

# Out of this world

*Incredible journeys, luxurious escapes...*



Two intrepid  
saddle riders  
take in the  
view from  
the top of a  
mountain.

## *My kingdom for a horse...*

A swirl of dust and kicked up sand, the sound of pounding hooves connecting with a world in motion — it's on horseback that we can best experience freedom.

From the remote gaucho frontiers of PATAGONIA  
to the ranches of AMERICA and stud lands of TUSCANY,  
PORTER rounds up the best places to ride off into the sunset.

Photography by Michael Turek

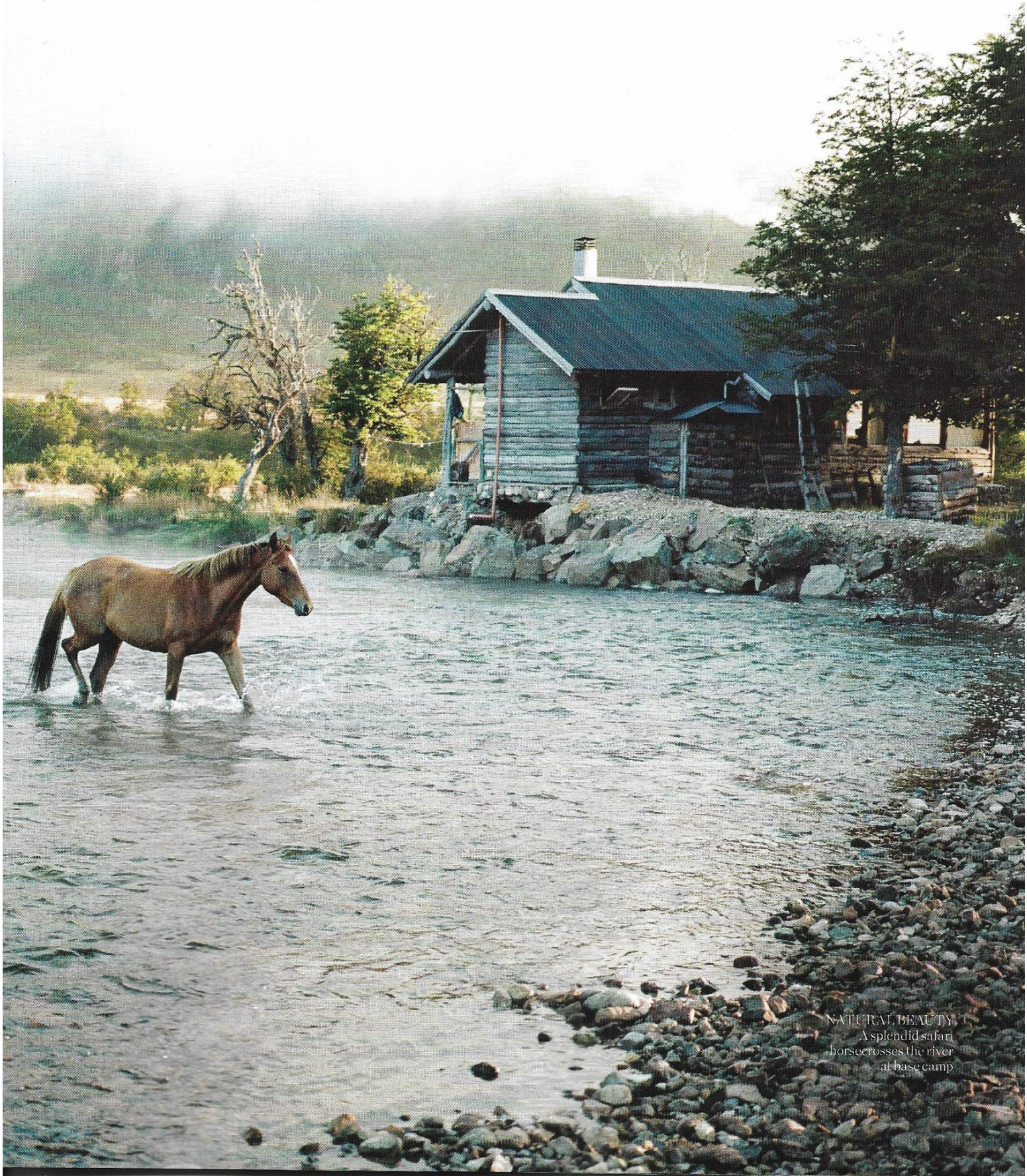


# Unbridled *Freedom*

What could be more liberating than exploring one of the most remote wildernesses in the world on horseback? Here, British author *Bella Pollen* braves mountain passes and sweeping rivers on an adrenalin-fuelled riding safari, as she falls for the raw beauty of PATAGONIA – a truly exhilarating and humbling escape

Photography by Michael Turek

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NATURAL BEAUTY  
A splendid safari  
horse crosses the river  
at base camp



**RIDING HIGH**  
The riders head off  
into the Patagonian  
wilderness toward  
the Pass of Torres.  
Opposite: Bella Vista,  
back at the main  
hodge at base camp

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*The carcass of lamb is butterflied in two, fixed to iron hooks and suspended upright above the burning embers of our campfire. It's been roasting for five hours now and a milky moon is hanging low over the mountains. Filipe and Cristobal, in