers are hot, courtesy of burning logs. Light at night comes with thanks to the modern wonder of kerosene (and candles), while water is pumped throughout the property only if Chandia’s wife, Marta, rides a generator with a bike pedal for 40 minutes each day. Here, foals are the target of hungry jaguars, horses are broken in in a single day, and generations of gauchos were born under trees (Chandia shows me where his mother was born at the back of the property).

This land has been in Chandia’s family for four generations; and barely a thing has changed, except for the presence of visitors like us. Van Plessen used to bring his guests for lunch; when they kept telling him that being here was the best part of the ride, he worked with Chandia to build two bathrooms, and to erect thick canvas tents beside the barn where Marta prepares meals. Sheepdog pups play on thick green grass beside where I lie attempting to stretch life back into my hips, and an enormous glacial lake is a short stroll away (on the other side of the lake, in a different universe, Alejandro Inarrritu and Leonardo DiCaprio filmed some of *The Revenant*).

After 22 hours of horse riding in four days I’m grateful for this break – an entire afternoon spent eating barbecued lamb on blankets in Chandia’s backyard among the wildflowers, beneath the mountain ranges. In the evening – when the temperature drops dramatically – we sit inside an ancient barn heated by wood fire, eating home-made gnocchi with wild mushrooms fresh-picked from the mountainside.

Filipe, Marta and daughter Miriam spend entire winters in this barn, shut off from the world. Filipe uses the time to finesse his facon skills, making reins, bridles and saddles to use once winter breaks.

THE END IS NIGH

It’s only now, with the end in sight, that I realise I haven’t seen another person in a week. Yesterday, Chandia led us up a trail behind his home. We rode up through beech forest, and with the light fading, fought our way out of the trees onto a flat rock platform high in the sky. From there we could see in every direction: back to the mountains we’d crossed, forward to the Andes we hadn’t, and below our feet, the 300-metre-deep,



From the top: Gaucho Felipe Chandia’s wife, Marta, prepares hand-made pasta for guests; every horse ride boasts spectacular lake views. PHOTOS: THE CLASSIC SAFARI COMPANY/ALICE GIPPS

Lake Traful. We stayed until sunset stained the mountains mauve. “[Chandia] says only about 20 people have ever seen this,” Daisy Soames tells me.

This morning we’re leaving by boat; and we have no words. Across Lake Traful, the tiny settlement of Villa Traful feels like a mega-city with its street lights and bitumen roads (there’s actually little more here than a campground and a fuel station).

In a modern world colonised by travellers, and accessible by airline, this journey allows us to disappear – at least for a little while – into the nooks and the crannies that nobody knows, where nobody goes.

TRIP NOTES

FLY

Fly to Buenos Aires with LATAM Airlines via Santiago, then fly to San Martin with Aerolineas Argentinas, and back from Bariloche. See latam.com, aerolineas.com

RIDE

The seven-night Jakotango Patagonian Trail starts from \$7800 a person, twin-share (excluding air fares), and operates from late November to March (maximum of eight in a group). Most riders fly into and out of Buenos Aires for a few days of food and culture. It’s recommended participants are at least beginner intermediate riders – though all levels are catered for. Phone 1300 130 218. See classicsafaricompany.com.au

MORE

traveller.com.au/argentina

Craig Tansley travelled as guest of the Classic Safari Company.

FIVE MORE HORSE RIDE SAFARIS WORTH TAKING

NAMIBIA

Take an 11-day ride through the Namib Desert in Namibia, across the region’s ochre-coloured dunes, eerie moonscape and desolate beaches of the Atlantic Coast, dodging wildlife along the way. Keen riders should consider the 31-day Namibian Epic Safari ride.

SPAIN

Want your riding to come with plenty of wine, cheese and long lunches? Take a ride through (southern) Spain’s Andalusia region with one of Australia’s highest-rated polo players, Andrew Williams. Canter into provincial towns in time for tapas.

BOTSWANA

Ride with wild game through one of southern Africa’s densest wildlife population zones, the Okavango Delta. You’ll ride between four and six hours a day, crossing plains and riding through rivers to sleep in treehouses and safari tents within your own private concession of the Delta.

KENYA

Ride across the famed savannas and acacia woodlands of Kenya’s Masai Mara region on a six-, seven- or eight-night riding safari. You’ll ride among lions, leopards, elephants and hippos, and traditional Masai herders.

INDIA

Traverse some of the remotest regions in all of India, while bringing help to children, on a relief ride. Accompanying you on the ride will be dentists, eye specialists and paediatric doctors. Start from Delhi and take one of two area options, Pushkar or Khimsar.

See classicsafaricompany.com.au/journeys/riding-safaris

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