



RIDE 'EM, COWGIRL!

Feeling frisky as a colt? Well, stop champing at the bit and saddle up for the greatest hell-for-leather trails in the world. Compiled by Daisy Finer



ILLUSTRATION: DAVID HOPKINS; PHOTOGRAPH: AFRICAN EXPLORATIONS, ISTOCK



CHYULU HILLS SAFARI, KENYA

Where am I heading? Deep into the Kenyan bush for a riveting six-night adventure. The tented camp moves location every day.

Who's in charge? The devilishly good-looking Patrick Stanton – a talented horseman and serious giggler who has an uncanny ability to match rider and steed at first go. He is also your guide to the flora and fauna, and will spot volcanic-black frogs the size of your fingernail (which no one else would even see with a magnifying glass).

What are the horses like? Incredibly well schooled. Despite the chance for exhilaratingly fast, long gallops, complete with jumps around every corner, they never get out of control.

Need to know The tack is English and almost all the saddles are Wintec, which saves a lot of fisticuffs over who gets the best one.

Do I need to be fighting fit? There's a maximum of 12 riders, with four to seven hours in the saddle each day, so amateurs need not apply. Stragglers and strugglers are left by the wayside (or sent back to camp).

What will I see? The most African Africa you could ever experience. You are surrounded by a jungle jigsaw puzzle of wild animals: giraffes, gazelles and, of course, elephants (the largest tuskers in the continent) – and when your horse's ears ping forward you know there's the possibility of seeing a lion. Patrick carries a gun on the walking safaris

(which come at the end of the day), but on horseback he's like Indiana Jones with a whip that will (hopefully) frighten any big cats away.

Will I go hungry? Everything is cooked over open coals: three-course feasts with pumpkin soup, barbecued pork chops, lashings of vegetables and epic puddings, like homemade meringues (how?!).

Where will I sleep? In a mobile tented camp of surprising smartness, run with efficiency and precision – guests are outnumbered by the Maasai staff by at least two to one. Gabriel, with his winning smile, will take your order for whisky and sodas ("Would you like another?" he is always conspiratorially asking you). Tents are large, wonderfully old-fashioned and fantastically comfortable, with bucket showers and a loo with a wooden seat. Every morning there's hot water in your washbasin and you're given a flask of steaming tea and a biscuit.

Poetic moment Eating breakfast with snowcapped Kilimanjaro rising before you. And Patrick jumping over the dining table on his horse Kruger, before the ever-patient Maasai re-lay the table. Again.

Top tip Stay at ol Donyo Lodge for a few nights at the end of your ride – heavenly.

Book it African Explorations offers six nights from £4,250, including flights, transfers and activities (africanexplorations.com or 01993 822443). ▷



CASTELLO DI RESCHIO, ITALY

Where in the world am I? Woodlands, lakes and a fairytale castle on 2,700 completely private acres of lyrical Umbrian countryside.

Who's in charge? Owner, Count Antonio Bolza, who bought this magical estate of ancient crumbling farmhouses in 1994. He fell under the spell of Andalusian horses as a boy, watching the famous Lipizzaner at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, and decided to found an equestrian centre to train and breed them for dressage.

Where am I heading? Nowhere taxing. Come here to dip into la dolce vita – amazing food and wine, sunshine, pools and then, before you doze off, incredible horses with dressage lessons on site, as well as hacking around the estate or taking part in children's pony acrobatics.

What are the horses like? Historically, Andalusian horses have been considered too short-legged/necked for dressage. Undeterred, Count Antonio hired legendary instructor Antonello Radicchio to train the horses in the French School, which admirably involves no force. The fact it takes twice as long to train them does not daunt the count. The experience is exceptional and even the tack room has a glittering chandelier and staggeringly attractive grooms.

Where will I sleep? Pick from nine absolutely delicious villas, all of which combine Italian grandeur with quirky charm. Expect frescoed walls, mosaic floors, swimming pools and jaw-droppingly beautiful Italian gardens. These guys know what they are doing.

Will I go hungry? Not if chef Marco can help it. Reschio has its own osteria, which is charming, intimate and relaxed, with log fires in winter and an enchanting terrace for happy summer evenings.

Poetic moment It's hard to beat the high of finally persuading the count's magnificent white Andalusian stallion to break into an extended trot at the end of your first-ever dressage lesson. The concentration required is so intense that you may not even realise it has happened until you dismount and are congratulated by Antonio himself.

Top tip If boy's toys are your thing, check in to the Palazzo – a large, imposing, almost theatrical villa with 360° views, a gym, cinema, barrel-vaulted wine cellar and billiards room.