their traditional gaucho outfits of bombachas, boots and neckties, lounge against a nearby tree, drinking mate and smoking cigarettes. It's 10pm and, despite a high tea of chorizo sandwiches smothered in chimichurri sauce, I'm overcome by a biblical hunger. I stare at the crisping meat, willing it to cook faster. The assembled company watch, mesmerized, as fat drips down the muscly haunch. One of the girls licks her lips. Granted we're in the 'butchocentric' surrounds of southern Argentina, but this is day four of a seven-night horse safari and, out here in the Patagonian wilderness, things are getting a little feral.*

These woods and their surrounding landscape are the back yard of our two gauchos, conscripted into service by the safari specialists with whom we are traveling. Filipe, a splendid dandy in his black hat and brightly colored hand-knits, leads the expeditions, makes the tack out of raw hide and, on our first night, transformed the farmstead where he lives with his wife, Marta, and their children into a

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makeshift camp as ritzy as any I've stayed in. Fresh water from the creek, cots in our tents and Marta, pulling a sumptuous array of breads, cakes and stews out of the primitive stove of their one-roomed cabin. Eating her cheesy polenta and beef in the clearing, encircled by poplar trees, a condor powering across a fierce sun, I couldn't imagine a more romantic setting, but then the edge of the earth is already the most romantic of concepts.

