

The Man From Snowy River – Peruvian Style

by Mimi Busk-Downey

In April 2002, we took a group of people to Peru on our annual National Show tour. Our group was diverse, having people from Canada, all over the US and Australia, and Holland. We had a great time at the show, saw 600 horses, and visited lots of breeding farms. We also enjoyed guided tours of museums, ruins, and learned about Inca and pre-Inca cultures.

After the show, 16 people came on a *Cabalgata*, which is a Peruvian trail ride. It was a three day event. From Lima we took our bus to Chincha, two hours south on the coast. We arrived at the ranch in time for lunch, and marveled at the architecture of our hosts' home, a graceful style with open-air beams and no protection from rain or insects. Our hostess told us that it never rains there and there are no bugs to bother us!

After lunch we walked over to the stables, where our horses were being saddled. Horses were matched with riders and we set out. My horse, *Yago*, was one of the smallest, barely 14 hands. His mane had been roached and was half-grown out, so he looked a little like an Icelandic. Dale's horse was one of the biggest at 15.2. All the horses were in endurance-type condition, lots of energy and not much extra fat.

The first ride took us out of town on a dirt road, then across a desert track. There was some vegetation, bushes, and in places irrigation provided trees. Variations in terrain were created by dry washes and long stretches of the trail were flat.

After three hours we rode down a winding trail to the Pan American highway, and crossed the highway toward the ocean. We rode to the beach and sat there on our horses as the sun was setting. As we looked out into the sea, a large school of dolphins began jumping in the surf. They played for ten minutes while we watched, mesmerized.. It was truly a magical moment that we will always remember!

We turned toward the ranch and rode up a canyon, then through the town. It was dark by then and traffic zipped by. The horses were steady and our *chalan* helper signaled the cars before they came past us. This did make them take a wider berth, but had no effect on their speed.



At the ranch the stable hands took our horses and we boarded our bus for a quick trip to our accommodations. After many turns on dark deserted roads, we came to a wall with large double doors. Our driver honked, and out came a man with a clipboard. (He was expecting maybe *another* busload of gringos that night?) As we drove in we were stunned by an expanse of arches on the veranda of the ancient hacienda that would be our home for two days. Upon getting settled, we found that the rooms had 14 foot ceilings, and

the courtyard was a magnificent expanse of tile, trees and flowers. We were offered the typical Peruvian cocktail, *Pisco Sours*. Dinner was being prepared, and as we relaxed we learned that the Hacienda was built in 1677. In its heyday it had over 1200 acres and there had been 1000 slaves to work the land. It had passed through the hands of successive decendants until 1821. On Christmas day that year, the owners were killed, on the beautiful veranda in front of our rooms, during a slave revolt. Beneath the hacienda is a system of catacombs, which had rooms to bury the dead, and ones to confine rebellious slaves. There is a tunnel that runs 70 kilometers from the ocean port to the hacienda, and another one to the neighboring hacienda. This was used to bring the slaves from the ships, so they would not know the terrain and be less able to escape.

After a restful night's sleep, we awoke the next morning and enjoyed our breakfast under the colonial archways. Then we boarded the bus and drove into the mountains, where the horses awaited us. We drove up and up, passing the place where our guide thought the horses would be. We found them a little farther on, and signaled to the truck to stop and let the horses out. This "Peruvian horse trailer" was a large open-topped truck that held 16 horses, tied head to tail. There is no ramp. It backed up to a large mound of dirt that was on the edge of a cliff, and they opened the back doors. The horses had enough room to get out of the truck and turn around, but not much more. The horses were already saddled, so it was up to each rider to grab their horse as it was led out and wait for a helper to put on the headgear. All the horses behaved well. I noticed we had an extra helper and then I noticed that the trail we would be going down was steep. Very steep. I anxiously watched for my little "Icelandic" Peruvian, as he had been very sure-footed.



