

A Peruvian Cabalgata

(Trail Riding - Peruvian Style)

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We guide a tour to Peru annually to see the National Show and the historical sites of Peru. Cheryl Aldrich and I coordinated the 1997 event, with constant assistance from Dave Johnson and my husband Dale Downey. We take our group to visit breeders and many social events. One of the most exciting in '97 was a *Cabalgata*. Typically these Peruvian trail rides are 15 miles in each direction if completed in one day, or 30 miles in each direction if a two-day. We pick up the story here on a day when our group was invited to two events, and most decided to visit the beautiful Hacienda of Sr. Olaf Hein.

While the majority of the group has been enjoying the hospitality of Sr. Hein, the rest of us are zooming across town in a microbus to participate in a large *Cabalgata* (organized trail ride). The ANCP CPP planned this ride, which marshaled at the Mamacona show grounds. Seven of our thirty-six people had decided this was an essential event, and Peter Koechlin had generously offered to find horses for us to ride. When explaining the activity options to the group, Cheryl and I had insisted that only very experienced riders join in the *cabalgata*, since we had no control over what horses might be offered to us.

When we arrive there are dozens of horses and riders milling about. Peter meets us and takes a head count of the horses available, and dispatches a *chalan* to find more and get them saddled. He gives me a gorgeous palomino -- one of his show mares -- and warns me she has a lot of *brio* and likes to go. Jocelyn Trimble, Joyce Brown, and Jayne McCartney mount up on very reliable horses. Rick Cones is up on a stallion which seems well behaved. Dale gets a young strong gelding, brand new in the bit. Cheryl's grey seems very quiet (in fact she wonders out loud if he is already tired). There are about

eighty horses and riders preparing for the ride and the scene is a little chaotic, but the horses are handling it well.

As we leave the show grounds we go down a dirt road amidst auto and bus traffic, then cross a major highway onto the sand dunes. Our group is near the tail end of the long lines of horses. None of our "loaner" horses lack energy. They are not keen on traffic, and want to go full tilt boogie. To my relief, we cross the highway without incident, but spread out in the process. I can no longer see everyone in our group and I hope they are not having trouble with their horses.

I cannot believe it but Rick, behind me, is actually filming with a camcorder as he tries to hold his horse back with one hand. He says we will need Graval to watch the videotape. Cheryl comes by and tells me her horse has gotten a second wind. The grey gelding is no longer acting at all tired and -- like my mare -- wants to go somewhere between a fast gait and a gallop the whole way. Dale rides by on his chestnut, which can gait extremely fast. Only Jocelyn and Joyce's horses are really smooth and cooperative in this situation. Cheryl and I let the others go ahead, hoping we can calm our horses by riding together. We come over the dunes, practically sliding down the steep sand. The wind gusts strongly across the rise and my hat goes flying. The horses are both prancing and half rearing, anxious to keep up with the herd, and neither Cheryl nor I are sure we can hang onto them if we try to dismount. I'd hate to lose my new Panama hat, but it would be a much bigger problem to lose the horse! I stare helplessly at the runaway *sombrero* and cast about for ideas. Chivalry is not dead, at least not in Peru, and a gentleman who sees my predicament rides up and gets off his horse to retrieve it for me. I gratefully jam it under my elbow and concentrate on staying in gait while Cheryl and I catch up to the rest of our horses' stablemates. Now we are in the middle of the eighty horses, which have formed three sub-groups strung out in long lines. The people in the first group stop, so we do too. It turns out that only the third group knows which way to go. We watch as they turn across the valley and we head off to meet them. Then we climb over large rocks and skirt piles of junk on the "trail." Our horses seem very accustomed to picking their way through whatever is in the path.

We go into a treed area, then stop at a clearing to wait for the stragglers. Peru has gone cellular phone crazy and someone is calling the office -- even though it is Saturday -- from the back of his horse. Most of the horses are very fit, but a few are breathing hard and it is evident they do not have enough conditioning for a fifteen mile ride at the fast pace we have been traveling. Ours seem in great shape, and we fervently wish that they would get tired.

We push on through the fields, riding on a road between two lines of trees. My horse has decided she must be with the front runners so by then I am riding alone, with only about six horses ahead somewhere. I'm acutely aware of her mouth and do not want to damage it. This horse is afraid of the Holstein cows she sees, and practically every farm has one. That gives her an excuse to hurry even faster. The road now has walls on both sides and we are crossing irrigation ditches. There is a series of bridges over irrigation canals, which must be crossed single file due to huge holes that could swallow our mounts. The horses pay no mind and act as if they would march into the jaws of death, if only they could only get to the front of the pack. Suddenly the breeze is blocked by tall trees, and the dust is inches deep on the road. The air is so thick with it, I cannot see the horses that must be less than fifty feet in front of me. I can hear the beat of their hooves, and my palomino wants to catch them. We are choking from dust, sweaty and filthy and our hands hurt from the constant give and take of the reins. Now we know the reason for the typical Peruvian ponchos and scarves. Where are they when we need them? Surely we must be close to Peter's hacienda.

The dust clears as the road becomes hard again. Suddenly Dale appears from behind me on his gelding, which has never missed a beat and is the Peruvian equivalent of the Energizer Bunny. He keeps going and going, gets way behind as Dale checks on other people then *paca-pacas* back up to the front, passing everyone effortlessly. Dale jokes that he's doing the *cabalgata* twice. I hold the mare back again and soon fall in step with Rick. His horse is starting to wear down and I'm most envious.

We round a few more turns and just ahead, I spy the turn into Peter's driveway. But disaster looms, in the form of a marching band standing there waiting to greet us. I am sure that the palomino knows the way home, but equally sure she will object to the drums and horns. I feel her gathering herself as she hears them..... with my body I coax her to be "calm, calm, calm." This does no good. She sees band and spooks, bolting madly across the highway at a dead gallop. The bit means nothing now. An old man waves his arms at her, succeeding in turning her off the pavement and down the dirt lane toward her home. Once on her own turf I am able to reduce speed and she is back under control as we arrive at the hacienda. I gratefully dismount and turn her over to the stable hand waiting for her. Horses are being tied to trees all the way down the long road, to wait for the other half of the ride. I'm glad our portion ends here -- we are tired! Cheryl and I make sure that all of our riders have arrived safely, then bolt for the bathroom to wash up. We burst into laughter at the sight of the rings of dirt around our eyes -- we look like raccoons! All five women share a the tack room sink with one available towel and a tiny trickle of water from the faucet. The men are waiting outside the door, and finally we turn the room over to them. The well must be on a timer though, because just as they begin rinsing off, the flow of water stops. Rick and Dale, accepting this with their usual wry humour, clean up the best they can with our damp grimy towel.

The *cabalgata* has taken much longer than we expected, but even so our van is nowhere in sight. Apparently the destination has been mis-communicated. It arrives later, after we have toured the adobe stables, partaken of the buffet and seen the sale horses. By now we are too late to meet the main group, so we head back to the hotel to wait for them. We are exhausted but agree that the experience was unique and that we would not have missed it for anything. ☞