

Gone Gaucho

An American reflects on cowboy life on an Argentine estancia.

By Ryan Thomas Bell

It's impossible to say when North American cowboys first rode among the gauchos of Argentina. In 1901, a pair of mysterious westerners arrived in Patagonia and made a go of the gaucho life on a sheep ranch near the frontier town of Esquel. Granted, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid were outlaws on the run, but they also made history in these parts, linking the cowboy cultures from each side of the equator.

More than a century later, history repeated itself when I signed on with the Estancia del Cielo, a 110,000-acre cattle ranch nestled high in the Andes Mountains. Working alongside a dozen gauchos at the annual roundup - held in December and January, the height of the South American summer - I felt as though I'd found horsemen's heaven.

The morning before the roundup began, citrus-colored firelight flickered through the cracks in the estancia cabin's wood-burning stove. The *mayordomo*, or ranch foreman, Hugo Manterola, lifted a teapot from the stove's surface and



Hugo Manterola, the *mayordomo*, or foreman, of the Estancia del Cielo, has lived the gaucho life for more than 50 years.

poured steaming water into a gourd filled with crushed *yerba mate*, herbal tea.

Where North American cowboys swear by coffee, a gaucho won't make his first *lazo* throw before his morning tea, and will anxiously wait his turn to drink from the communal *mate* gourd. The centuries-old custom is a fad in Hollywood, at present, because of the tea's health benefits. Most gauchos can't pronounce the English word "antioxidant," but they do know that "gaucho coffee" is why they'll rarely need a doctor before they're 60.

"Well, these cattle won't brand themselves," Hugo declared in Spanish before issuing instructions for the morning's work. "Lalo, you and Chipi bring down the herd from the holding pasture. Vincente, start the branding-iron fires. The day's already half-gone"

With that, he adjourned teatime and walked out the cabin door into what any sane man would call the middle of the night.



A gaucho's cabin in the Andes Mountains is made of adobe brick and has a thatched roof.

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Herding cattle in the Andes Mountains often means fording rivers. The Trocoman River runs for 20 miles through the center of Estancia del Cielo, making horseback river-crossings a part of daily life.

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A *tropilla*, or “troop”, of Argentine Criollo horses runs free in the open country of Patagonia.



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The Criollo

Luis was a young gaucho with a reputation for being more horseman than cattleman. As with so many gauchos in the Andes, it was hard to guess Luis’ ancestry. From a distance, his black hair, dark skin and short frame looked typically Spaniard, but up close, his high-set cheekbones and round face hinted of native Mapuche or Tehuelche Indian descent. When Luis spoke, his singsong Spanish carried a Chilean accent.

Luis and I forged a friendship based on horsemanship, and he proved to be a knowledgeable tutor in the way of the gaucho.

That morning, we followed Hugo outside to fetch our horses from their pasture. Luis’ gelding was easiest to spot, with his telltale gaucho grooming: the mane and forelock clipped to the nape, the tail chopped to a bob to protect it from getting snagged or torn in thick brush. The gelding watched us approach and blew a snort like a steam locomotive, leaving the vapor to hand in the still-starlit air.

The Argentine *Criollo* is an amicable, robust cow pony known affectionately as the “South American Quarter Horse.” The nickname, however, is a misnomer. More accurately,

the Criollo is the South American Mustang, descended from escaped conquistador stock horses from the 16th century. Half a millennium in the wild has produced a distinct breed.

My horse, loaned to me by the estancia, had once been a gaucho’s mount before joining the ranch’s dude string for visiting Americans. He looked nothing like Luis’ Criollo. His muzzle looked Percheron, his rear Thoroughbred. He had Shire-sized feet and a bad eye that made him spooky on his right side. “Charger,” his Americanized name, seemed a cruel joke. “Gramps,” or “Shadows-Spook-Him,” might’ve better suited the horse.

Luis Castillo, an Estancia del Cielo gaucho, sizes up his prey.



COURTESY SETH AVOTTE

Gaucho Imprints

We haltered the horses and tied them to a rail in front of the cabin. Luis rummaged through a pile of saddlery. The gaucho *recado* is a complicated, seven-layer system that includes a saddle blanket, saddle pad, leather saddle seat, cinch, padded sheepskin blanket, leather blanket, and a second cinch to hold it all together. Saddling Charger in the near-black dawn, I knew I’d need help.

I’d just peeked over Charger’s withers when Luis looked up and caught me



Three young gauchos share their exploits. Customary dress in the Argentine countryside includes a neckerchief, long-sleeve shirt, blousy bombacha slacks and a woven belt.

spying. His laughter made me wonder if this had been a joke, and if the real saddles would be brought out at any moment. Finally, though, I positioned the soft, throne-like saddle on my horse.

Luis explained that most gaucho traditions date back to the Argentine frontier, when gauchos were nomads. They spent their lives on the trail and had to be self-sufficient, carrying everything they needed with them on horseback. The recado saddle is an example of that life-on-the-range utilitarianism. For instance, the saddle's multiple layers spread out to make a comfortable mattress, much appreciated on Estancia del Cielo, where the gauchos spend many nights sleeping on the trail.

That afternoon, as we herded cattle to a high mountain pasture, Luis explained another aspect of gaucho horsemanship that echoes this sense of self-reliance.