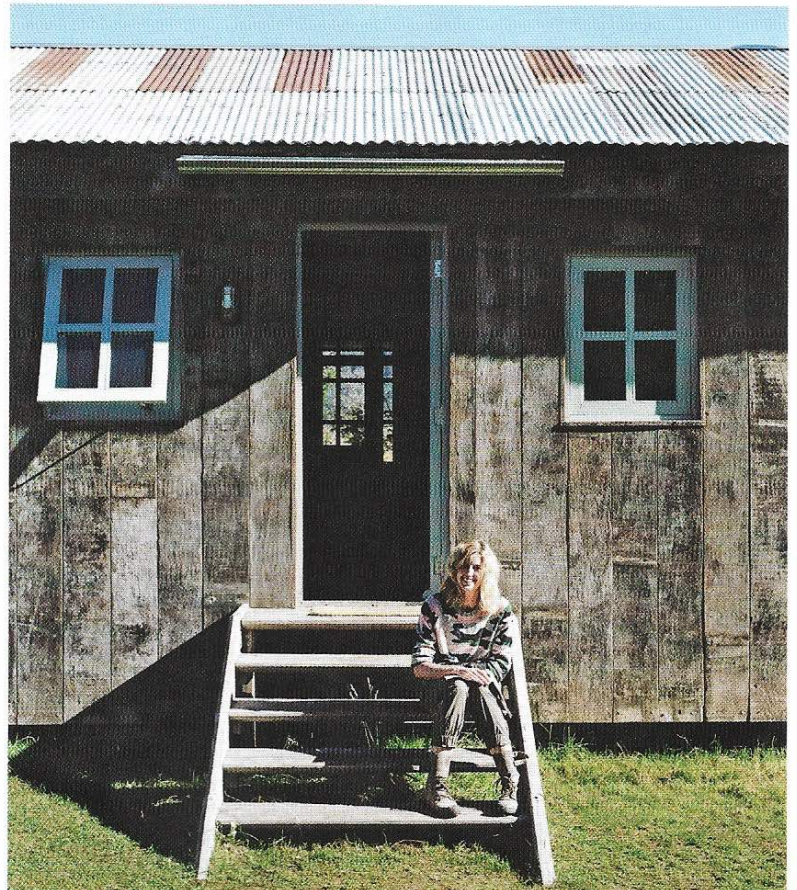
Patagonia was first 'discovered' by Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan around 1520 and was said to be peopled by fearsome giants, standing up to 8ft high, for, after all, how could a land of such immense splendor not have colossal inhabitants to match? But these musings are overridden by the arrival of my dinner, Fred Flintstone style, a single rib, five inches sticking out on either side of a bun. I suck the bone dry, then, with ash in my hair and lamb fat on my fingers, it's off to my tent to dream the night away.

Light spills through the forest. The morning air is chilly, but our crew is already up and rekindling the fire. Rosie and Simon are young British-Kenyans highly experienced in horse safaris and if this adventure at times seems otherworldly, so too, do they. Simon is all *Out of Africa* grit, while the gentle Rosie could have stepped out of the pages of *Swallows and Amazons*. Their old-fashioned good manners and determination to hide the sheer graft involved in hauling eight riders and horses over mountains, from one fly camp to the next, has been one of the trip's unexpected joys. They also understand the balance

between spoiling and challenging, so it is the irresistible smell of fresh coffee that teases me and my fellow riders from our tents, stretching and groaning good naturedly. Soon we're in the saddle again and cutting through the tangled overgrowth of blueberry bushes and *guinda* laden with the wild cherries that Marta had flavored her show-stopping flan with a few days earlier. Austral plovers chirrup, a turkey vulture scavenges by. Every so often, the dense green is alleviated by a single orange flower: “Mustisia – a strangler!” Simon shouts from his horse. The hilly track flattens then, stone by rock, morphs into a lunar landscape of granite boulders, Filipe and his spitting black steed leading the way. And still we see no one.

From north to south, east to west, Patagonia is a geographical marvel, with its shuddering volcanos, cut glass glaciers, plummeting waterfalls, all under the glowering peaks of the Southern Andes. From those great spills of lake to the forests of coihues and cypresses, this, surely, is something close to the Garden of Eden – before the snake, before man's seismic destruction of all things holy – and, as the sense of wonder grows, the sense of self diminishes. Our horses lope steadily on until, suddenly, late afternoon, their ears prick at the sound of water. A river is flowing in elliptical bends through the meadow and there, camouflaged into the high grasses of the far bank, is base camp. Tying our saddle bags high on the horses' backs, we cut through the sweeping water towards lunch.

Our permanent base camp consists of a large saloon, kitchen and living room alongside four tented cabins, >



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the *threshold* of the *modern* world”





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**ON THE TROT**  
The safari horses bathe in the river at base camp after long rides. Opposite: local gauchos take a break from their equine duties.

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all with wide decks, plump green duvets and an ingenious fire, which both divides and warms bedroom and bathroom. Let loose, the horses amble through the property as though they own it, which, as I read my book later, they make clear they do, poking their heads through open windows, and snuffing territorially at the dandelions around my feet.

