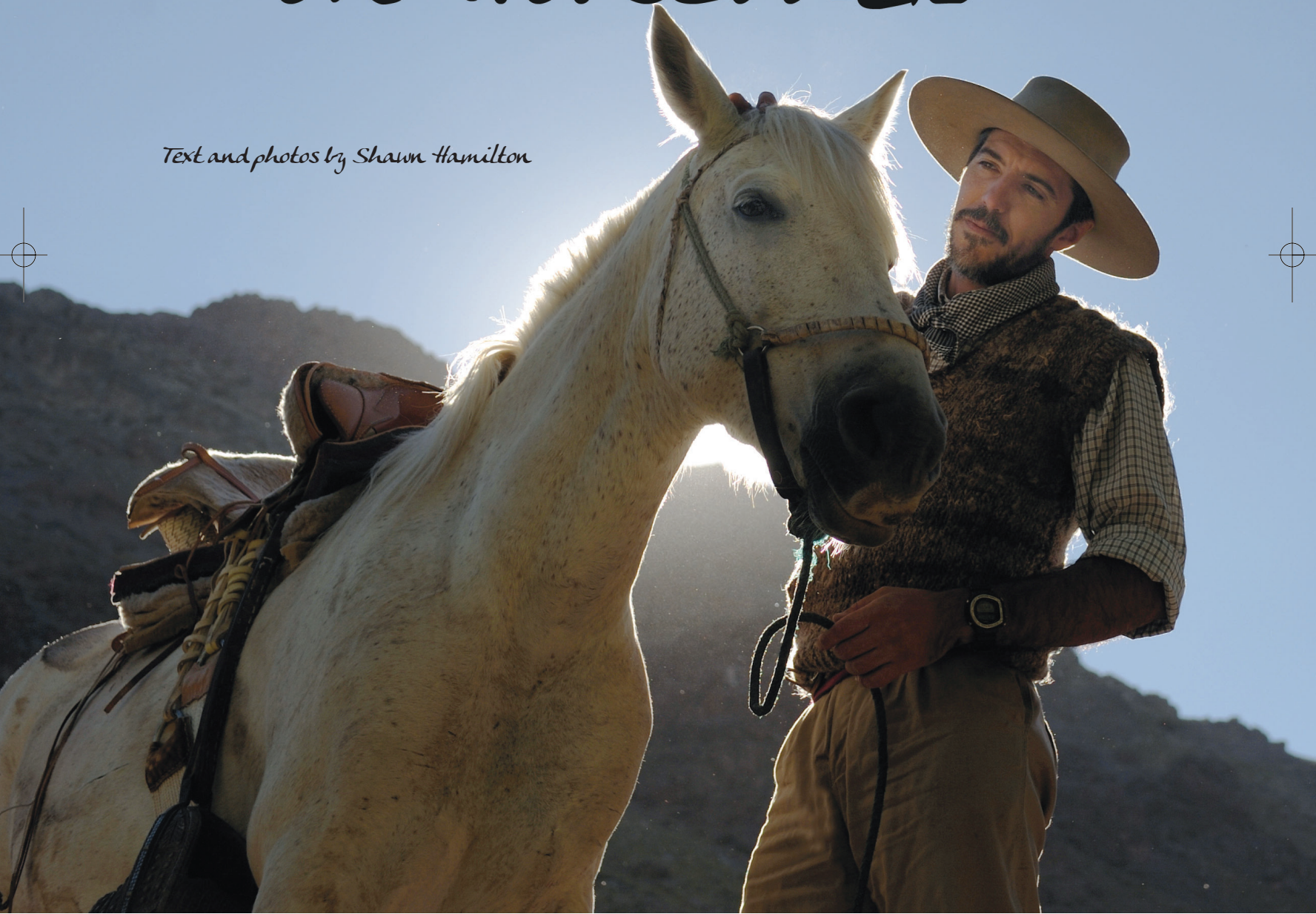


Crossing The Andes on Horseback

Text and photos by Shawn Hamilton





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San Martin and his army of 5,423 men, could cross the Andes Mountains by horseback then, certainly, why couldn't I? In January of 1817, San Martin along with O'Higgins crossed the Andes from Argentina to declare independence of Chile from the European Monarchs. This historic trail, reaching heights of 4,500 meters can now be revisited on horseback. From the hot dry heat in the day to a chilling minus ten at night, sleeping in tents and carrying all your needs on horses and mules, the six day riding vacation brings you back to basics. The surefooted Criollo horses take you over narrow ridges above the rushing rapids below, zigzag up steep pitches to high altitudes and cling to the sides of overhanging rock formations rewarding each challenge with spectacular vistas and constantly changing unique ecosystems.

Having previously ridden with the Argentinean outfitters "Pioneros", I knew I was in good hands. In the small foothill town of Los Andes I accompanied owner Eduardo and his assistant Andres to a local tack shop to help pick up a few supplies. By the time we left, I was the proud owner of a new Chilean saddle. Well, if I was going to cross the Andes on horseback I might as well do it in a comfortable saddle! I couldn't think of a better way to break it in.

After a Chilean dinner of roasted chicken and local wine we were issued our saddlebags, which would store our six-day necessities. The mules would carry any excess baggage along with our food and supplies. Eduardo explained that we would be escorted from a Chilean military base by government officials for the last hour's ride to the border. We'd leave our Chilean horses behind and a team of Argentinean horses, mules and gauchos would be waiting on the other side. Our escorts' job is to make sure the two countries' animals do not come in contact with each other, reducing the risk of spreading disease.