Finally he was brought out, and I watched as cinches were checked, stirrups and bridles put on, people mounted up. All the others were ahead of me and Yago was fresh, so I let him gait fast for a few minutes. Then we stopped, and when we went on I cued him for a canter. He took the correct lead as I thought he would, since he was trained by a polo player. A few minutes of fast work made him remember the four hour ride of the day before, and then he was ready to walk. Our guide then showed us the path – no more than a llama trail down the side of the mountain. Steep! That had been an understatement. Ever see the movie "The Man From Snowy River"? Well, this trail was a little less steep than that! I was the only one on the ride that day who spoke both English and Spanish, so I told everyone to sit back, sit still, and let the horse do his work. Over the side of the mountain we went, leaving about 30 feet between each horse as we started down the. The mountain was 100% loose rock, and the horses were in it up past their fetlocks. With every step, a horse would balance and slide three or four feet. We had riders on the trip ranging in age from 12 to 75 years, and a couple of them had told us they were less experienced. They followed directions well, and had gotten horses that would just go anywhere, and they so they got along fine. It was a little nerve-wracking for some people, and I was worried since it would have been easy to

make a horse fall. However, our guide and three helpers were there to assist anyone having a problem.



We rode farther down into the valley, on a road wide enough to put five horses abreast for a while. There was a filmmaker doing a video, and he grinned at us from the tiny taxi that had caught up with us on the wide road. He encouraged us to ride in *barridas* and to wave and show off our horses.

We came to restaurant by a river (yes, on a gravel road seemingly in the middle of nowhere!) and stopped to let the horses breathe. There was a mountain lion in a cage, snarling and pacing, and at one point while we were near him he lunged at the bars with a mighty roar. Several horses jumped, but Dale's horse stood there two feet away and looked at the cat in defiance. Dale said he should buy the horse and take him hunting, except of course that he doesn't hunt!

We rode on through an old hacienda that had seen better days, and greeted the owners. They gave us a tour and explained how they had plans to renovate the old place. Ten years ago it had been a stronghold of the terrorist group *Sendero Luminoso*, until they were wiped out by the government. We then crossed the big river, and headed back to the restaurant. The horse truck was waiting for us, and so were Dave and Cheryl, who had not ridden that day. As the horses were unsaddled and watered, we walked down to tables by the river and were served a scrumptious lunch of shrimp that had been gathered just then – we had seen a lady on a burro bringing them in.

We arrived back at the hacienda in time for a swim in the pool – you might call it the *Cabalgata* swim team. The Canadians were first in -- Suzanne Brown, Joyce Brown, Dale and I. Then came some Texans, including our junior rider Christian. He loved the waterslide, but then so did all the big "kids".

After supper many of us toured the catacombs by candlelight. We could barely fit through the trap doors and passageways, and our guide explained that slaves being punished had been left there without any light at all, since candles for long periods would make the temperature lethally high. It was historically fascinating but sad to think of people treating other human being that way.

On day three we toured the hacienda grounds, visiting the cathedral with its elaborate alter and looking at the areas where the old workshops and slave quarters used to be. Then we walked down to the corrals where our horses had spent the night. We found our mounts and started off on our final ride. This *cabalgata* was guided by a Peruvian horse breeder who lived nearby. He took us through fields and small settlements on a wonderful agricultural tour. We rode past bananas, asparagus, grapes, corn and tomatoes. Small donkeys were tied here and there, ready to carry burdens back to town. We saw very small Peruvian horses tied by strings around their necks, awaiting their owners who were working in the fields. Hogs were tied to trees; chickens and goats

ran loose. Larry, Christian's dad, had brought candy to pass out to children, and once we had to gait fast to outpace the herd of kids chasing us for more. He wanted a photo of an old woman with her bundle, so she posed for him and then he looked for money in his pocket to pay her. About 30 cents is the going rate – but Larry had a five dollar bill and he gave her that, and she gave him a big kiss and a toothless grin!



After two hours we arrived at the our final stop at our guide's breeding farm. Again we enjoyed excellent hospitality and a lovely meal with all of the ranch's produce represented. We even had wine made from the grapes in the field! We had to say goodbye to the horses that had carried us so well. They had shown us the real Peru, from a vantage point atop well-trained horses that would go anywhere and do anything. We were sorry to have the experience

come to an end -- but many of us will go again, and find new trails to ride! ♦

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