Book it A week at Noci villa from £6,565 for four people; dressage lesson, £110; riding lesson, £80 (reschio.com or 00 39 075 844 362).



COXILHA RICA, BRAZIL

Where am I heading? To the relatively unvisited state of Santa Catarina, riding between fazendas (farms). This cattle-country is like something out of a Western, with open plains you'll want to charge across. Luckily, the horses and the gauchos feel the same way, and you can canter to your heart's content.

Who's in charge? The dedicated pairing of Belgian Paul Coudenys and cattle farmer Roberio Bianchini. What are the horses like? They're local criollos. Small and nifty, very responsive and trained to neck-rein, turning quickly to work among cattle. Strangely, the cowboys don't always give them names, so guests can DIY ('Gwynnie', perhaps, for the horse that does peculiar yogic stretches of an evening).

Do I need to be fighting fit? The gauchos don't like walking much and tend to move at a fair pace, but the terrain is easy, with huge rolling expanses and very few fences to worry about. You'll break each day for lunch – usually at a fazenda, where the family will feed you so much beef, pasta and salad that you'll need to be winched back into the saddle. After lunch you can snuggle up to your sheepskin numnah for a quick siesta. You'll usually ride about six hours a day.

What will I see? Rolling hills, craggy valleys, ancient monkey-puzzle forests, plenty of birdlife and free-roaming cattle and horses. What you won't see is anyone else, bar the occasional roaming herder.

Poetic moment The horses, cowboys and riders swimming together in a lake at the end of the day.

Book it Ride Worldwide offers seven nights from £1,575, full board, including transfers and activities (rideworldwide.com or 01837 82544).



ILLUSTRATION: DAVID HOPKINS; PHOTOGRAPHS: AMANDA HOLMES; ISTOCK; SOPHIE MONTAGNE



MACATOO, BOTSWANA

Where in the world am I? After flying to Maun, you'll be picked up by jeep and then transferred by boat, swishing your way through endless water lilies, to a half-million-acre private concession in the mind-blowingly beautiful Okavango Delta.

Where am I heading? Base is the Macatoo Camp, from which you will ride into pristine wilderness every day, seeing not another soul.

Who's in charge? John Sobey, a cheeky chappy with an impish sense of humour who wants to ensure everybody has the best time. 'Take a good look at those chipmunks eating your breakfast – that's all the wildlife you'll see this afternoon,' he jests, before you enter a ridiculously enthralling *Jungle Book* adventure.

What are the horses like? A mix of Namibian and Hanoverian thoroughbreds, Kalahari-Arab crossbreeds and 17-hand Percherons, with one to suit everyone, even the slightly overweight huntsman. The bigger breeds don't make way for bushes, and simply barge straight through them. You change horses several times during the trip, which keeps you on your toes. Be careful of all-conquering Caesar – before you know it, you'll be leading the ride.

Need to know This trip, started by Sarah Jane Gullick, is almost considered a rite of passage by those on the inside track.

Do I need to be fighting fit? At times your horse will be swimming through deep waters and long grasses (with you still on top), so you do need to be competent and confident.

What will I see? You'll find yourself galloping with herds of giraffes or dazzling zeals of zebras – totally thrilling views one minute, peaceful and calm observation the next.

Where will I sleep? In supremely comfy and eerily isolated semi-permanent canvas tents. As you are walked back to your room, there are visitations by elephants, deer and the occasional lion – which all adds to the excitement. Be warned: snoring, farting elephants can be a source of sleepless nights.

Top tip Non-riders can easily accompany friends, enjoying endless hours of boat rides, walking safaris, fishing and the chance of seeing even more wildlife than those on horseback.

Book it *Wild and Exotic* offers seven nights from £4,020, including flights, transfers and activities (wildandexotic.co.uk or 01439 748401). ▷



HOMOKI LODGE, HUNGARY

Where in the world am I? Less than two hours' drive from Budapest, in the Puszta, with its vast, spectacular sandy plains, dotted with dense poplar, oak and acacia forests, and remnants of shells, fossils and even Celtic gold. This magnificent landscape is peppered with small homesteads connected by long, straight sandy tracks – absolutely ideal for safe, fast gallops. You'll be based at Oliver Christen's charming Hansel and Gretel farm, Homoki Lodge.

Where am I heading? Out to the Great Hungarian Plain every day, which allows for endless exploration and adventure. No holes, no fences – this is the Mongolian steppes without the hardship. The feeling of openness is elating. While the rides are ideal for those who are hot to trot, the pace of the day is perfectly civilised: you'll let loose between 9.30am and lunch, for which you'll either return to base or have a picnic. Then there's a two-and-half-hour ride before dusk.

