

# THE GAUCHO

## Horseman of the Pampas

*Different language, nation, and customs, but the same passion for the cowboy life.*

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*Translated and assisted by Domingo Hernandez.*

One of the largest countries in the world, Argentina occupies much of South America, and from its arid high plateaus, valleys, canyons and colorful hills to Patagonia, land of lakes, volcanoes and glaciers, it is unique. The fertile plains of the Pampas, in the center, support most of the country's cattle ranching.

It was during Spain's first attempt to colonize South America in the 16th century that Spanish settlers brought shiploads of livestock from Europe. They brought them to the Pampas—a vast region with an abundance of pas-

tures and an ideal climate. Cattle adapted well to the pampa and spread widely, becoming wild between the mid-1500s and 1700s. It was during the Spanish Crown's second attempt

to colonize South America in the late 18th century that the Spanish settlers encountered thousands of head of wild cattle and horses, descendants of the livestock brought by Spaniards many years before.

With the abundance of feral livestock rose the need to domesticate the horses and hunt and slaughter the cattle for their hides and tallow; out of







*The Estancia Las Yervas in Tapalque, Argentina. For branding, gauchos usually catch the calves from the ground, roping the hind feet to prepare for the hot iron. RIGHT: Nestor Hirtz and son Santos are sharing a traditional maté, which is a bitter tea made from the leaves of a Pampas shrub. BELOW: Nestor's wife Mercedes helps get ready to ride. Her family owns several estancias in the Patagonia and Pampa regions of Argentina. There are eight layers to the saddle and she is about midway. OPPOSITE: The gaucho's facón is always tucked in the back of a belt, sometimes adorned with silver. The knife is used to remove the hide of an animal, to cut wire, to trim hooves, to eat meat, and even as a toothpick.*



*Pablo Lozano, Nestor Hirtz and Armando Deferrari bring the mares and foals to the pens for inspection and inoculating.*

*The parts to Nestor's fancy gaucho saddle. The soft wool blankets are used as pillows and covers whenever the gaucho spends nights out on the range.*





this came the gaucho, the nomadic horseman of the Pampas. In this vast rangeland of unimaginable dimensions and plagued with topographic accidents there was a need for a rugged individual with horsemanship skills, courage, good judgment and common sense. The traditions of the gauchos and of the American cowboys are similar in many ways.

Through the years the estancias (cattle ranches) were built and became productive establishments. Nomadic gauchos became hired hands, tending the cattle and horses. To cope with the needs of ranching, the gaucho created specialized tools such as the lazo, similar to the reata. It was made by hand of four, six or eight strands of braided rawhide or two or three strands of twisted rawhide and kept supple with tallow. To one end is attached an iron ring called argolla in lieu of a honda, through which the other end is passed and fastened to the girth of the saddle by the presilla, a type of fastener made of rawhide that utilizes a loop and a button.

The lazo's type and length depends on whether it will be used in a corral or out on the open range, and also on whether it will be used on foot to pialar (fore-footing) or on horseback to catch the animal for doctoring, branding or castrating. On average, the lazo measures between 18 and 25 meters (59-82 feet) in length. A design feature unique to the lazo is the yapa, a segment approximately two meters in length where the argolla will be attached, and consisting of additional strands of rawhide braided to provide more strength because it gets the most wear and tear.

Gauchos also depend on boleadoras, which is used for catching wild horses, cattle, deer-sized animals, and the ñandú (*Rhea americana*), a relative of the ostrich native to the Pampas that is an important part of their diet. The boleadoras consists of three balls made of wood, bone, or stone covered with rawhide and connected by three strands of twisted or braided rawhide of an equal length. One of the balls is smaller and is called manija (handle). This ball is held in the hand as the boleadoras is swung around and over the head and thrown by the gaucho while riding at a full gallop. The objective is to throw so that the balls swing round and round until the hind legs are tied together, and the animal falls to the ground.

Gauchos also need a tropilla (a personal string of horses), to cover the vast tracks of land on the Pampas. A tropilla consists of between eight and 20 geldings led by a dominant bell mare referred to as madrina. The bell mare usually is only halter-broke. The



*Fancy rawhide and silver reins and headstall made by Pablo Lozano for Nestor Hirtz. This set won Best of Show at La Rural, the national agricultural show in Buenos Aires. It took Pablo several months to complete. This is one of Nestor's favorite horses in the garden of the Estancia Las Yervas in Tapalque.*

gaucho places a wide strap of softened cowhide on the mare's neck from which he hangs a bronze or steel bell of a variety of shapes and sizes known as cencerro.

