

## Riding with the gauchos of Corrientes

Pushed by a gaucho on horseback, the herd of horses gallops across the pasture. The rumbling of their pounding hooves grows louder as they approach the corral. Once inside, after blowing through their nostrils and nickering to each other for a few minutes, they quickly settle down. Another gaucho stretches a rope between two trees. The horses know the drill. They rapidly line up with their chest against the rope. One by one, the ones that will be ridden that day are bridled before being led out of the corral to be saddled.

This is how each day starts on the estancia, a 2000 ha spread located in the Province of Corrientes, about 600 kilometers north of Buenos Aires. The region is considered the «wetlands» of Argentina, where jaguars and caimans roam. It is also known for producing some of the best horsemen and gauchos in the country. They are the real deal. This is where I wanted to be. Living and riding horses in Wyoming for many years, my interest lies mainly in cattle work performed ranch style. With 2000 head of cattle and 130 horses to care for on the estancia, we should have plenty to do.



I had arrived the night before after an eight hour bus ride from Buenos Aires. Despite the early hour (4:30 am), Fernando, the owner of the estancia, was there to greet me at the bus station. His big smile and warm welcome put me at ease right away. Half an hour later, we arrived at the estancia and Fernando showed me to my room.

Now, after a few more hours of rest, I meet the rest of the group. There is Linda and Andrew, a British couple who decided to return for the second year in a row, and Nicolas, a teacher from Switzerland. Fernando soon joins us. Breakfast is served outside, on a covered porch. The Argentine breakfast is what I'd call a «large continental» breakfast. It includes stronger European style coffee, croissants, toasts, jam, ham and cheese, yogurt, fruit salad and fruit juice. Fernando gives us the different options for the day. We'll soon learn that every morning, there is an «option A» and an «option B». «Option A», he starts, «is to gather all the cattle located in the woods a couple of miles away, and to bring them back to the corrals where they'll be sorted and treated for ticks.» «Option B», he continues, «is to ride through cattle in another pasture to identify the calves that need to be doctored and rope them on the spot.» We unanimously opt for option A, leaving option B for the afternoon.



After breakfast, we meet by the tack room where the horses are tied, already saddled. Saddling a horse gaucho style is very different than anything I had experienced before. Several layers composed of a pad and several blankets are placed on the horse's back in a very specific order, then comes the saddle itself, tightly cinched. Over the saddle comes a thick sheep skin, covered by a soft and thin capybara skin. A wide cinch running across the seat secures everything on the horse's back. I meet my horse, Capitan, an eight year old stallion, very well mannered and very well trained. All the horses are born and raised on the estancia and trained by the gauchos. «It is essential for our work that we know well all of our horses», states Fernando.

We follow a shady lane bordered by tall eucalyptus. At the end is the gate leading to a large pasture where we all fan out. I am pleased to notice that there is no nose to tail riding on the estancia. In fact, riders are given a lot of freedom, according to each rider's ability. Once we reach the woods, located at the other end of the pasture, we separate into two groups in order to be more efficient. With two of the gauchos, we canter to the opposite end of the wooded area while the rest of the group follows Fernando. As we ride through the timber, we push whatever cows we find out of the woods. About half way to the corrals, the two herds join to become one. The cattle breed is a cross between Angus, Hereford and Brahma, the latter making them more resilient to the heat.

As we approach the corrals, Linda canters ahead to open the gate. We take turns to sort the cows that will be treated and push them into an adjacent corral. Then, one small bunch at a time, we urge them to the «swimming pool», a long and narrow concrete tub filled with water and a chemical solution that kills the ticks. The cows enter on one end, swim the whole length and come out at the other end by climbing a few stair steps. Once all the cows have been treated, we turn them back out to pasture and head back to the estancia for lunch.

The estancia is very charming and typical of the region. It is composed of several low buildings, each surrounded by a red tile walkway protected by an overhang. Palm trees dot the grounds and sway in the gentle tropical breeze. The hearty lunch is also served outside on the porch. Argentina being a latin country, like Spain or Mexico, the early afternoon following lunch calls for relaxation. Some choose to take a nap, the traditional «siesta». I choose to relax by the pool, recently filled with water for the summer season. Linda plops herself in the hammock with a book.

Two hours later, we meet again by the tackroom. «There is a slight change of plans», Fernando announces. «Some horses went into the wrong pasture. We need to bring them back to where they belong. After that, we'll go doctor the calves.» We find the culprits in a nearby pasture. The five horses suddenly lift their heads as we approach and take off...in the wrong direction. At a dead run, one of the gauchos heads them off and turns them back. Resigned, the horses settle into a canter and we follow at a short distance, with a rider on each flank to avoid any other escape.



After this interlude, we head back to the pasture where some calves need to be doctored. «Some maggots enter through the umbilical cord after the calves are born, and we need to flush them out. If we don't, it can create an infection», Fernando explains. A gaucho spots one of the calves and takes off after it while twirling his loop above his head. At a dead run, the gaucho releases his loop which softly settles around the calf's neck. The gaucho then dismounts to treat it. One after the other, each calf is treated. I am offered to try. Although much slower than the gauchos, I manage to catch two calves in a row. It must have been my lucky day.

The sun is casting long shadows and sheds a golden glow on the pampa by the time we head back to the estancia. A flock of herons takes flight across the pink sky. Suddenly, Linda spots a small lagoon that was formed by a recent rain. We all have the same idea...Being playful, the gauchos splash across the water at a gallop. We, of course, follow their example and come out of it slightly wet but laughing.

After unsaddling our horses we hose them down to cool them off and release them into the pasture for the night. Tomorrow, we'll be ready again for «option A» and «option B» and a day of riding across the pampa with the gauchos of Corrientes.



Trip report by Guy de Galard, 2023

Further information "Esquina Gaucho Week":  
[www.reiterreisen.com/it-arsr10.htm](http://www.reiterreisen.com/it-arsr10.htm)