

# Going Gaucho

HORSEBACK ADVENTURE  
IN THE WILDS OF ARGENTINA.



By Susan Ewing

**T**ITO THREW ANOTHER LOG ON THE CAMPFIRE AND sparks flew toward a half-moon tacked brightly onto the soft black bowl of night. He brushed his hands on leather chaps he wore like his own hide, picked up a battered nylon-stringed guitar, and began to strum. He began to sing an Argentine folk ballad in a warm voice. We were all in love with Tito. Cowboys are author Pam Houston's weakness. Gauchos—the Argentine variety—were ours.

We were camped in the foothills of the Andes, in Argentina's Nahuel Huapi National Park. We had come to ride, ride, ride, and then ride some more. As participants in a Boojum Expeditions' Patagonia horse trek, we were a hemisphere away from home. Back in Montana it was winter-dark and snowy-cold, but South America was full of the light, fresh air of spring.

Patagonia is a geographical region that drapes across the lower third of South America's tip and includes provinces of both Argentina and Chile. Our party of five had already spent a week riding the Pampas—the vast fertile South American lowland plains—near the Atlantic ocean, horse-surfing the sand dunes; watching for armadillos, rheas, and wild boars; and loping empty beaches as black-necked swans lifted into tangerine sunsets. It was wonderful, but the world is divided into mountain people and ocean people, and I am of the mountain clan, so Nahuel Huapi put me several thousand feet closer to heaven.

Several thousand feet—plus about 14.5 hands. My mare's name was Rojiza and she was a criollo (creole), the gaucho's favored breed, descendants of horses brought to South America by Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century. As the Barb and Andalusian war horses escaped or were abandoned, they gathered into blended herds and adapted to life on the plains.

**A pair of gauchos in traditional dress, including the stiff leather leg protectors known as guardamontes.**



PHOTOGRAPHY: ©CORBIS





**TOP:** Dancing and riding during the gaucho fiesta near Quilmes, Argentina. **ABOVE:** On horseback near Salta, Argentina.

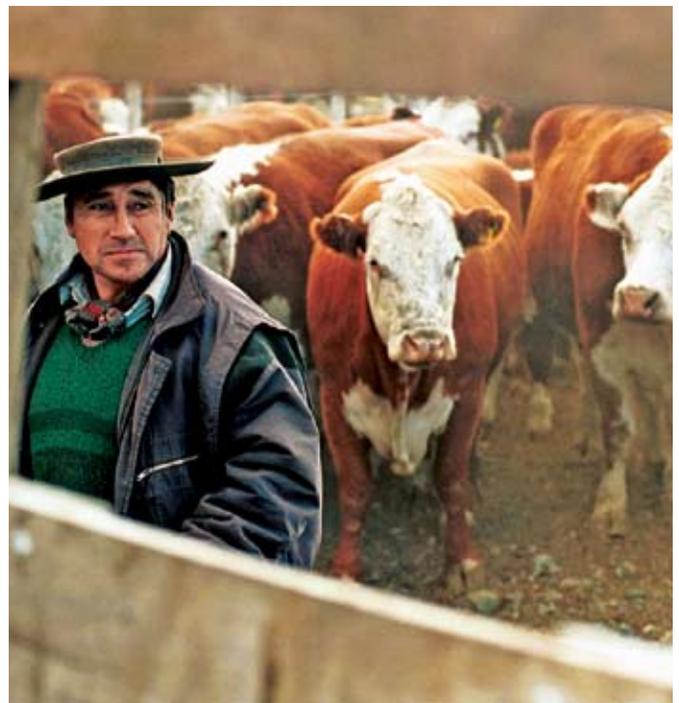
You could say that the gaucho himself, usually a mestizo of Spanish and indigenous Native blood, essentially co-evolved with the criollo, mirroring the horse's adaptability and toughness. Historians peg the rise of the gaucho lifestyle to the 18th century, when men were needed to work South America's growing herds of free-ranging cattle. Gauchos became legendary horsemen and lived a vagabond lifestyle, retaining their independence and proudly resisting the softening influences of civilization. The typical gaucho owned nothing but a long, sharp knife called a *facon*, a leg-entangling lariat known as a *boleadora*, and of course his horse—the "lower half of the gaucho." Originally gauchos were scorned by the upper classes, but when called into service during the wars of independence from Spain they fought ferociously and served with honor, gaining the respect of the nation.