The sound of the cencerro helps the gaucho identify the location of his tropilla at night or during conditions of low visibility. Also, the horses identify the sound of their





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Silver headstall and traditional Argentine bit. ■ Boleadoras are attached to the rig underneath the blankets. ■ Fancy stirrup. ■ Traditional belt with antique coins. ■ Horsehide boot, with spurs. ■ Nestor Hirtz's collection of fine, handwoven matras (blankets), made by the Tehuelches, Mapuches, Araucanos and Pampas Indians from different regions of Argentina.

cencerro and remain in the proximity of the madrina while grazing or traveling. Even if they cannot see the mare, the sound of the cencerro helps vector the tropilla towards the madrina. It is a luxury for a gaucho to assemble a tropilla in which all geldings bear the same color or pattern. Often a horse in a tropilla bears a different color or pattern; this horse is referred to as a lunar, and is sometimes the gaucho's favorite mount. The gaucho travels with the madrina on a lead line and every other horse in the tropilla is loose.



No gaucho can leave home without his knife, called *facón*. It has a blade of approximately 12 inches and is carried on a rawhide scabbard stuck in the back of his belt. He uses

the *facón* for every conceivable purpose: to remove the hide of an animal, to cut wire, to trim the hooves of his horse, to eat meat, and even as a toothpick.

The broad leather belt that the gaucho wears is often decorated with antique silver coins that were minted in Potosi, Bolivia, for the Spanish

Crown centuries ago. The buckle that holds the *tirador* is called *rastra* and is generally made of silver, consisting of a large center-piece decorated with a traditional motif and attached to six short pieces of silver chains (three on each side) that on each end will feature a silver coin or a silver button.

Like the American cowboy, the gaucho

wears either specialized leather boots or the more traditional *botas de potro* made from the hind legs of a horse. The hocks form the heel and the leg is cut off just above the fetlock joint, so that when the skin has been cut through at the top of the leg, the whole of it can be drawn off like a glove. The hair is scraped off, and the boot is rubbed by hand until it becomes soft. The toe is either open or sewn closed. The boots have to be tied up above the calf with garters and resemble a soft leather sock. A pair of elaborate, fine silver spurs are often strapped to the ankle of the *botas de potro* with thin strips of rawhide.

Of course, the gaucho's all-purpose garment is the poncho, a simple woolen blanket generally rectangular in shape with a slit in the center to fit the head through. It hangs on the sides down to the knees and protects the wearer's back and chest from cold weather. Argentine ponchos range from the heavy and utilitarian type made of sheep wool to the





very fine made of vicuna wool. It is said that the finest ponchos made of vicuna will slide through a ring. Beyond its multiple uses and greater or lesser degree of quality and decoration, the poncho is a distinctive sign of regional and personal identity.

The gaucho's saddle is called a recado and it varies according to the taste or means of the owner. The topography of the terrain in which a saddle will be used determines the height of the fork in this hornless saddle. The recado is made of wood, covered with leather with a fork in the front and the rear, or in many cases they are made of two long rolls of straw covered with leather. In this rig consisting of several layers, first goes a sheepskin put next to the horse's back with the flesh side up, and next the wool blankets known as matras. Traditionally the matras are handmade by the native Indians—Mapuches, Araucanos, Pampas and Tehuelches—in a rectangular shape. Several folded matras will provide a



*When you find a gaucho, you will always find horses. This is one gaucho's tropilla in the Pergamino parade, which draws gauchos to the Fiestas de la Tradicion, some from thousands of kilometers away. They celebrate the gaucho heritage each November. AT TOP: One of the gauchos who traveled with his tropilla to the festival is getting his horses ready for the parade. During the later contests, other gauchos will try to steal his horses to add to their own tropillas. After the parade, hundreds of chorizos and dozens of rib cages of steers and whole sheep are barbecued to feed the gauchos at the fairgrounds. There is also bread and wine, but the meal is mostly unadorned and tasty meat. Dinner goes past midnight, and then the dancing starts and continues till early morning. To thank them for participating, three meals are fed to close to a thousand gauchos and their families at no charge.*





more comfortable ride for both the horse and rider, and they will make the gaucho's bed at night.

