

# Learning the ways of Tucumán's Aconquiya

A three-day horseback ride to isolated settlements in an unforgettable backcountry of northern Argentina

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Every time I passed through San Miguel de Tucumán and looked up at the white Christ statue of San Javier and the upper-crust enclave of Villa Nougés atop the ridges of the Aconquiya range nearest the provincial capital, I wondered what was on the other side of the mountains. What lay between these icons of modern Western civilization and the town of Tafí del Valle in the eponymous valley which was once the seat of an interesting pre-Hispanic culture? In the 40 km of mountain ranges "as the crow flies" between the two points (a three-day ride on horseback) there are no roads, just trails. As a result, everyone must drive a roundabout 102-km route to get from one place to another on asphalt.

So when an invitation to visit some of the homesteads in this area with the Cabra Horco trail ride outfit came up in November, I couldn't say no. Especially since the outfit, run by young business school graduate Nicolás Paz Posse with friends from the city and the Aconquiya backcountry, had won raves from a demanding adventure travel agent friend of mine some years ago, and the *Lugares* travel magazine's 2008 award to the Best Guide and Small Business undertaking. "They can't be wrong," I thought. And they weren't. Good, reliable mountain-bred horses, quality riding equipment, exceptional views, contact with local people, and above all good service on the trail and in the family home and inn where we stayed during the three-day excursion were the ingredients of an unforgettable ride.

The outfit is the result of Nicolás' years of riding for fun in the mountains with his friends in all sorts of weather, combined with the growing popularity of "ad-

venture" tourism at home and abroad. He equipped family farm homes in key places in the mountains with bathrooms with showers, habitable bedrooms and basic training, and went into business.

Raco, the hill town vacation spot 50 km from the capital that is the official headquarters of most rides, runs a yearly mountain horse contest that was the source of my little steed. Nicolás had been trying to buy it for some time from its owner and was able to do so only when it came second in the 2008 contest. Small and wiry but sturdy and calm, it thus joined the Cabra Horco stable with its original, unflattering name of Sangre de Toro, which refers to its blood-bay coat.

This year's rides will take place from April 10 to December 18, or until summer rains set in. The rainstorms make trails slippery and unleash landslides and flash floods that have on occasion swept away bathers and riders who happen to be crossing rivers. So, even though a drought has been on for a long time, responsible ride outfitters in the region don't take tourists into the mountains in summer.

Our ride set out from a farm near Siambón, skirted the highway briefly and then followed a road on the bed of the Río Grande, paved with enormous water-transported rocks and practically dry at that time. After a brief passage through a stretch of mountain cloud forest, the trail snaked up through alder woods, then *chaco*-type brush and finally bald grassy hill tops like the one where we had a picnic lunch.

Riding along an east-west-trending stream in a narrow canyon, we saw impressive vegetational contrasts: arid *chaco*-type bushes clung to the canyon side that had been blasted by winds from the province's northern

desert area, while rainforest-type vegetation with mosses and ferns luxuriated on the side blessed by humid pampean winds from the south.

I am still digesting the absolute solitude in which homesteaders live. You can ride for hours on trails that zig-zag down precipitous mountainsides without seeing a soul until a ray of light pierces the clouds and spotlights a single farmhouse far, far away down a mountain valley off to the right, with no neighbors in sight. Locals go down to town to buy provisions once a month, river levels permitting.

During our first night at a modest family home in the Anfama settlement, locals from really far out in the bush showed up with a boy who had had convulsions, because they knew that the provincial government's rescue helicopter could be summoned to the clearing in front of that house at daybreak. They had travelled for six hours on foot and horseback at night on mountain trails to get there.

All the tony rustic-chic furniture (including mirrors) of the boutique inn on the Las Queñuas private nature reserve, where we spent the second night, had been brought on pack mules. The reserve, located on what was once an enormous ranch, is owned by a rancher and former provincial tourism official who gave outpost families deeds to their homes when he bought the property.

This year 17 rides are planned on different itineraries in the mountains, including five on the one I did to Las Queñuas.



The group poses at one of the rest stops with the best landscape. Just outside the picture frame is a pre-Columbian menhir.



The lunch table at the La Hoyada outpost.



Children at an outpost pose for a photo.



The horses are saddled early in the morning at Las Queñuas for the return to Raco.



Everything in the Las Queñuas Lodge was brought by pack mules.



Entering the cloud forest on the way down to Raco.