Tito interrupted his singing to take a sip from the steaming gourd of *yerba maté* that was going around the campfire circle. *Maté* is tea, tonic, and tradition infused into one aromatic experience. The etiquette of brewing, drinking, and sharing *maté* is precise and complex, and Tito, Martín, Flor, and Delores (our party's head wrangler, camp host, and sister cooks) were



patient in our education. Tito handed the gourd back to Martín, who refreshed its contents and handed the gourd back to our Boojum guide, Linda. She sipped the perfectly hot tea up through the silver straw (*bombilla*), then passed it back to Martín, who refreshed the gourd again and handed it to me. It was deliciously bitter. *Yerba maté* is a mild stimulant, like green tea. Studies indicate it doesn't affect dream patterns, but you couldn't prove that theory by me—although maybe the rich dreams I dreamt in my blue tent later that night were simply the effect of the moon, or of Tito's ballads, or of the rocking sensation that lingers after a full day in the saddle.

In the morning Tito rode past my tent as he did every morning, leading our saddle horses into camp. We explored Nahuel Huapi by horseback for a week and hardly scratched the surface of the park's 3,000 scenic square miles. The Andes mountains meet the Patagonian steppe here, creating a rich and varied landscape of rugged and forested mountains, large lakes, cold rivers, and wide, rolling meadows. We humped up steep and rocky mountain trails, our noses in our horses' thick manes, then scabbled down the seemingly steeper other side, leaning back for counterbalance, stomach muscles clenched, fighting



**TOP: A female gaucho driving Herefords across the pampa. ABOVE: A gaucho at work in a cattle pen.**



the force of gravity so as not to slide forward over our horses' withers into the downhill abyss.

The criollos never stumbled, bucked, balked, or complained. We rode single file down quiet trails through forests of southern beech trees, and cantered loosely abreast through sunny meadows strewn with wildflowers. When we came to a river, the horses plunged in and barged across, leaving their riders delighted and soaked to the thighs.

Reining Rojiza to the back of the string, I would slow my

pace to take in some lovely detail or another. It could get a little dusty at the end of the line, but it was still a fine place to be, because that's where Tito rode. I spoke very little Spanish, and Tito spoke about the same amount of English, but he saw that I was interested in the plants and animals, so he graciously identified some of the natural wonders we rode past: *Topatopa*, he pronounced, popping the *Ps* and indicating patches of delicate bright-yellow orchids growing along the trail. *Tero-tero*, he said, rolling his *Rs* and pointing his dark stubble-covered chin at a lapwing plover. Was he smiling under that heavy black mustache? *Helecóptero*, dragonfly. *Chimango*, hawk.

On the last night in camp—with Flor and Delores busy stirring stew over the fire, Tito brewing *maté*, and the rest of us sprawled on the ground bone-tired from the day's ride—Martín asked if we were interested in condors. There are places in Nahuel Huapi, he said, where you can see them. *Con-dor*, Tito intoned smoothly. Oh yes, we were interested in condors.

Overhead the moon was getting bigger, rounder, like the slowly opening eye of an owl. It was probably 20 below zero at home. I retired to my tent and hoped to conjure a *maté*-inspired dream about the life of a *gaucha*. In the historical literature, the *gaucha* is referred to as the “companion” or common-law wife of a gaucho. Her occupation was to raise corn, watermelon, and children. But it is also said that she liked smoking, occasionally favored a low-cut dress, and was as good a rider as her compatriot. Sadly, I woke up as much a *gringa* as I was when I went to sleep.

