

CHILE TO ARGENTINA

Across the Andes Mountains



Starting near Santiago in Chile, David Smith rode through the Los Patos Pass across the Andes Mountains to Upsallata, near Mendoza, in Argentina in a nine day trek, sometimes at heights of 4,500mts, and always with stunning scenery on this journey where there are no roads.

David Smith, from ????????, in the UK, has one of the best jobs in the world! He is Managing Director of Unicorn Trails, www.unicorntrails.com, the horsetrekking company that has rides available all around the globe. From the UK to Mongolia, New Zealand to Iceland and everywhere in between there is a horse trek to suit everyone. Some treks are roughing it, some are luxurious and others are a mix of both. As part of his role in the company David is obliged to take as many of the rides as possible. He doesn't mind at all!

It has only been about twenty years since David caught the 'horse bug', but he has certainly taken his passion and fashioned his life and business around it.

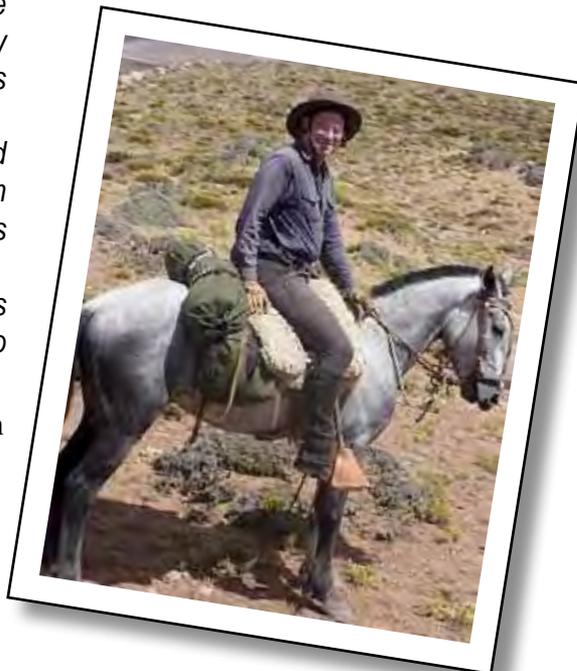
David tells us about one of his recent treks crossing the Andes Mountains from Chile to Argentina.

The crossing took us from the Andean foothills near Los Andes in Chile to the plains of Mendoza in Argentina; we enjoyed seven days riding over mountain passes, including the Espinacito Slope

at 4500m (14,760ft) and six nights camping in the remotest of places. There are no roads on this historic route, which was taken by San Martín in 1817 when his army crossed the High Andes to liberate the people of Chile in 1817, so we had to take all our camping gear, provisions and personal belongings (limited to 10kg per person) along with us on pack horses and mules.

A day may start with the waking dreams of a luxury en suite whilst still snuggled into a warm sleeping bag but on sloping,

David packed and ready for the day of trekking on his Chilean pony..



undulating ground and preparing to reverse the gymnastics of the previous night to emerge from a tent into the 'fresh' morning of cold stones and soggy vegetation to retrieve damp, stiff boots oh but such magnificent scenery in the soft golden light, horses and mules contentedly munching away, the aroma of a wood fire, the distant call of a wild animal and real fresh morning air.

After a wash and dress, there's breakfast to be had but I like to pitch in with the jobs if I can and so I might fetch water from a stream,



Top: Ponies during a rest stop. Middle: Dinner at the campsite.

Bottom: Rest stop with a view by a pristine lake.



or collect up the debris from the fire-side party of the night before. Bags are then packed and left for the gauchos to stow on the pack animals along with the tents and all the other provisions. There's really no rush as horses are tacked up and riders mount but eventually we are off, leaving the gauchos to finish the domestic tasks and follow on later.

Mountain trail horses are sure-footed and there is no need to micro-manage as they pick their way across the most rugged ground, sometimes across steep scree slopes or along narrow ledges, but there's no need to fear as you climb higher and higher. Time flies by as the vistas unfold and soon there is a stop for a rest and lazy picnic lunch in some shade by a cool mountain stream or waterfall. Early afternoon will see the riders on their way again as the sun comes round behind them, colours slowly turn to gold and the next campsite comes into view.