Who's in charge? Oliver Christen is legendary. He knows how to put everyone at ease – on some afternoons you'll be offered seven different palinkas (like grappa; only better).

What are the horses like? Whoa, these babies are up for the gallop. Beautiful and well primed – and a mix of various old Hungarian breeds from Furiosos to Kisberis, Arab and Thoroughbred crosses – they are all highly responsive. Satisfaction for speedsters.

Need to know Temperatures range from -30°C in winter to 40°C in high summer. In May and June, the wildflowers are incredible: Hungary looks like England must have 200 years ago.

Do I need to be fighting fit? If you're not up to speed (safety comes first), you might be separated and taken on a very long, boring trot while everyone else is racing away.

What will I see? Deer jump out at you, appearing from nowhere – you may have to jump out of their way. There are wild boar, huge hares, nesting herons and other birds of every description. The wonderful tobacco plants smell exquisite. Nothing escapes Oliver's notice – he'll point out the horrible tree with the

thorns that were supposedly used to crown Jesus. The gallop through the tobacco fields and wildflowers is possibly the most sensational ride ever.

Will I go hungry? Don't miss the peach compote (you can pluck the fruit from the trees as you ride) at breakfast, or the cured ham and fresh eggs with paprika. Lunch and dinner are comfort food at its best: macaroni cheese, potato gratin, homemade sausages, goulash cooked over an open fire (be warned, vegetarians are considered an oddity here). One lunch is a magical picnic in the woods of just-caught carp with lots of fresh bread and wild strawberries, on a table laid with sunflowers.

Where will I sleep? Oliver is a trained architect and has converted this small farmhouse into a guesthouse without losing any of its local charm – it has painted shutters, wooden beds and pretty Hungarian textiles and is thoughtful without being contrived.

Poetic moment The gorgeous horse and cart ride to the very basic pub, pulled by two enormous grey coldbloods, is wondrous. The clip-clop of their hooves on the road, the serene feeling of being in a carriage with its gentle suspension and the scenery floating past all make you feel as though you've gone back to the 19th century. It's a shock to see anybody else at all (spotting a car will outrage you), but when you do, everybody looks as though they've stepped out of a novel – headscarf-bedecked women tending their gardens or hardened farmworkers. The evenings are also a highlight – the galloping grooms turn into dashing, twinkle-toed dancing partners, as chivalrous as any cavalier. The national zither champion comes once a week, bringing music and beauty (he is so handsome).

Top tip Don't write Hungary off as boring – this is a real gem. Those in the know keep it a closely guarded secret. Even the most intrepid riders will be enthralled.

Book it *In the Saddle* offers seven nights from £1,000, full board, including activities (inthesaddle.com or 01299 272997).



ESTANCIA RANQUILCO, ARGENTINA

Where in the world am I? The Ranquilco adventure begins in a pick-up at the small town of Zapala (a flight or overnight bus ride from Buenos Aires). Drive into the Argentine cordillera to Buta Mallin (Big Meadow), where the gauchos will feed you, pile your bags on a mule and send you, guided, into the Patagonian wilderness.

Where am I heading? Wildest Patagonia. No phones, internet or even vehicles can reach this unique estancia, a good three hours' ride from anywhere. Tailor the trip to your tastes – base it all at the ranch, pack-trip into the Andes for days or mix it up as you please. Let the guides show you their favourite spots, tie the horses, pick cherries and drink mate (herb tea), then head back for a feed or load up a mule and ride to a tucked-away camp to swim in rivers, build fires and sleep under the stars.

Who's in charge? The ranch is family-run by a Californian and Colorado crew. Your host, TA, is utterly laidback, all soft-spoken charm. His sister Sky is pure gaucho, while patriarch Ashley looks every bit the Marlboro Man.

What are the horses like? Sturdy Criollo ponies and whizzy Arabs, rated by their speed. Maybe start on adorable pony Chocolate, then upgrade to grey Arab Caviahue, the 'third-fastest horse on the ranch'.

Need to know Mate etiquette: the host has the first cup, drunk through a straw called a bombilla. It is then refilled with hot water and offered round to each person in turn. Saying thank you means you've finished; disturbing the bombilla means you're a cretin.

Do I need to be fighting fit? The terrain can be tricky and good core balance will help, but the horses are extremely careful. They're used to neck reining, so ride one-handed, sit deep into your pillion (sheepskin) and relax. If your nerves are still a little wobbly, a Cavic (red wine, usually from a box) stash in your saddle bag seems to do the trick.