We arrived by bus at a small house in Los Patos and our horses awaited us in the yard the next morning. The Huasos (Chilean version of gauchos) were busy packing the blindfolded mules, preventing them from spooking when large objects are hoisted up onto their backs. From tables and chairs to pots and pans, their load was stacked four-feet high. The military customs officials checked our bags and we mounted up.

My nerves had me shaking as we scaled the narrow trail just above the river, flanked by cactus-filled deserts and valleys painted by red, yellow and blue flowers, resembling forget-me-nots. Camping next to the rapidly flowing Chalaco river at 2,145 meters, Colita de Cuadril (hindquarter of beef) was cooked on the open fire as we set up our tents. The full moon came into view as we sipped mate, a traditional Argentinean tea, completely oblivious to what was ahead of us.

Herds of wild Guanacos and countless condor sightings started off day two. We were heading upstream along the Rocin river canyon when the heavens opened up. With rain gear fully intact I looked up to spot our mules climbing the ridge. "We are not going there, right?", I chuckled out loud. Eduardo explained that the river crossing had become

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dangerously fast and wide with the recent rains so up and over the ridge was the alternative. The narrow, steep, loose-footing-covered trail forced us to dismount and climb the slope that earlier I would have sworn only a mountain goat could scale. Thunder echoed throughout the valley as we led our horses. A rainbow in full color shone over us as the trail finally widened allowing us to remount. After inching our way down to a crossable portion of the river cold, wet and exhausted, Alex, a female cop from Alaska, and I managed to muster up enough energy to set up our tent. Scrambling in to change out of my damp clothes I was delighted to see Tatiana at the door with hot soup in hand. The warm liquid quickly heated us up. When the rain finally stopped the setting sun shone



on the grazing horses as we ate hot pasta by the fire. With the soft alpaca saddle blankets under my sleeping bag I dozed off to the sounds of the river below.

Just as Eduardo had promised, our uniformed escorts on mules joined us for the last hour's ride to the border the next day. The wind whistled across the barren crossing, marked only by plaques and busts of San Martin and O'Higgins. We dismounted, carried our bags across to the Argentinean side and prepared to break out the champagne when a hail storm suddenly came upon us. Huddling behind the jagged rocks we lunched as large chunks of hail hammered down upon us. Not the most forgiving mountains, I thought to myself.

Now heading downstream on my new mount, a stocky chestnut, Eduardo explained that the rivers each flow away from the border. The Aconcagua mountain silhouetted the sky as we sang songs from Arlo Guthrie to ZZ Top around the fire, our bellies full of scrumptious beef stew.

The next day I watched the mules swim across a wide river with our supplies piled high. The green valleys, back-dropped by layers of coloured mountains, turned into canyons boasting white travertine rock on one side and volcanic rock pushed up by glaciers on the other. Every time we turned a corner a unique ecosystem revealed itself. At 3,400 meters we dined on pizza cooked on the open fire while admiring The Southern Cross and Three Marias star formations in the huge sky before the moon crept over the mountains.

The early morning sun gave the white travertine rock a fluorescent glow. The ponds mirrored the snow-capped mountains. Sipping on coca leaf tea to aid against altitude sickness I watched the backlit gauchos herd the horses to camp. Eduardo's favourite campsite was a perfectly painted canvas in every direction.

Proceeding in what Alex coined "slinky formation", the lead mule stopping to wait for everyone to catch up then starting again, we switch-backed up 1,100 meters in three hours. Snow formations resembling small stalagmites iced the sides of the trail. Pausing briefly to look for fossils while the horses caught their breath, the highest point rewarded us with stunning views. At 4,500 meters every movement required a huge amount of effort.

During our descent my horse took an alternate route than the lead mule. The loose footing under the snow gave away and down we went. Like a movie in slow motion I landed on my backside, got my feet out of the stirrups and with Andres instantly behind me to make sure I was ok, we recovered quickly.

After nine hours in the saddle, collapsed in the soft grass at the campsite I heard Peter, who learned how to ride to do this trip, exclaim, "I am both exhausted and ecstatic", in his thick British accent. I agreed. We broke out the wine and champagne and celebrated the crossing of the pass.

Washing by the river the next morning I could not believe it was almost over. Paul, a journalist from Buenos Aires tried a mule for the last day. We rode up flat slabs overhanging





Dinner on first night.



Last campsite.



Heading to the big climb.

red rock surrounded by “hoodoo” formations to a full view of the rugged landscape. The red rock soon turned to desert and as we descended the sights and sounds of civilization slowly took shape. Like waking up from a wonderful dream, I didn’t want it to stop.

With tack off, our mounts rolled in the paddock. We dined in the small town of Uspallata, famous for housing Brad Pitt while filming the movie Seven Years in Tibet. Oscar, an Argentinean who had hardly ridden before the trip, recollected galloping after a runaway mule. Mary Lynn, a 67-year-old ex-ballerina considered purchasing her husband’s mount to take home to Colorado. Plans to do the Salta trip together in November took shape.

When asked if I would do the Crossing of The Andes ride again my only question was “when do we leave?” This was an adventure that will be impossible to top! 🐾

Shawn Hamilton's passion for horses had her changing careers from the advertising industry to equine photography in 1984. She is the owner of CLiX Photography, co-author of several children's books on horses and regularly is an official photographer at international horse shows such as the Olympics and the World Equestrian Games. She lives on a small farm in Orono where she keeps five horses, one of which she is eventing.



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Trips Available:

Andes Crossing – Chile – Argentina;
8 days
Patagonia – San Martin de los
Andes; 4-7 days
Mendoza. Upsallata; 4 - 7 days
Salta valles Calchaquies; 4-7 days

Crossing a small creek in the valley