I wake to an eerie mist that burns off into another big blue. Today, Cristobal is helping at the local corral. By the time we arrive, the gauchos are grumpy. Several cows have broken through the fence and made their escape. The tamer ones will be re-mustered within a week, the rest will join a renegade band of 75 permanent fugitives, who live in the forest where they are hunted regularly with the dogs and lassos. Right now though, the men are busy. Patagonian gauchos live outside the threshold of the modern world. Yearlings are clamped into a manga, a medieval looking press, then, tagged, branded, castrated and released, all by hand. Tiring stuff, even for the spectator, and, tomorrow, we riders must brave the ominous-sounding Pass of Tears. I eye the impenetrable looking peaks above us in the hope that this much-vaunted trial has been exaggerated. After all, we haven't been handed waivers or hard hats, but then we have learnt not to expect this kind of soft-soaping. When asked by a moist-eyed client whether he found it moving taking foreigners across his country, Cristobal famously replied, "Madam, for me it is no different than transporting a sack of potatoes."

Lágrimas, the Pass of Tears, turns out to be a humbling exercise in trust between man and beast. Our initial climb has the horses sweating and heaving. Once above the tree line, the track narrows into coppersy shingle and the line

of riders goes peculiarly silent as we realize that the pass will not be a single moment, but hours along a precipitous spine of bristling, stalagmite crags with 1000ft drops on either side. This would not be possible on any other horse than the Criollo, first brought to Argentina by the Spanish conquistadors. When the beleaguered Pedro de Mendoza abandoned his new-found town of Buenos Aires in 1536, his men supposedly let loose seven mares and five stallions on the pampas, where they flourished. This is probably myth – de Mendoza's starving men, already nibbling on their fallen comrades, were unlikely to have spared the horses – nevertheless, 40 years later, Criollo horses in their thousands were discovered on the plains. Famously impervious to hardship, it is only their resilience and surefootedness that stand between us and the great beyond. The line moves, a rock dislodges and rolls into the void. A jolt of nerves passes through the group and, again, we stop. Then, from somewhere behind us, a strain of something utterly incongruous – Rosie, singing *The Sound of Music*. I muster a little faith, as Pato, my horse, follows the track to the edge, closer and closer, until there is seemingly only sky left beneath his hooves. I close my eyes but, in the last second, he makes the bitterly sharp turn and pushes on around the flank of the cliff.

We're a weary group of poncho-clad souls who make the final descent. I feel a rush of gratitude as Pato carries

“Such remoteness has enormous emotional power over us”

me through a dreamy forest of bluebells and cow parsley towards camp. In a small lake, citric with algae, we wash the horses, then Rosie pins the newest slab of meat to the grill and soon we are tucked up one last time in our sleeping bags. I will miss the rhythm of a horse – my bones bumping and jumping into place. Patagonia seems far, far away from the complicated knot of world tensions. An illusion perhaps, but what isn't an illusion is that our city lives have been annexed by speed. Wander slowly through the world and it changes your perception of how you want to live in it. The outer corners of the earth remain an insistent fantasy because such remoteness has enormous emotional power over us. My brief impressionistic blur of Patagonia is of a paradise *not* lost, a place where, if only for a short time, everything feels OK. I bury my face into my sheepskin. This most unassuming luxury has softened my saddle, transformed my tree stump into an Eames chair, become my pillow at night. Yesterday, it smelt of earth, sweat and smoke. Tonight, it smells like freedom. ■

NEED TO KNOW *Prices for the riding safari start from £597 per person per night. Bella Pollen stayed overnight at Casa Sur Bellini, Buenos Aires, from £163 per night (casasurhotel.com); and traveled with Plan South America (plansouthamerica.com). Her memoir, Meet Me in the In-Between (Picador, £8.99), is out now*





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