What will I see? Real gaucho tradition mixed with an addictive hippie vibe. By day, see snow-capped mountains, hidden lakes, fish-filled rivers and soaring condors in epic country. By night, the asados (barbecues) are the most fun. Finish the feast, drink wine from the jug, find a fabulously yummy guide to teach you the tango and dance till you drop.

Where will I sleep? Enchanting grown-up treehouses and the cutest cabins house appealingly mismatched antique furniture, well-thumbed books and pleasing curios. Hunker down at bedtime under a duvet, listening to the crackle of an open fire. Every room is built for its view.

Poetic moment Dressed in ponchos, cantering out to round up horses as the morning rain stops, the sun comes out and a perfect double rainbow hangs in the mist.

Book it *Top 50 Ranches* offers seven nights from £1,300, full board, including activities (top50ranches.com). ▽





HIPPIKOS CENTRE, PORTUGAL

Where in the world am I? Nestled in the hills of Vila Verde, near Braga, converted farm Hippikos is wrapped in vineyards and sheltered by pine trees. Arrive to a big meal, chatter and introductions, then a quick tour of the stables. Your needs are sussed out from the start and you are matched to a horse for your first of five days' riding. **Where am I heading?** This is a one-stop shop. Be up for breakfast or lessons – whichever comes first – and carry on training all day. You have three hour-long classes, be they pure dressage or a combination of pole work and jumping, and you can also spend time watching other groups for tips. Respite comes from lolling poolside or cooing by the fire in winter.

Who's in charge? Antonio Soares is the most captivating and warm host. He truly lives for the place and insists that you must treat Hippikos as your home.

What are the horses like? A mixture of purebred Lusitano stallions for dressage and warmbloods for jumping. These horses have many buttons, so if yours is walking backwards, you've squeezed the wrong bit.

Need to know Be selective in your colour of jodhpurs. You are going to sweat: black is safe; light blue is not.

What will I see? Your riding will improve in ways you didn't think it could: you'll finally develop that elusive 'feel', where you stop tugging reins and flapping your heels and start riding with your body, really 'talking' to your horse. Such intense training does wonders. Hacks can be arranged at request, but they're not really the point here.

Where will I sleep? In converted farm buildings that have fetching bedrooms with views of the church, laden lime trees and the valley below. Fresh flowers and fruit appear daily on lace-topped wooden chests, and night-time disturbances amount to a nearby whinny or woof.

Poetic moment Dressage discipline fights every hunting-born urge to ride jockey-length and gung-ho. The moment you stop taking motorbike corners and simply ride a whole lesson in a great outline is joyous.

Book it *Seven-day dressage and showjumping programme* from £1,400, full board, including all activities (hippikos.pt or 00 351 917 323 397).



SINGITA GRUMETI, TANZANIA

Where in the world am I? Singita Grumeti Reserves, Tanzania – 350,000 acres of the western Serengeti, whizzed into from Kilimanjaro by teeny plane. Landing on the dirt-red airstrip scatters zebras and ostriches – an apt introduction to the safari.

Where am I heading? From one indulgently comfy base to another, across huge landscapes teeming with game. Head out from the immaculate stables at Sasakwa, riding to the Explore mobile camp and on to Faru Faru Lodge, via plain and bush, through rivers and scrub, tracking hippos and elephants, leopards and lions.

Who's in charge? Ali and Martin are your guides and you'd be pushed to find more amiable, knowledgeable folk. A lifetime's varied equestrian career means that South African Ali has a sixth sense with the animals – she's practically half horse. Martin caught the safari bug on holiday and left the UK for a life in the saddle. He's marvelously reassuring (his rifle helps) and is a zoological mastermind.

What are the horses like? The best. Gleaming, happy and truly fit. Kept in impeccable stalls where tsetse-fly-caused sleeping sickness is staved off by twice-daily temperature checks and regular blood tests on site. Ali matches you to your horse with a thorough questionnaire. Whether you like a pocket rocket or a schoolmaster, she'll find your foot-perfect, unflappable friend.

Need to know Martin understands animal behaviour and you will learn heaps from him. A splayed-fingered hand at the side of his head means a buffalo in the bush – shhh. If he says, 'Walk quietly' – creep silently behind. Should he say, 'The elephant's really not happy – she's coming this way, let's go,' then leg it.

Do I need to be fighting fit? Most important is riding ability. There's regular ducking, diving and log-hopping, so natural superglue on the bum does wonders. **What will I see?** Unveiled, close-contact, real Serengeti. Gazelle herds bounce wide-eyed next to graceful giraffes that appear impossibly from behind lone acacia trees. Zebras buck as you canter past and elephants shift silently through the bush.

