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GAUCHO STYLE

A riding holiday in rural Brazil
brings adventure, music and memories

By KATE KELLAWAY

It is the first morning – we have been in the saddle only a minute or two – of a week’s riding in Coxilha Rica, a high plateau in the southern state of Santa Catarina in Brazil. Its gaucho culture makes it, according to Unesco, the world’s liveliest equestrian destination. Giancarlo, one of the gauchos escorting our ride, invites our group of 13 to form a circle. Short, stout and bearded, he wears a broad-brimmed straw hat, as if about to attend a garden party. He has a mean little knife in his belt and scuffed boots. Now he sweeps off his hat and everyone crosses themselves – hats off all round – as he recites the Lord’s Prayer in Portuguese. One might take the need to pray at this stage as a bad sign but, apparently, these gauchos seldom ride without praying first. Charmed, I murmur: ‘Amen.’

Yesterday, straight off the plane, we drove from Florianópolis to a shop selling gaucho gear: black sombreros that make you look dangerous to know, scarlet berets, butter-yellow boots, disarmingly fluffy slippers (for relaxing in after riding) and embroidered saddlebags so dainty they might be made to transport cucumber sandwiches. I bought a nice pair of pinstriped riding trousers – *bombachas* – with embroidered seams, and Giancarlo told me his grandfather wore the same style.

Brazil is vast, bigger than Australia. This area alone is the size of Belgium, yet with a population of no more than 400. To most of us,

rural Brazil is an unknown quantity, not defined by football, carnival or crime. A cattle-farming region, Santa Catarina was colonised by European pioneers in the 18th and 19th centuries and built on slave labour. Our ride, which goes from one fazenda (ranch) to another, covers 135 miles. I quickly discover that in spite of the space, or because of it, Brazilians are anything but solitary. Put two or three together and, within seconds, there is a party. I have never experienced a week of such exuberance, nor one in which I was hugged so often by strangers on their festive way to becoming friends.

Our travelling cook, Gida – a demure old lady – is introduced as a celebrity, which, in a way, she is. There is nothing demure about her cooking. Her breakfasts resemble birthday teas, with an emphasis on chocolate cake. Lunches and dinners are splendid with beef, lamb, chicken, endlessly inventive salads and puddings. And every stop is a fresh excuse for a jug of caipirinha, made with cachaça – sugar-cane rum – plus fresh limes, sugar and plenty of ice.

The rides are run by Paul Coudenys, a Belgian with a lovely sense of humour. The riding is outstanding, and unusual for its informality. It is a delight to make your own way in limitless space (while keeping the group in sight), riding six to seven hours a day. The Criollo horses are unflagging, sure-footed and sharp-eyed dodgers of armadillo holes. The Western riding style is relaxing and the saddle, a pile of

sheepskins belted on tight, surprisingly comfortable. My charming mare, Coroadá ('Crowned'), has a restlessness I share and a bumpy stride. The frisky trotting down steep hills on a long rein is dicey until mastered: it's as much about trust as balance.

As you ride, you become part of the rhythm of the hills. The landscape, with its generous grasslands, big skies and calm lakes, resembles the Brazilian character. There are forested valleys and araucaria (monkey-puzzle-trees) everywhere. They seem like impostors in the UK but look magnificent here in dark, imposing groups, their branches like candelabras. The earth is the colour of gingerbread.

We stop to swim beneath a waterfall – a dip of silvery effervescence – and spot an enormous turquoise butterfly, shining like glass. Each fazenda seems a mirage after the uninhabited miles. The most beautiful is the colonial Fazenda São João, with the proportions of a Georgian country house. It belonged to our senior gaucho Robeiro's great-grandfather. An Italian carpenter, he came to Brazil expecting the promised land and found nothing. Only when his furniture business took off did he become a wealthy landowner.

Fazenda São João was built by slaves; we are shown a rooftile that would have been shaped over a slave's thigh. In the hall, Robeiro's ancestors look out from black-and-white photographs: unquiet souls. The gauchos insist the house is haunted. A year ago, a rider, combing her hair in an old mirror, saw an old woman with long white hair mimicking her in the glass. And although ghost-proof, I wake in the night to an inexplicable slamming of doors and a draught, as if someone were in a hurry to move on.


The weather is semi-tropical by day, cool by night (the altitude is 3,000 feet). One afternoon, we go out with rain threatening. We pass handsome cattle, orange daisies and the odd orchid but concentrate on Daniel, a gaucho with a mischievous glint in his eye. Small as a jockey, he likes to race. He swings his lasso and

the cattle run for it. I suspect they know him and are not taking any chances. We gallop fazenda-wards to beat the storm.

But the greatest surprise of the trip is that the gauchos are more than flamboyant horsemen: they are superb musicians. One night, we gather round a fire in ponchos that make us look like Old Testament prophets. The stars above throw a Brazilian party, lanterns hang on trees and we eat sausages dipped in *manioc* (Brazilian cassava). Giancarlo plays guitar, giving it a bit of a beating, and sings from the heart, accompanied by virtuoso accordionist Paulo.

Giancarlo's voice has a soaring melancholy as

he sings of lonely foals and fickle women, but the love song that it consumes him most is about the province and his desire that it never change. He composed it himself – it is the ride's second prayer. He then teaches us the local anthem with its catchy refrain '*canta Catarina*' – sing of Catarina. And we do, all the way home. □ *Seven-night riding itineraries run from October to May and cost from £1,625 a person full board, including guides, equipment and transfers, with Ride World Wide (01837 82544; www.rideworldwide.com). Private departures can also be booked for groups of five or more. Flights to São Paulo and Florianópolis were arranged by Journey Latin America (www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk).*



Clockwise from above left: equipment hanging in the Fazenda Ferradura's garage. A horse skull in a treetop. Araucaria-trees. Gauchos by a waterfall at Fazenda São João. Saddles and other riding gear

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