Corrals and fenced pastures aren't always available so, lacking other options, gauchos often began training their horses while on the move. Once a youngster was one or two months old, a gaucho began putting miles on the mare, forcing the foal to follow. It's still common to see weanlings tagging along on a cattle drive, experiencing a de facto training course that prepares them to become surefooted cow ponies with plenty of stamina. Luis joked, though, that it's a miracle such foals don't grow up thinking they're herd dogs instead of horses.

COURTESY SETH AYOTTE



Groundwork

The sound of bawling calves filled the air and the midday sun burned hot in the clear, blue sky. I wiped a stream of sweat from my temple, staining my shirt-sleeve corral-dirt brown. "Can it really be December?" I thought. My home in the snow-covered Rocky Mountains seemed another world away

Charger stood saddled nearby, his lower lip drooping as he snoozed in the shade of a tree. We'd labored on foot in the branding corrals ever since Chipi and Lalo had arrived with the herd of steers.

The estancia's branding corrals were shaped like an hour-glass, with a roofed shed at the center. Cattle were vaccinated and ear-marked in the shed, then divided by a swinging door opening into a holding corral on one side, a branding corral on the other. Each time a bull passed through, the swing-door operator yelled, "Steer out of the chute!" A dozen gauchos descended on the animal as lazos swung overhead.

Once the calf was roped, a team raced from the periphery to take him to the ground, and a gaucho ran across the corral, branding iron in hand.

The exhausting work had ignited a hunger that was getting the better of me as the scent of roasting meat wafted from a nearby fire pit, occasionally mixing with the smell of burned hair. At an Argentine cattle roundup, wages often are paid in barbecue. Gauchos come out of the woodwork to offer a hand in return for a chance to show off their lazo skills and for free *asado* (barbecued beef). They also earn a rare social gathering amid a hard eistence.

Hugo's Lazo

Argentina is a large country, nearly one-third the size of the United States, and gaucho customs vary by region. Hugo was born and raised in the cattle-ranching country of Buenos Aires, a credential similar to being a cowboy from Texas or Wyoming. Two things were immediately noticeable about Hugo: his ox-like, five-foot stature, and the beret, or *boina*, he wore.

The boina, a tradition brought to Argentina by French and Basque immigrants, is the unofficial hat of the Argentine gaucho. It's tough to imagine any self-respecting North American cowboy in a beret, but Hugo wouldn't be caught dead without his.

As the afternoon's work continued, Hugo couldn't resist making a couple of throws with his lazo. The rest of us scattered to the corral fence as Hugo fed out enough rope to make a loop 10 feet in diameter. In one motion, Hugo spun his body like a discuss thrower and motored the heavy-gauge, eight-strand rawhide rope into flight.

Hugo yelled to the swing-door keeper, who turned a steer into the corral. Hugo funneled the steer along the perimeter and in three quick steps closed the gap between them, casting an airborne snare that might as well have been a fishing net. The loop encircled the steer and Hugo backpedaled hard with the rope wrapped around his waist. The lazo zipped tight around all four legs and the steer fell to the ground.

"That's how we rope cattle in Buenos Aires, boys," Hugo taunted.

The Chase

Horses speak Spanish. At least that's the folk wisdom Cormac McCarthy has us believe in his Border Trilogy novels. But the gaucho's rolled Rs and the lyrical brogue of Argentine Spanish do make some words sound like phoneticized nickers and whinnies. Maybe that's the reason, when someone opened the wrong gate and some steers escaped the corral, our horses seemed to understand the urgency of every shouted word.

It doesn't take long for 50 steers to scatter into the mountains, but it can be an afternoon's work gathering them again. Because our horses were the nearest saddled mounts, Hugo ordered Luis and I to head off the steers. By the time I reached Charger, Luis and his Criollo were already galloping into the foothills. I pulled my cinch tight, mounted, and we were off before my rear hit the saddle, quickly catching up with Luis.

The rogue herd had split in two, one group heading straight up an incline, another dropping down into a river valley. Luis and I galloped side by side, standing in our stirrups.



This *Criollo* gelding sports "gaucho grooming," including a clipped mane.

"Your horse is faster," he yelled. "You take the valley herd."

Luis reined in his gelding and climbed the rocky mountainside my horse wouldn't have been capable of tackling. I rode on to catch the other group before they made the valley.

It took the better part of an hour, but we reunited the two herds and returned them to the corrals, where there wasn't a gaucho in sight.

Back at the cabin, a full-blown fiesta was underway. Hugo had called lunch break while we were gone, and everyone was reclined on the front porch, gnawing on beef ribs, passing around bottles of wine and playing guitar. Hugo walked toward us as Luis and I unbridled our horses.

"What took you so long?" he asked, calling upon the gaucho work ethic, which dictates a man can always work harder.

We're not the ones taking an early lunch," Luis retorted.

As Luis and I sat down to eat our asado reward, I reflected on the idea that the North American cowboy and the gaucho are like twin brothers, separated at birth, each bearing the imprint of our passionate heritage with horses and cattle.

Ryan Thomas Bell has worked as a cowboy in Argentina for three years. For more information on Estancia del Cielo and the gaucho culture, visit www.estanciadelcielo.com.