Where will I sleep? All of the base camps are beyond top-notch. This is glamping at its best. Voluminous beds envelope you, writing desks are equipped with paper and paints, showers are piping hot and loos have proper seats and actually flush. Despite the luxuries, when the high-pitched zip of your tent goes down, lions rumble and there's no escaping the raw sounds of the Serengeti night.

Poetic moment As you canter home in the hazy late-afternoon sun, hundreds of animals suddenly join the mini-migration. As camp appears in the distance, the giraffes, gazelles and zebras disappear as instantly as they arrived.

Top tip Sleep with canvas windows rolled up. Through mosquito screens, the blood-orange sun rolls up over the horizon to illuminate a jaw-dropping vista of acacia-dotted plains.

Book it *African Explorations* offers three nights from £2,805, full board, including flights, transfers and activities (wildandexotic.co.uk or 01439 748401).





EXPLORA ATACAMA, CHILE

Where in the world am I? High up in the astonishing Atacama Desert, at Hotel de Larache, the traveller's must-visit hotel in this neck of the woods. We're talking natural chic, with perfectly judged architecture that keeps the distant mountains centre stage. The scenery is spectacular – the snow-capped Andes, an endless sky and a vast, alien and thoroughly mesmerising landscape. Prepare to be wowed.

Where am I heading? A short ride on day one helps the team spot any lack of experience, offering extra help where needed – so no pressure. But if you're scared of heights, take a deep breath. You'll be tackling some of the biggest sand dunes you've ever seen, along with narrow crevices. Some rides keep you in the oases and others take you across the desert and up into the foothills of the Andes. The full days are long (nine till five) but invigorating (more gobsmacker views). Frequent stops are made for drinking water and taking pictures, with longer breaks for picnic lunches.

Who's in charge? Each night before setting out, your guide will give you the most riveting slideshow (really) explaining the history and geology of the area. Additional horses are loaded up with saddlebags, so you don't have to carry anything, plus all the kit you need in case a horse casts a shoe (quite likely on this terrain).

What are the horses like? Not your average plodding trekking ponies. Explora gets all the horses from a farm in Santiago and they are a mixture of Chilean breeds and Thoroughbreds, hardy and trained for the long days at high altitude.

Top tip Ensure you plan a stopover in Santiago, which will break the hellish length of time it takes to reach this unique area.

Poetic moment? Watching the sun set over the Andes as flamingos gracefully wade through the Laguna Tebinquinche.

Book it *Enchanting Travels* offers seven nights from £2,970, full board, including internal flights, transfers and activities (enchanting-travel.com or 08000 988486).



COLONIAL HACIENDA RIDE, ECUADOR

Where am I heading? Up, up and away. Through the famous avenue of volcanoes and then up the side of a couple of them, reaching 13,000 feet (just below the base camp of Cotopaxi, where the air is thin but the horses just keep going). Onwards, up the Zuleta Valley, to the peaks of small mountains around Cayambe volcano and on through eucalyptus and pines into the Cotopaxi National Park. Six days of contrast and beauty.

Who's in charge? Sally Vergette, an energetic Englishwoman who is passionate about horses (given the option, she'd probably come back as one) and her team of local Ecuadorian chagras (cowboys). Great fun to ride with.

What are the horses like? Local Criollo crossed with Andalusian, Thoroughbred and Peruvian Pasos – all very well prepared. You'll get a change of horse so you'll never get a tired steed. McClellan saddles come with built-in sheepskins for extra cushioning.

Do I need to be fighting fit? Lots of canters and riding at altitude does make you short of breath on occasion, but the days in the saddle are a mixture of long and shorter.

What will I see? Some days you'll feel like you're on top of the world, riding in the clouds, while on others you'll wind through the back alleys of rural villages, spotting a Quechuan woman with a baby sling on her front, and a very happy piglet inside too.

Will I go hungry? Expect plenty of chicken, salads, quinoa soup and small, sweet, honeyed pastries. Thankfully you won't, at any point, be offered the national delicacy, guinea pig.

Where will I sleep? A different spot every night, from La Cienega, a grand colonial hacienda, to the charming farm of San Agustin, built on the site of an ancient Incan palace.

Top tip Tack on a trip to the rainforest. You've come all that way, so you might as well.