The day's ride over, horses are untacked and released to drink and graze in the oasis of a water-meadow. The campsite is soon buzzing with people building a campfire for cooking, putting up tents, assembling



Left: The ponies are all very sure footed and pick their way carefully in the rough terrain. Middle: Left is the Chilean stirrup and on the right is the Argentinian version. Bottom: The views and the colours on the High Andes

tables and chairs and preparing food. With many hands, in no time at all it's time to eat and drink – and to talk long into the night around the fire about the adventures of the day before going off to a deep sleep and to dream some more.

Our first night was spent in a regular hotel then, after breakfast the next morning we are ferried by private bus to the small town of Los Patos, the last chance to purchase souvenirs in Chile, and then a few miles further on where our papers are processed in preparation for crossing the unattended border in a few days time, and where our horses are waiting for us.

In very little time at all, the riders set off to climb gently through a lightly wooded valley, following



the rushing Rocin River which is little more than a large stream when we reach our first campsite in the first evening of riding.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words but even a thousand pictures would struggle to convey the magnificent unfolding scenery that is the High Andes. After a fairly long second day riding, we choose a likely spot to pitch our tents - somewhere dry and flat and not too far away from the campfire or the water. We invite three soldiers attending the nearby army outpost to join us and they are so grateful as we are the first real company they have had in nearly six weeks. And, although horse riding means different things to different people, to me, horse riding is about seeing the world from horseback – and I'd be surprised if it comes any better than this. But it does ...

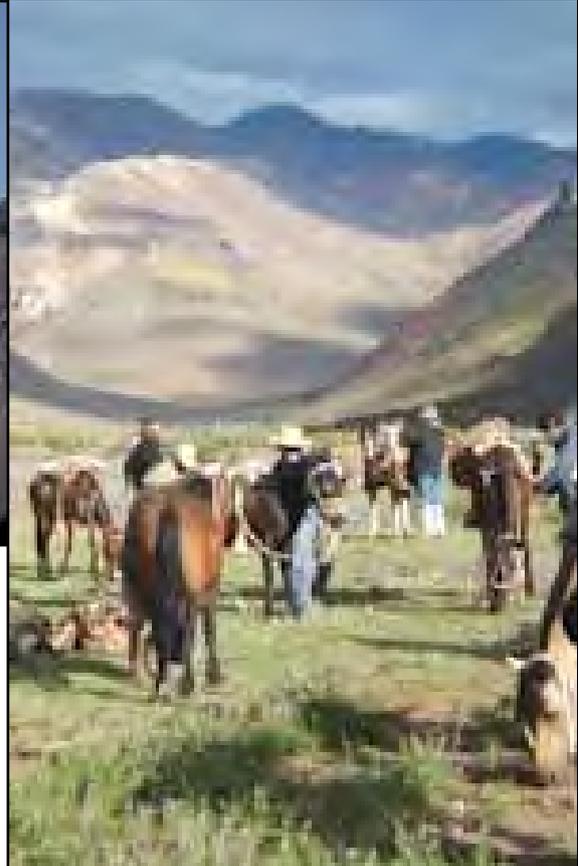
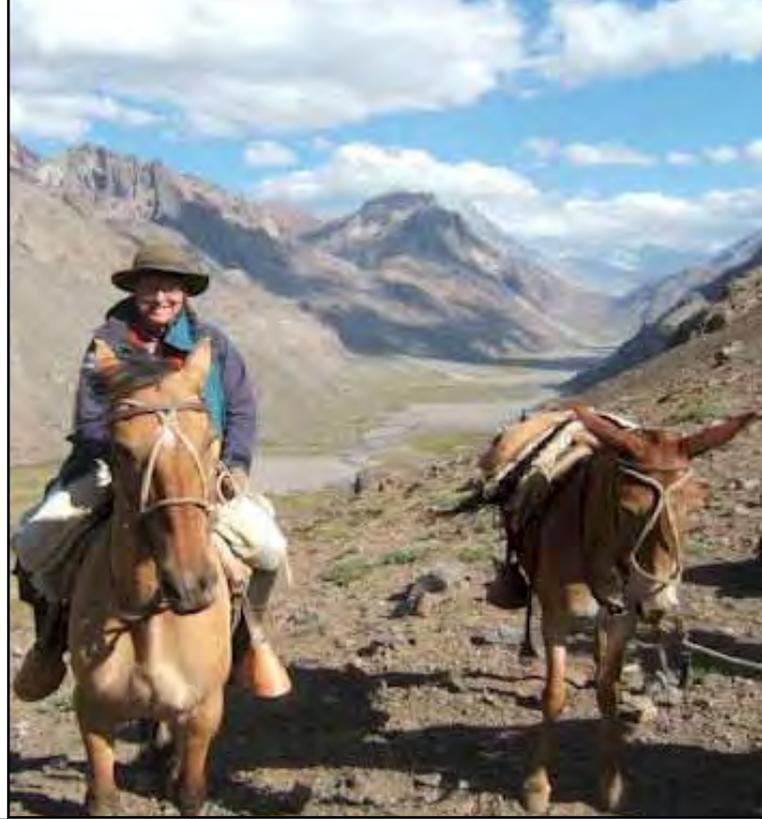
The next morning we work our way slowly up the steep-sided valley to the Chile-Argentina border crossing at 3500m. On the high plateau, we meet a goat-herding family who sell us some of their cheese while we take in the rarer mountain air and ponder on the magnificent views.

