



# THE GAUCHO WAY

The ultimate  
Argentina road trip...  
**NO CAR REQUIRED**

STORY + PHOTOGRAPHY BY Janet Gyenes

# In Chicoana...

where you'll find "A little bit of the hidden sky"

**T**he sound of the white stallion's horseshoes clanging against the river rocks rings out into the canyon like a distress signal as he rears up on his hind legs, muscles rippling. Tati, his rider, pulls on the reins. But the young horse continues to kick and struggle, churning the water into a fury.

The scene playing out before me is both folkloric battle of man against beast and modern-day display of a gaucho with true grit. In the 17th century the gauchos in this region fought for independence against the Spanish and won. And with a few more manoeuvres, Tati triumphs too, coaxing the horse through the narrow channel toward a waterfall.

My hands tremble as I gently tug on my horse's reins. "It's OK, Picaflor," I whisper and stroke her chestnut mane. Before I nudge her forward, I look back at my fellow riders, Tati's teenaged daughter and my friend Melissa, whose face clearly says, "What have you gotten us into?"

Our original travel plans had taken a detour. We had sketched out the ultimate Argentina road trip: driving high-altitude roads snaking through the foothills of the Andes in the northern province of Salta, bordering Bolivia, Paraguay and Chile. We'd traverse lonely landscapes inhabited by little more than skittish *vicuñas* and cartoonish *cardon* cactuses, with their century-old arms outstretched like a gang of giants gesturing in the oxygen-deprived air.

But when my guidebook advised only to rent a car if you're skilled at fixing the inevitable mechanical issues, we charted a different course—by horse—to spend a couple of days riding with *gauchos*, the archetypes of Argentina.

Sayta Estancia sprawls alongside a dusty road in Chicoana, a traditional agricultural village backdropped by a spine of mountain ridges. Located 35 km from Salta city, the province's colonial capital, Chicoana's name comes from the Quechuan language and translates to "A little bit of the hidden sky."

Enrique, a silvery-haired fellow with a mischievous glint in his eyes, welcomes us. For more than two decades he has owned and

operated this ranch, which is surrounded by trees bearing avocados, limes and oranges. "They're all organic," says Andreas, a horseman who'd lived in Los Angeles for two decades before returning to the gaucho way of life in Argentina.

"Lunch first, then riding," he announces after showing us to the *casita* where we spend our first night. Then we join him, Enrique and Sergio, another horseman, in a screened room at a long table laid with round wooden plates and bottles of organic red wine made by Benedictine monks. Enrique regales us with jokes in Spanish and scraps of English as we pile our plates with a

salad of blood-red tomatoes and onions; earthy lentils and white beans; hunks of crusty bread; and the classic Argentinian *chimichurri* sauce.

White shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, Mario, the *asador*, deposits chubby handmade sausages and slabs of tender beef onto our plates, then continues to offer us new cuts of meat as we eat. And so it goes. Rounds of meat, refills of red wine and conversation flowing. All is deliciously satisfying.

The *asado* isn't just a traditional Argentinian barbecue where meat is cooked on a *parrilla*, or grill, over wood coals. It's soul and sustenance. A celebration of culture, community and reverence for the land that's hardwired into the country's collective DNA.

Eventually we saddle up for a late-afternoon ride, soon crossing a shallow riverbed. I spot a dead horse. Not a skeleton, but a freshly spent carcass in repose, bathed in long shadows from the low autumn sun. I naively

wonder out loud why the poor animal hasn't been buried. Andreas explains matter-of-factly that it would be one big hole to dig. "Tomorrow," he says, as if to change the subject, "Tati will take you into the mountains camping." Nevertheless, the image of the motionless horse burns hot in my mind, like the mournful beauty of a still life painting.

