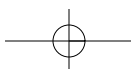


Riding Through Time in The Calchaquí Valley

Article and photos by Shawn Hamilton





The geographically secluded Calchaquí Valley is perhaps one of the most historically significant areas of northern Argentina. Named by the Spanish conquistadors in honour of Juan Calchaquí, a *curaca* (native chief), for his loyalty to the Spanish during their struggle for power in the 16th and 17th centuries, this valley remains home to the Calchaquí tribe whose traditions have not swayed far since that time.

On a bus from the town of Salta, a short flight from Buenos Aires, my husband, Joe, and I sit with the 11 other guests and three guides from Pioneros outfitters on our way to a small farm west of La Vina. Lunch, consisting of fresh roast chicken cooked

in a round mud oven, is followed by an adjustment of stirrups and tightening of girths, marking the beginning of our journey back in time. The mules, loaded with five days' worth of supplies, join us in line as we ride over ridges of cascading greenery winding back and forth over the Rio de Sauco. The barking of domestic dogs and crowing of roosters gives way to song birds. Yellow espenillo flowers spot the hills where a flock of colourful Jacaranda parrots swoop into a tree. "Take note of the thick vegetation," advises Eduardo, owner of Pioneros. "It will soon disappear."

Just above tree line, an opening exposes a small mud brick house, or adobe. A native woman greets us with a smile and

*Above:
Our group, ready to hit the trail.*

*Right:
The author/photographer with Delfin,
the youngest gaucho, at the Alto de
Chile.*





If you have a few extra days, Pioneros will also take you to see the Iguazu falls, ride the train to the clouds, go white-water rafting, fly fishing and even visit the mummy museum, which is worth a visit.

In Salta, the Museo De Arqueología De Alta Montana, which is open to the public, contains the preserves of three children belonging to the Inca culture found naturally mummified over 6,000 meters high in the mountains. Also in the museum is La Reina Del Cerro (The Queen of the Mountain) who, after being discovered, was stripped of her artifacts and traded off, but has been returned to her native Salta region where her naked mummified body now resides.

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offers snacks of homemade cheese and bread with *dulce de leche* (a sweet milk-based spread). The gauchos untack our horses, turning them out into the lush valley for the night. Sipping Argentinean Malbec, my favorite red wine, we soak in the view. *Empañadas* made with ham, onion and cheese, cooked over hot coals in the tiny kitchen, are quickly devoured before we stake out our sleeping spots on the floor inside the adobe. Immense darkness falls when the candles are blown out, and we rest up for tomorrow's last climb over the ridge to the valley.

A hawk circles above the mountains as the morning sun burns off the mist. The gauchos return from the round-up one mare and one mule short, but don't seem to be overly concerned.

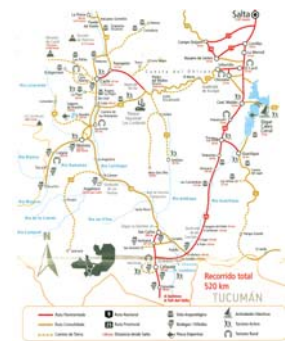
The gauchos and guides dismount to tighten our girths before riding each steep pitch up or down, while condors watch us from above. Close to the top of the last ridge, Damien, one of the gauchos, gallops past me on his horse. The missing mare is seen grazing on the hillside of long golden grass, unaware of the gauchos hot on her trail. Camera in one hand and reins in the other, I run up the hill to help. The mare's attempts to outwit us end when the lasso of Delfin, youngest of the gauchos, lands over her head.

The barren desert floor of the Calchaquí Valley is in full view as we make our descent. We stop at an adobe with a long bench made from *cardon*, the woody part of the local cacti, leaning against its mud brick walls, which provides a perfect resting place.

While the tables are unpacked from the mules and set with checkered tablecloths in the traditional Pioneros fashion, Alfredo, one of the guides, points to an oasis in the distance. Miles of nothing but dry red dirt lie between us and the hint of greenery on the horizon.

Back on the trail, just as the arid air and hot sun begins to take its toll on us, we arrive in the town of Amblayo, named after the Amblayo River that runs (or trickles, this time of year) through its center. In the dining area of a small *finca* (ranch), we sip on *yerba mate*, an Argentinean tea, drunk through a *bombilla* (metal straw) from *mate* cups made from gourds, wood, ceramic or horns.

Cafayete, a popular tourist town known for its vineyards, lays only two mountain ranges to the south, but here in Amblayo, time has essentially stood still. A short three months prior to our



Map of Calchaqui Valley
 Trail from Amblayo to Isonza

arrival, the government finally introduced electricity here, powered by a generator which runs between sun-down and midnight. Boasting a small school and a church, this town has provided shelter for the Calchaquí tribe for over a thousand years.

In the hub of town, 16 of us squeeze into the narrow store which also serves as post office, telephone service and bar, to share a few beers and challenge each other to a game of *zupa*, where the task of tossing large coins into a metal frog's mouth can be daunting, but fun.

The sky is lit up with stars on the walk back, the Southern Cross in full view. I am asleep before my head hits the pillow, until woken by the barking of dogs chasing two stray donkeys down the main street the next morning. The rising sun paints the mountains shades of red as I quickly dress to stroll through the town.