We set out on the last day's ride with high hopes, but by lunch time hadn't seen so much as a black slash in the sky. Unlike California condors, Andean condors aren't endangered, but they

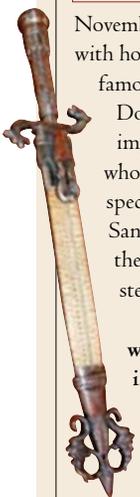
## Gaucha Fiesta

**S**an Antonio de Areco is the center of Argentina's gaucho tradition. About 70 miles outside of Buenos Aires, the village hosts the country's biggest gaucho celebration every November 10. That day—and the days leading up to it—is filled with horse parades, dance, song, and food. Try the *asado*, Argentina's famous barbecue, and some *yerba maté*, Argentina's national drink.

Don't miss performances of the folkloric and poetic *payada*, improvised musical dueling “dialogues” between two *payadores* who accompany themselves on guitar. Known for artisans specializing in *rastras* (silver-studded belts) and *facones* (knives), San Antonio de Areco is also a great place to fish. A day trip to the country town of Capilla del Señor can be had by historic steam train (buy tickets in advance).

For more information about traveling in Argentina, visit: [www.welcomeargentina.com/sanantoniodeareco/index\\_i.html](http://www.welcomeargentina.com/sanantoniodeareco/index_i.html)

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**OPPOSITE: Gauchos work cattle as well as horses, sheep, and other livestock. ABOVE: Several annual fiestas across Argentina celebrate the gaucho culture; fiestas often include skills competitions similar to a rodeo.**

are far from an everyday sight. With their 10-foot wingspans, condors are among the largest flying birds in the world.

Tito and Martín built a fire for the lunch *asado*—a meal of huge slabs of meat roasted over coals—as they had every day. Early day gauchos had no way of (and probably no interest in) preserving meat, so after butchering a sheep or cow they cooked and ate it immediately, thus inspiring the tradition of the *asado*, which is very much alive today.

After lunch and a siesta we pointed the horses up toward the tree line and rode until their shoes were ringing against bare rock. At the base of a huge stone escarpment we tied the horses to some stunted shrubs, and I scrambled up after Martín and Tito. Reaching the flat top we panted along the narrow peninsula of rock toward its end. I caught up with Martín, leaning over the edge. Easing my own face over the drop-off I came eyeball-to-bright-black-eyeball with a juvenile condor perched on a thumb of rock 15 feet below. We stared at each other until the bird stepped off its perch into the void, stretched open its wings, and lifted past my face on a rush of air pushing up the cliff. Hearing a rustle overhead, I looked up to see an adult condor wafting 20 feet above, turning its head this way and that to check us out. Its feathers ruffled like the frills on an ice-dancer's costume. More condors materialized until there were almost a dozen in the air around us.

The silent, gargantuan vultures were gorgeous, their bright white throat feathers looking like clerical collars against shiny black-feather cloaks. Suspended in the theater of sky, the birds fanned, folded, and tilted their tails, cutting this way and that through the thin atmosphere. Playing with drop and lift, they

tucked and untucked wings as long as a gaucho is tall.

That night the owl-eye of moon would be wide open. The next day we would break camp and begin the journey home. A stray breath of breeze toyed with a downy condor breast feather and I snatched it out of the air. I would take it home and tuck it with my photos and a baggie of *yerba maté*—maybe under my pillow, as a welcome mat for Patagonian *gaucho* dreams. 

## Want To Go Gaucho?



### Nahuel Huapi National Park in the Andes foothills.

Upcoming horseback treks with Boojum Expeditions in South America: **Patagonia Gaucho Ride** — October 13-20, November 3-10, December 22-29 — and **Coastline to Condors** (Uruguay and Argentina) — October 6-20, November 24-December 8.

Boojum Expeditions: (800) 287-0125; [www.boojumx.com](http://www.boojumx.com).