

ROUGH RIDING IN patagonia

words and photos kate johns



Pablo Neruda's verse on Patagonia

The man's face is worn, leathered and tanned from the harsh elements typical of Chile's Patagonia. He sits deep in his rustic sheep-skinned saddle, his feet pushed out to the sides, his stirrups positioned near his heels.

Spare spurs attached to the saddle chink in rhythm with the clip of the horses' shoes on the rocks. A worn raw-hide lasso is strapped to the other side of his saddle; he holds a revenque in one hand; his boyner (style of hat) sits snug on his head. His eyes squint against the icy, blustering wind as he musters the herd of woolly-jumpered sheep back to the yards.

He is a baqueano (bac-e-ano) or pathfinder. These men are brought up in Chile's Patagonia — a terrain filled with long and narrow fjords, irregular mountain chains, huge ice fields, infinite lakes and rivers. These form a very difficult terrain full of microclimates and tricky passes.

Baqueano have navigated their way through dense beech forests in knee-deep mud; mustered cattle through glaciers, traversed steep, rocky mountain passes and crossed icy fast-flowing rivers for generations. The men have a spiritual connection to the land they traverse and the animals they care for.

I discover Torres del Paine National Park's unruly territory on horseback and ride shoulder-to-shoulder with

the true Patagonian cowboy — the baqueano.

Torres del Paine is Chile's most prized national park. Its 180,000 hectares of diverse scenery and wild landscape on the edge of the southern ice fields is one of the largest sources of temperate-zone glaciers in the world. The park was created in 1959 and was declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1978. Before that, it was part of a huge sheep estancia.

The name 'Paine' (pronounced 'pie-nee') comes from a Tehuelche Indian word meaning 'blue'. The 'Torres' are named after three spectacular granite peaks, the highest reaching 2900 metres, that form the centrepiece of Torres del Paine. These dramatic peaks are part of the Cordillera del Paine, the youngest mountain range on earth.

Estancias bordering the park are predominately sheep properties with drift-wood, lichen encrusted fences and red-roofed homesteads with plumes of smoke billowing from the chimneys.

From the comfort of a heated car, the outside looks like a normal temperate summer's day: the sun is shining and the sky is an endless egg-shell blue. It's not until I turn my attention to the beech trees flexing backward in the wind that I realise how chilly it is.

We enter the park through a privately owned estancia,



this page: top descending the Sierra del Toro' left: traditional Chilean tack middle Baqueanos returning to camp above traditional Chilean tack.

where we encounter the majestic mountains that will be our sentinels over the next eight days. The mountains resemble craggy, razor incisors dusted in freshly powdered snow; domes of cloud hover like spaceships above the mountains.

Tents are quickly assembled near Laguna Verde (Green Lake), a freshwater lake with white capped waves breaking onto shore. Our group of six is in bed by 11pm, when the sun sets. In summer, there are sixteen hours of natural light due to the position of the earth.

The next morning we are introduced to the herd of horses and the two baqueanos Chino and Luis, who will guide us through the park. Our chief guide for the trip is Jorge Alberto Rozas, a thirty-year-old Chilean born in Patagonia who has been working in the park for thirteen years and has been riding since he was a young boy.

Over the next two days we fall into a steady routine of riding for four to five hours a day, stopping for picnic lunches in daisy-filled paddocks, afternoon siestas and drinking pisco sours (traditional Chilean drink) at the end of the day.

A lot of the riding is in Indian file due to the rocky terrain and narrow paths. The country transforms rapidly as we ride through hidden, enchanted beech tree forests

and cross freshwater streams with mottled coloured stone bottoms and climb rocky outcrops that are treeless and bare. The days are chorused with humming, whistling, laughing and singing from the baqueanos.

My admiration and respect for the horses grows each day. The Criollo breed is extremely willing, stocky in shape and tough as old boots. The breed is one of the oldest registered horse breeds of South America and is known for their high threshold of discomfort, great immunity to disease and remarkable rate of recuperation.

Day three welcomes us with a gentle wind swaying the tundra and a sea-blue sky plumped with cotton-wool clouds. After stopping for lunch, we descend down the steep Sierra del Toro. The view riding down is overwhelming. The black-as-coal shoal spills into the limitless electric-blue Lago del Toro. Beyond the lake the land spreads out into pampas and the mountains envelope the horizon.