*A man without a horse was a man without legs.* In his memoir, *Far Away and Long Ago*, naturalist William Henry Hudson mythologizes



**ABOVE Sergio in the tack room at Sayta Estancia, a ranch in the agricultural village of Chicoana** PREVIOUS PAGE Tati leads the way. In the 17th century,

gauchos battled the Spanish near here OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP ROW FROM LEFT Enrique, the owner of Sayta Estancia; Tati, dressed in traditional gaucho gear MIDDLE

ROW Mountain views overlooking Salta city, which sits at the foothills of the Andes in northern Argentina BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT Saddles, bridles and blankets

ready for riding; chickens grilling on a *parrilla*; organically grown mandarin orange; traversing the mountainside



## IF YOU GO

To ride with gauchos at Sayta Estancia check out [saltacabalgatas.com.ar/eng](http://saltacabalgatas.com.ar/eng) and for more about exploring Argentina go to [welcomeargentina.com](http://welcomeargentina.com).



this credo from the gauchos he grew up around in Argentina. Tati is the embodiment of that conviction. He's dressed in traditional gaucho garb: loose trousers—*bombachas*—stuffed into leather boots, a scarf, beret and a knife called a *facón* tucked into his woven fabric belt.

After a breakfast that includes biscuits slathered with *dolce de leche*, I watch the men outfit our horses. Six others arrive for our ride to the mountains; after lunch they'll return to the *estancia*. Our group hits the road and the horses settle into a steady pace, passing fields of corn, chia, quinoa and leggy yellow-and-black sunflowers saluting the azure sky. We ride a path skirting whitewashed brick buildings. There's no activity here today, but Sergio says these structures are used for drying tobacco leaves.

Almost three hours later, we arrive at our camping spot. Cows graze next to a stream framed by prickly pear cactuses. Chickens, sheep and a billy goat are corralled in pens. Showy roosters raise a raucous. Under a corrugated metal roof is a primitive *cocina* composed of stone blocks supporting a



*parrilla* crowded with a gaucho's feast of beef and whole chickens garnished with lemon halves. An old man with skin the colour of burnt caramel and hands like clubs stirs *papas* boiling in a cast-iron pot.

"¿Dónde está el baño?" I ask Andreas, already suspecting his answer. "En naturaleza!" he says with a deep belly laugh, gesturing at the surrounding woods. "Anywhere you want." Wild animals? "Pumas," he replies. "Watch out for the pumas."



Still stuffed from lunch, we haul ourselves back onto our horses. They climb up the mountain trail, clambering for footholds. Tree limbs claw at me like wild animals, leaving tiny trails of blood on my hands and forearms. I duck down in my saddle to avoid getting a branch in the eye and bang my knee on a tree trunk instead. My battle scars feel well-earned when we reach the mountain's 600-metre summit and Chicoana's hidden sky appears. We dismount and stare in awe at the pleated green mountains and views of Salta in the distance before riding back to the camp.

Tati and his daughter pitch our tents and place the padding and blankets from beneath our horses' saddles inside as cushioning. Blackness cloaks the camp. Tati cooks our dinner in the dark, expertly making *locro*, a thick and delicious stew that's ready hours later. One knife. One pot. One fire. Above us, a blanket of a billion stars flickering in the night.

After eating, Tati pulls out his smartphone and shows us video after video of his friends—fellow gauchos—performing *loco* rodeo-style stunts on horseback and being tossed like rag dolls. It's like a guts and glory bedtime story.

We sleep like the dead. The roosters rouse us at dawn, cajoling us to get up for one last ride. Today Tati takes us on a different route up the mountain. After a few minutes of riding he wordlessly slows to a stop. The untamed forest has reclaimed the trail. In true gaucho form, Tati pulls out a machete and dispatches an army of branches. We forge ahead until it's time to fight the forest again. It's slow-going but that's life here. No path? Make one. Hungry? Build a fire and cook. It's the gaucho way. Not just a state of mind, but being at one with the land, no car required. ●

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ABOVE, FROM LEFT Lunch, gaucho-style (with tablecloth!); the estancia's impressive wood-fuelled *parrilla*