Willow trees hang over the Amblayo River's edge. Hoofbeats echo under the bridge where I stand as a native leads his horse across. "He is a Paso Fino cross," he proudly informs me in his native Spanish. Pasos are highly

regarded in Argentina, and many are crossed with the local Criollos to create an affordable equine with some quality Paso blood. I pass a farmer planting beets by hand in his yard and stop to chat with his kids before returning to the ranch for breakfast.

Mounting up, we head out to the flat, washed-out riverbed for an invigorating gallop. The angular flaps on the sides of our local saddles provide protection for the horses from the thorns of the large cacti which break up the red desert scenery. The only tree in sight for miles provides little shade for lunch.

During our afternoon ride, I hear, "please take my picture!" as Eduardo gallops past me, disappearing down a bank. Cresting the ridge, I spot Eduardo and Alfredo perched on the top of a massive rock outcrop on their horses. Pioneros's guide, Andres, motions me to follow him behind the formation to a slippery slope heading upward. "You have got to be kidding," I mutter nervously.

Having witnessed Criollo trail horses handling more difficult terrain than this in the past, I put my full trust in my

Opposite page, clockwise from left: The sturdy, surefooted horses wore saddles topped with thick blankets, which provided comfort for the rider during the day and a bed at night. The ranch owner's wife in Isonza crushing corn with a rock. Shawn's husband, Joe, on the trail.

Below: Eduardo and Andres on the road to Amblayo.

Below left: Pioneros owner Eduardo, right, with gaucho Delfin, at 9,000 feet.



mount and followed Andres up. My horse is braver than I while standing at the rock's edge, but is cautious on the descent. My heart pounds as Andres coaches me down the slope, "*sin miedo* (without fear), *Shawn*."

That evening, we walk to the church to climb the bell tower. The setting sun casts long shadows on the mud tombstones below. I spot a farmer working his fields with a horse-drawn plow in the distance. Inside the church, we admire its simplicity from one of the pews. I remember reading that Juan Calchaquí converted to Catholicism to please the Spaniards.

Back at the finca, Alfredo pulls out a guitar and Argentinean music and folklore fills the room. Just before midnight, when the town shuts down, Eduardo reminds us to pack up all of our gear in the morning. "Tomorrow we head to Isonza," he informs us, "a small town known for its homemade cheese. The valley's dry air perfect for its curing."

Water heated by a wood fire provides a luxurious hot morning shower. As I walk back to my room, a litter of puppies squeal from inside an unused mud oven which their mother has chosen for shelter.

We watch with amazement as the local farrier trims our horse's feet with nothing but a sharp knife and a stick used as a hammer, cutting away the overgrown toe. The school children wave from the playground as we head out of town on our horses. Following an old Inca trail to a small plantation of cacti, believed to be a sacred place of worship, we dismount to look for ancient pottery pieces, some still displaying the original paint motif.

A welcoming breeze blows as we lunch under a willow tree beside a small stream. After a dessert of pears topped with cream, I squeeze in a short siesta while the horses graze beside the mud-walled corrals housing a few cows from the nearby farm.

The fiery Isonza sky at sunset.

Next stop is the "Alto de Chile" — Argentina's own Grand Canyon. Nervously perched on my horse on the edge of the ridge, I look way down to the gorge floor with its bordered layered walls of red, pink, and brown.

Our arrival in the tiny town of Isonza coincides with the end of the school day. Backpack-laden children in uniform head home on horseback. The school houses approximately 30 children and boasts the town's only computer with internet access!

The setting sun sets the sky on fire as I sip mate at the edge of the pond on the finca where we are staying. After dinner, in complete darkness, I lay on a cardon bench at the pond's edge, admiring the stars to the sounds of an orchestra of frogs. I find it hard to believe that tomorrow will be our last ride in the Calchaquí Valley.

The roosters crow their morning chorus in the backyard where I sit with the ranch owner's wife as she crushes corn with a rock in a stone bowl. Her life is etched into her face, but her smile is uplifting. While out looking for her sheep, who are late returning from the fields that morning, we pass a pond reflecting the mountains on its surface. Riding to a small gorge, we dismount to explore a crevasse displaying ancient pictographs of small llama figures painted in the rocks. Before returning to town, we ride to a small farm where a woman invites us in to show us her beautifully coloured saddle pads made from her own sheep's wool. These pads provide not only comfort for horsemen on long rides, but just as important, a bed for those cold nights on the trail.

As we mount up to leave, the woman hands Damien a two-month-old lamb as a gift to take home. We canter along the bottom of the painted gorge, Damien beside me holding the reins in one hand and cradling the lamb in the other. Both seem very content as the lamb's head bobs up and down to the horse's gait.

Back in Isonza, we say our goodbyes to the gauchos and hop on the bus to Salta. Navigating hairpin turns while climbing the mountain range, the bus swerves to avoid washouts in the road. With my head leaning on Joe's shoulder (I am impressed with my husband for surviving five to nine hours in the saddle each day), I reflect on the ride. In previous excursions with Eduardo and his crew, I have viewed northern Patagonia from horseback, as well as survived the extreme seven-day crossing of the Andes from Chile to Argentina. But this experience had its own charisma, bringing us closer to the culture that shaped this part of the country and providing an intimate view of the Calchaquí Valley's natives and their relatively isolated society. I am grateful for Pioneros for sharing with us this peoples' strong connection to the past.

The plane takes off and the mountains fade farther and farther away. I am envious of the simple life we have left behind, but in Argentina it is never goodbye, but rather "Hasta la vista" — until we meet again. 🐎