The next layer is the carona, a saddle pad made of heavy leather stamped into patterns, trimmed and bound to protect the saddle from sweat. The whole rig is held together by a broad girth made of softened cowhide called the cincha that goes on the bottom, and another broad piece of softened cowhide called encimera that goes over the top. Both will be fastened with two wide straps of softened cowhide that will secure the rig to the horse. Above the encimera goes the cojinillo, which is made of sheepskin and secured by a narrow strip of softened cowhide. And above the cojinillo goes a small piece of well-softened leather such as the hide of a carpincho or capivara, mountain lion or deer that is called sobrepuesto.

The stirrups are normally made of one piece of wood, but could be made of metal



*It was hot and muggy in Pergamino during parade weekend in November, with temperatures climbing above 90 degrees. These visitors and friends of contestants are watching the tropilla event and are happy to find some late afternoon shade. There are more than a dozen gauchos competing, each with a tropilla of from eight to 20 horses—most groups of matching color and led by a bell mare. They are competing for the best tropilla. Other gaucho events include jineteata (bronc riding), team penning, barrel racing and corrida de sortija—a timed event where gauchos race to a small one-inch ring hanging on a post and—at incredible speed—attempt to put a small lance the size of a pencil through the ring.*



*Poppy Colarden and husband Alejandro Moreno farm in Pergamino and Pila in the province of Buenos Aires. The Morenos grow soy beans and raise Aberdeen Angus cattle. For pleasure they compete in hackney races around Argentina. BELOW: Poppy, daughter Clarita (right) and a friend ride in a hackney in Pergamino's gaucho parade.*







*Pablo Lozano is one of Argentina's great rawhide braiders. He has won numerous national awards for his work. Pablo's workshop is in the hill country of Tandil, several hours south of Buenos Aires. He works with an apprentice, Martin Teils, who has been studying with Pablo for seven years.*

*TOP RIGHT: Pablo's hobbles are unique, each with different designs and buttons. This set of 12 was sold to a collector in Argentina. Some pieces of Pablo's braided work include more than 100 strings. One cinch took him six months to make and included 68 different braids and 690 strands of rawhide.*



*Pablo selects skins carefully and cuts his rawhide by hand. These are not the smallest strings he uses.*



*Pampa Cura runs Pulperia El Recreo, a gaucho museum in an 1880s old country store in Chivilcoy. Several buildings display artifacts from the height of the gaucho days. This is the wagon shop. LEFT: Pablo Lozano visits with Pampa and his dog at the museum's entrance.*





and inlaid with silver, made completely of silver, made of horn, or made of a combination of materials. They feature a somewhat small and narrow throat, intended for the gaucho to ride with the ball of his foot or his toes, whichever suits him best.

The bits in use by gauchos have changed little since the time of the Spanish conquistadors, from the snaffle with the mouthpiece split in the middle, to the more severe ring bits and the port bits, which are raised in the mouthpiece and feature a cricket or roller called *coscojo*, placed inside the port to give the horse something to do with its tongue and to relieve tension. Nowadays the bits have short-shank cheek pieces and feature a medium port with a cricket, often embellished with large silver conchos and a silver shank hobble called *pontezuela*, which helps prevent the horse from grazing while wearing the bit.

The headstall, reins, bosal, and halter are made of rawhide for everyday use. However, they are also made of fine braided rawhide, rawhide and silver, or pure silver depending on the intended use and according to the taste or means of the gaucho. Historically the gaucho has been willing to spend most of his



earnings on his horse, his true and loyal friend, and shows him with pride during social gatherings and festive occasions. Even the least well-off gaucho would wear his *nazarenas* (ornate silver spurs).

Like his American counterpart, the gaucho is an icon, but he is also threatened by technological advancement. But thanks to efforts by many stewards of his culture and heritage, the gaucho will remain on the Pampas for many generations, and in Argentine hearts and history even longer. ■



*The gaucho parade in Pergamino offers every kind of flash and tack. Even tiny gauchos get to ride. BELOW: Rawhide braider/writer Armando Deferrari, left, with his friend Nestor Hirtz from Tapalque.*



**Armando Deferrari** gave up his veterinary practice to pursue his passion for rawhide braiding and silversmithing, and his work is highly respected throughout Argentina. In 2008, along with fellow braider Pablo Lozano, he was accepted as a member of the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association. The TCAA, in alliance with the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, is committed to preserving the traditions of the North American cowboy. **Domingo Hernandez** was born in Cuba, lives in Miami, Fla., and frequently travels to Central and South America. He says, "I like helping to connect my cowboy and gaucho friends." Photographer **C.J. Hadley** is editor/publisher of RANGE.