Book it *Ride Worldwide* offers seven nights from £1,850, full board, including transfers and activities (rideworldwide.com or 01837 82544). ▷





OROMO HIGHLANDS, ETHIOPIA

Where in the world am I? In a part of East Africa like no other. This is the birthplace of mankind, a spiritual land, where Christian Orthodox and Muslim religions flourish alongside tribal animist beliefs, and where the skeleton of 'Lucy', a 3.2-million-year-old bipedal hominin, was found.

Where am I heading? North-west, into the lands of the Oromo – an ancient tribe of horsemen – for a six-night trek into the wilderness. You'll be riding about 15 miles a day through remote country where foreigners are rarely seen.

Who's in charge? Yves Stranger, a charming Guernsey-born chap, who arrived here on a journalistic assignment 10 years ago and never left – partly because he met his Ethiopian wife Lydia, but also because he just loves the country.

What are the horses like? Small, locally bred Abyssinian ponies – light-footed and brave. Importantly, since there are no fences in Ethiopia, they all have good brakes. **What will I see?** Vistas that will make your heart sing. You'll cross meadows filled with wildflowers and endless fields of tef (a local crop) bending in the breeze, ride through dense forest, skirt rocky gorges and witness vast skies.

Where will I sleep? In two-man dome tents pitched on high plateaus, or in local villages. The terrain is high and it can be cold at night, so take a warm sleeping bag.

Poetic moment A breathtaking sunset with a glass of chilled wine in your hand, as you stand high up on the edge of the Blue Nile gorge, watching Lammergeiers (bearded vultures with eight-foot wingspans) swoop below. **It takes some beating.** **Book it** *Ride World Wide* offers eight nights from £1,405, full board, including transfers and activities (rideworldwide.com or 01837 82544).

ILLUSTRATION: DAVID HOPKINS. PHOTOGRAPHS: ISTOCK. SCOTT DUNN, SHUTTERSTOCK



SNOWY RIVER COUNTRY, AUSTRALIA

Where in the world am I? South-east Australia, a three-hour drive from Melbourne.

Who's in charge? Mike Watson is far from the copper-bottomed cowboy you might expect. He's clean-shaven, affable and dedicated to giving guests an authentic experience.

What are the horses like? Mike has more than 60 horses and never falters on a name. They are expertly trained without being dullards. This is no nose-to-tail plod – there's plenty of galloping but also some steep hills and the odd giddy drop. Even so, you can trust a Watson steed. At a cliff edge, Mad Max (as one horse is worryingly called) turns as docile as a retiring librarian.

Do I need to be fighting fit? It helps if you can stay on a horse, especially when the thing's cantering, but you certainly don't need to be an expert. Even if long hours in the saddle leave you looking like a bow-legged Eli Wallach, it's nothing a bit of stretching won't sort out.

What will I see? Beautiful rolling hills, rivers, woods, mountains and, from the top, 360° views through the dramatic, ever-changing light. Best of all, and from just about everywhere you look, families of kangaroos, boinging to and fro, sleeping in the shade or simply peering curiously at you from behind the safety of a tree. And, oh boy, what trees... Majestic peppermint gums line the rivers and the air is soporific and thick with the smell of eucalyptus.

Where will I sleep? If you want the full camp-and-swag holiday under the stars, it's there for the taking. But for those who prefer cool sheets in a comfy bed after a long day outside, Mike and Wendy have opened two properties, one of which is an old pioneer wooden homestead with Victorian camphor lights and patchwork bedspreads – it's the real deal and wholly charming.

Top tip Take the kids and stick them all in the homestead, with its funky multi-bunk bedroom, which looks like it could sleep dozens. They'll have a blast.

Poetic moment Each time you let go of your nervousness, inhibition and (quite often) the reins too, as you splash through those big swollen rivers.

Book it *Scott Dunn* offers five nights from £2,400, full board, including activities (scottdunn.com or 020 8682 5060). ▷



LA BAMBA DE ARECO, ARGENTINA



Where in the world am I? Prime polo-playing pampas, two hours' drive from BA, near San Antonio de Areco, home of Gold-Cup-winning team La Bamba. This is the stuff of Jilly Cooper novels. Approach the estancia through an avenue of trees edged by immaculate pitches, escorted by achingly handsome cowboys trailing a herd of loose ponies behind them.

Where am I heading? From pony to pool to polo pitchside and back again. This estancia is a retreat that lives and breathes Argentine equestrian culture, celebrating local craftsmanship and gaucho history.

Who's in charge? Emelia, your host, has a twinkle in her eye, but is faultlessly professional, ensuring every need is met. She is quick to offer the questionable local tippie, fernet and Coke, promising the taste gets better.