When we reach low land, we push the solid ponies into a fast-paced canter along the prairie. Everyone spreads out, the cold wind whipping our faces, the baqueanos swirling their revenques (Chilean style of whip) in the air. The horses' hooves pound as they move across the earth with ease. It's an absolute delight to feel the rush of adrenalin



from left to right: Guanaco graze in the wild; Criollo horses ready for the day's ride; Chilean puesto.

and give the horses their heads — an addictively free feeling that is unique to galloping a horse.

We all arrive extremely smiley at our camp on Serrano River, where Pisco Sours and cervazas (beer) are chilling in the river.

After using Serrano River as a base for two nights, we break camp early for a seven-hour day in the saddle. I watch an Andean condor that is playing overhead in the thermals spiralling down and swooping up, the sky his playground. We scatter herds of Guanaco, a llama-like creature, as we canter along the plains.

We set up camp on the outskirts of the national park at a baqueano puesto, or small wooden hut. Puestos are used by the baqueano in the winter and are positioned on high ground as a good vantage point to watch over cattle.

On our ride to the puesto, we stop in at an estancia to re-shoe one of the horses. It is interesting to watch the quick, no-frills technique of the baqueanos. They put the horse in a make-shift crush, wrap a piece of rope around the fetlock of the back leg and lever it up. One man holds the rope while the other pulls the remaining nails out and replaces the shoe.

The two days at the puesto campsite are very special. We ride out each morning, discovering hidden waterfalls, peering into secret valleys that have ancient beech trees carpeted by furry green lichen. We share close-knit dinners in the small puesto heated by the wood-fire stove and are lulled to sleep by the munching of the horses as they graze near the tents.

But it must come to an end. The next morning, six-pack horses are loaded with eskies, tents and food for the last camp site at Lago Paine. Chino, Jorge and Luis precisely pack the horses so that they can trot and canter alongside us without lead ropes.

We cross an icy, fast-flowing river that is high from recent rains on the mountain. Chino leads us through a section in the river. The rushing water reaches the underbelly of the horse while the current pushes the horses off track, slipping occasionally on the wet rocks.

After six days in the park, I have respect for the country, the weather and the people that call it home. The mountains, clouds, sun and wind act as an amphitheatre where the wind plays the main role blowing the clouds into vast contortions

that cast shadows on the mountains. The theatrics captivate me for hours.

A well-known expression by Patagonians is 'If you don't like the weather, you just have to wait'.

On our second-last day I am praying for this expression to be true. After riding for three hours through blistering icy winds and rain, I think I am going to die. I can't feel my hands, let alone keep hold of the reins. I inwardly curse myself for not packing my Drizabone. I look over to see Jorge, Chino and Luis unfazed by the downpour, warm in their leather jackets and ponchos.

Just as I think I am going to turn into an ice statue, we jump off our horses and board an inflatable boat that transports us across the rushing river with the help of a rope. We find sanctuary from the downpour in a cosy wooden house used by walkers. Socks, jumpers and gloves are stripped off and stuck near the fire and hot chocolates are prepared.

Chilean music hums in the background; laughter from the baqueanos fills the room and the aromas of soup wafts from the kitchen.

I am saved — or so I think until I am asked to dance by the manager Orlando, a tiny man who comes up to my shoulder. This starts an impromptu dance party, where men and women dance in the tiny room. Chino, Jorge and Luis laugh as they watch me step on Orlando's feet. It is a fantastic haven to wait in while the weather clears.

"This is Patagonia, nothing ever goes to plan with the weather," says Jorge.

And it's so true: over the past eight days of riding through Torres del Paine I've fallen in and out of love with this magical park.

At times I've cursed the wind that whipped my face to beetroot red and been brought to tears by the sheer beauty of the mountains. Most of all, I have admired and learnt from the fearless baqueanos — our pathfinders. S

Blue Green Adventures www.bluegreenadventures.com; info@bluegreenadventures.com; 00 11 56 61 410009. Glacier Rides cost between US\$2550 and US\$2880 per person, depending on numbers.