

Cattle horse drive along with local Mapuche culture

Trip overview

Drive a thousand head of Angus cattle from the sheltered plains of the pre-cordillera Pampas to their summer pastures in the Andes of Patagonia. Take a soak in remote mountain streams where the hot springs emerge. Try freshly grilled mountain stream trout prepared the Patagonian way. Camp beside your horse and listen to the peaceful rhythm of his breathing and hear the night-time sounds of the herd at rest. At dawn join the gaucho energy, dust and thrill of easing the herd into the morning mist of a day on the trail.

Day 1

Arrive Neuquen. 4 Hs transfer to Caviahue which is a small town on the Chile/Argentina border a few hundred kilometres south of Santiago, in Patagonia (but on the Argentina side) and within sight of snow-capped Andes. Accommodation: Grand hotel Caviahue.

Day 2

We'll meet you at The Grand Hotel (Caviahue) is not far away and as soon as breakfast is over, have a short transfer

to where the horses are being saddled and meet your horses.

The task today is to gather the cattle and corral them for an accurate head-count. There's a knack to it: rule 1 is everyone counting has to count silently! And rule 2 is count in two's – you'll be amazed at the difference it makes.

This evening we camp beside the stockyard. The tents are two-man and well up to the job. This is an authentic cattle drive, so luxuries are left behind, waiting for you at trail's end. Dinner in camp.

Day 3

The day begins early on the estancia and as soon as the riders are ready we set off on the cattle drive. The Rio Agrio rises in the Andes and begins its long journey to the Pacific; not the most famous of rivers but an absolutely beautiful valley. This is an ancient volcanic area and mid-way through its descent from the Andes the Agrio flows over a caldera (giant hole left by an extinct volcano) forming a majestic waterfall. Today we're downstream of the waterfall and the herd needs to ford the river before heading on to their summer pasture. The herd moves for between 5 and 7 hours depending on the natural obstacles such as rivers, and the terrain we cross. You need to be riding fit and

intermediate or better in the saddle.

During hole day the herd is nudged onwards: the idea is to keep things steady and calm. Some individual cattle will inevitably stray, and need to be brought back to the herd. Riders spread out around the herd and encourage the cattle forwards. The surrounding countryside is timeless and beautiful. The only trails here are those cut by generations of Angus cattle: no-one else comes this way.

Once the cattle reach the fresh mountain pasture and they are left to fan out and browse the grasses, herbs and shrubs that thrive in this remote, untouched environment.

Overnight in camp.

Day 4

We ride up to the Salto De Agrio where the river freefalls over a basalt lip into the lagoon below; a stunning site. Have lunch down in the caldera. You will be amazed at the rumble of the water as it falls. Swimming there is something you´ll never forget.

The dominant tree in this area is the Araucarias, better known as the Monkey-puzzle Tree, which tops out at a staggering 80 m. The trees are dioecious (male or female) and the females produce cones containing little edible nuts, not dissimilar to the pine nuts you can buy in supermarkets.

But watch out for the needle-sharp leaves, which take no prisoners.

Late in the afternoon you´ll ride back to the camp where a Lamb on a stick is going to be waiting for you to enjoy. Local grass-fed Patagonian lamb is a typical gaucho meal.

Day 5

Ride up to another valley where another herd of estancia el Morado is grazing the fresh natural pastures it offers during summer. In winter this valley is completely covered with snow. It´s five hours ride away, and only accessible on horseback. You will camp on a real paradise with a private hotspring and have a bath in it.

Day 6

Ride up to "laguna del cuero". Chile is only about 3 kilometres away. You could ride a couple of hours more and complete "el cruce de los andes"; as a liberator José de San Martín did in 1817. This is the best day to find some condors andinos. This majestic bird in danger of extinction, can measure up to 3 meters long with its wings open. Its also probable to come across Guanacos, a local camelid whose wool was used by Mapuches for weaving and leather clothing.

Camp beside the hotspring again.

Day 7

It's time to head civilisation, but don't think it's the end of this adventure because it's a long way. Even a 4 hours ride is only going to take you half way. You have lunch and rest some minutes beside Maloñehue. This incredible mountain had his name given by Mapuches meaning "malon viene" a strategic place where this pre-Columbian inhabitants used to keep an eye on groups of horses coming from the north during the invasion of Spanish conquistadors. You can guess that the view is astonishing. Everything seems so quiet and peaceful from up there.

In the afternoon we continue the way down with a spectacular view all around. Notice the horses having a renewed enthusiasm as they begin to understand they are going back home. On the way you will come across some ruins of a settlement of the "conquest of the desert" and a monolith remembering those days placed 100 years ago. Stone arrowheads, bullets, copper uniform buttons and many other traces of the invasion are still found every now and then.

Return to town for a refreshing rest in the main hotel.

Day 8

Optional (Late check out)

Rest and recover energy at the Gran Hotel. Even the hotel

keeps a swimming pool and spa; there's even a massage centre, if you wish, and healing mud-pack straight from the Copahue volcano – perfect!

There's an excellent Trekking plan to visit the crater of the Copahue volcano.

4 hs transfer drive to Neuquén Airport.

- Dates:
- 16 -23 December 2022 (full)
- 30 Dec 2022 - 6 Jan 2023 (full)
- 4-11 Mar 2023
- 18-25 Mar 2023