What are the horses like? Pure Criollo ponies, faultlessly mannered, but with spirit and character, and ridden in handcrafted traditional tack. Note their sharpness and speed of turn when the herders work cattle.

Need to know The Argentine horse culture lives in every corner of La Bamba but the key is to relax and indulge, so don't expect any daredevil riding.

Where will I sleep? In *Princess and the Pea*-height, four-poster heaven, where the paper-crisp sheets are turned down for you every evening. Weighty door keys hang on stirrups and rearing horses adorn the walls.

Poetic moments Outriding the lightning as you canter through a thunderstorm with a herd of young ponies hot on your heels.

Book it Double from £330, full board, including all activities (labambadeareco.com or 00 54 11 4519 4996).

ESTANCIA HUECHAHUE, ARGENTINA

Where in the world am I? A couple of hours' drive from Bariloche, through astonishing Patagonian landscape. **Where am I heading?** The estancia specialises in eight-day pack trips to Chile, but also offers shorter stays with gutsy guided rides around the gigantic farm.

Who's in charge? London-born owner Jane Williams is a wonderfully formidable woman, quite in contrast to very sweet Georgie, who runs the guesthouse and works miracles in the kitchen. Guide Diego cares for the horses with the help of Gunthar and Luis, the 'horse tamer'.

What are the horses like? A brilliantly cared for, characterful bunch. They are mainly homebred Criollo, but there are also bigger, weight-bearing types. Each has its speciality: Meadow (aka 'Fat Boy') is a dependable armchair, great for admiring the view; to herd cattle, Zorro is master of the round-up, nimbly dodging armadillo holes, expertly accelerating and turning at the slightest touch to move the cattle on.

Need to know The weather changes in the blink of an eye. Pack saddlebags with layers and expect to use them all.

Both the sun and the wind can be ferocious, so slather your face in super-high SPF and bring a hat.

Do I need to be fighting fit? Even cutting cattle and cantering around the estancia will bother unexpected body parts. An eight-day romp to Chile is no mean feat, so good core strength will give both your and your pony's back a break.

Where will I sleep? In large cabins with pretty white embroidered bedsheets, shaggy sheepskin rugs, vases of roses and views of the orchard or the mountains.

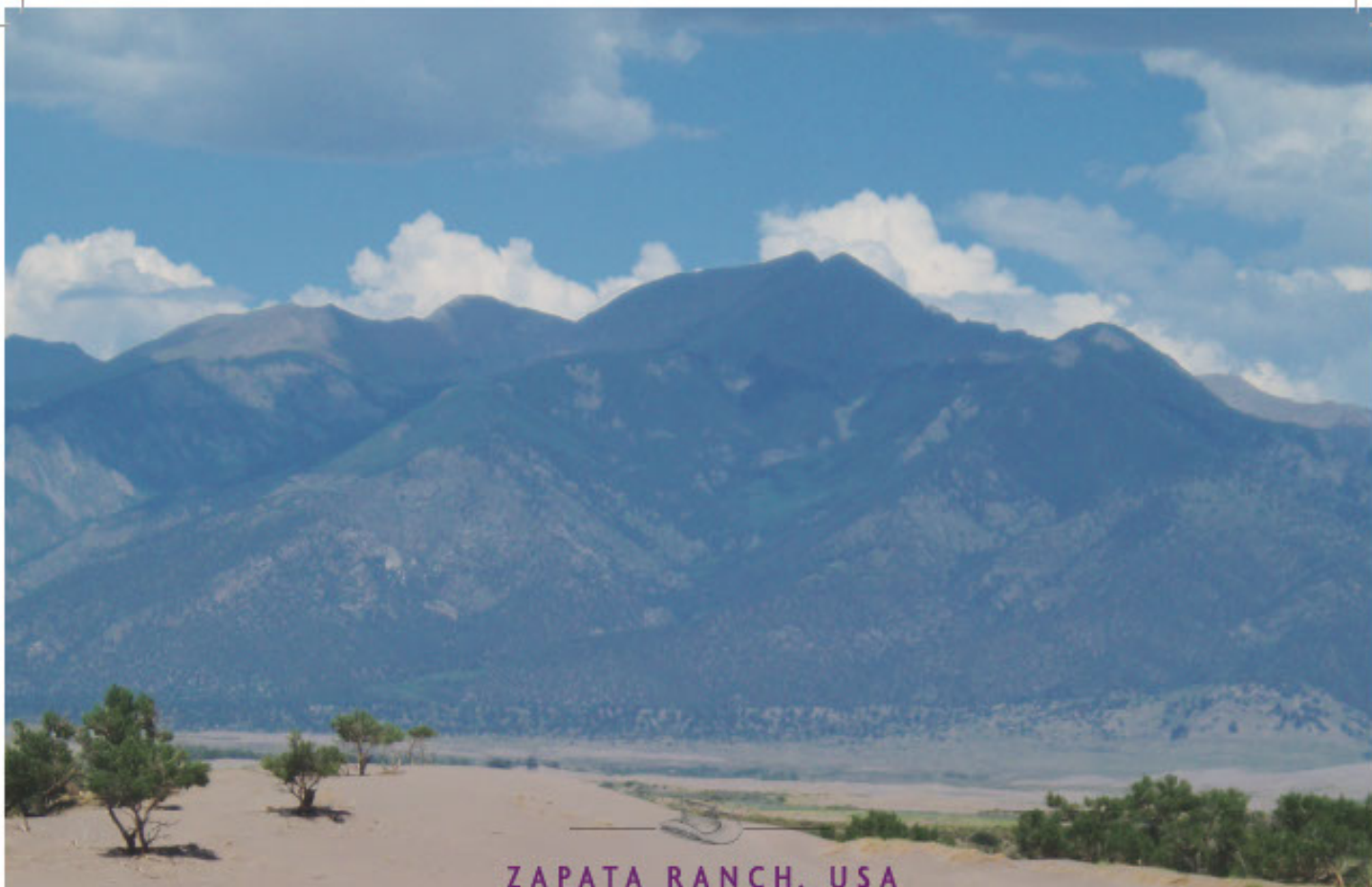
Poetic moment OK, we know it's not cool to leave your helmet at home, but there is no feeling like bounding full pelt on a horse, across a dusty mountain with the sun on your head and the wind in your hair.

Top tip Rounding up stock is great fun, especially if you're a nervous novice. Get stuck in – you'll be whooping and whistling at speed before you've even time to worry.

Book it *Top 50 Ranches* offers seven nights from £1,689, full board, including riding, activities and transfers (top50ranches.com). ▷



ILLUSTRATION: DAVID HODGKINS; PHOTOGRAPHS: EYE JONES, WALLY SWILL, ISTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK



ZAPATA RANCH, USA

Where in the world am I? Southern Colorado, at a historic bison and cattle ranch, set on one of the most scenic and ecologically diverse landscapes you could ever wish to explore. You can get hands-on experience of estate management and conservation, and a feel for what it's like to be a real cowboy. Yee-haw!

Where am I heading? Zapata is a working farm and, as well as helping out with cattle-branding weeks, you can learn how ranching and conservation go hand in hand, from the ground or from your horse. Each day you'll saddle up and traverse the high-desert grasslands, wetlands, sand dunes, creeks and lush meadows.

Who's in charge? The acreage is owned by the Nature Conservancy and is managed by the Phillips family, led by the truly innovative Duke and Janet. And the family ties don't stop there, as all the children in this third generation of riders are involved in the business too. They believe so passionately in their way of life that it's difficult not to be swept up in it all.

What are the horses like? The American Quarter Horses are responsive and well disciplined, and are chosen specifically for your needs. Tuition and advice are always on hand to build confidence and hone riding skills if required. You'll be hooked on the western saddles in no time.

Do I need to be fighting fit? The day is yours, so it depends on how hardcore you want to get.

What will I see? If 2,500 bison isn't enough for you, take a sunrise ride through the Great Sand Dunes National Park and watch in awe as the Sandhill Cranes migrate through the San Luis Valley, or take a nature walk across the summit of one of six 14,000-foot peaks in the stunning Sangre de Cristo mountain range.

Will I go hungry? A wise man once said to eat local and eat fresh (OK, so that might just have been Jamie Oliver) and that mantra is followed here. Chef Mike Rosenberg serves Zapata's own grass-fed bison in a relaxed, low-key dining room in the main lodge. Meals are buffet style and all the guests eat together. It's a great opportunity to recount the wildlife spots of the day.

Where will I sleep? Much of the accommodation, which includes the Zapata Inn, Bunkhouse and Stewart House, dates back to the 1800s. The beds are covered with high-quality linen and topped with big, fluffy pillows – just the ticket.

Poetic moment Riding through the herds of bison and their young calves, then cantering across the vast plains into the desert-like national park, with the southern Rocky Mountains as a backdrop, is just awesome.

Top tip The ranch isn't licensed to serve alcohol, so stock up in town half an hour away and bring your own.

Book it *Top 50 Ranches* offers seven nights from £1,425, full board, including activities (top50ranches.com). □