Here we say good-bye to our Chilean ponies as they are not allowed into Argentina. Waiting patiently for us, are the

Argentinean gauchos with our fresh mounts and pack animals. In an old stone-built Inca shelter, we enjoy a long and lavish picnic, and then a siesta; I found it wonderfully strange to think that we were using this space for the same purpose as travellers had done for hundreds of years.

Moving on, we soon have our first great view of snow-veiled Mount Aconcagua (6962m), the highest mountain peak outside the Himalayas. I have been very lucky to have seen many truly stunning views in my travels but never, before this day, have I been able to look at a stunning view in one direction, turn my horse around through 180 degrees, and then see another that is just as inspiring. Eventually we move on to camp in a wide lush valley that is a camping haven: rushing fresh water, grass for the animals, wood for the fire, level area to set up tents, a slow river to fish in.

This valley of Valle Hermoso is such a haven that we stay here for the rest day.



Top Right: David with his Argentinian horse and one of the pack mules - note the stunning view in the background.

Above: Mt Aconcagua (6,962m), the highest mountain peak outside the Himalayas.

Right: Valle Hermoso campsite had it all, views, grass, water, wood and a river to fish in.

Below: Pack mules and horses turned loose on the lush grass for the rest day.



In the morning, we leave our haven and climb over a ridge to enter the dry Los Patos Valley, which gives the name to the next pass. After a while, we ride along an ancient ocean floor that exposes marine fossils, and then we pass along the ephemeral Volcán riverbed. Our next camp, Rancho de Lata, is at 3500m, which is a good preparation for high altitude challenge of the next day.

After a hearty breakfast, we set off for the highest point of our journey as we ascend and cross the Espinacito Slope at 4500m. We took the steep climb very gently. There was to be no hurrying



Left: Stopping to drink from a stream of snow runoff.

Right: Crossing the Los Patos Valley Pass.



on this part of the trip as each horse took its turn to advance a few paces and then pause for breath.

Along the route, we have occasionally passed historic markers that designate points where Don José de San Martín and his cavalry set up their camps and, tarrying at one, the sheer enormity of their journey begins to sink in.

In the middle of the last day, as we wind our way down to the estancia in Hornillas, we met three young Chilean soldiers who were making the historic crossing on foot. They were carrying pack nearly twice their size, had been intensively training for six months and were expecting their crossing to take them 21 days.

THE HORSES OF CHILE

The Chilean horse or Chilean Corralero is a horse breed from South America. It is the oldest registered native American breed, the oldest registered breed of Iberian origin, the oldest registered horse breed in South America and the oldest registered stock horse breed in the Western Hemisphere.

Like many other native breeds in Latin America, the Chilean Horse is extremely hardy. It has a low metabolism, a high threshold for pain, a great immunity to disease and a remarkable rate of recuperation. Their hooves are strong and their thick double-hair coat makes them well-suited for both cold and dry/hot weather. The breed has a very docile temperament and makes a very alert horse with a

large capacity for work.

The Chilean horse prior to 1850 was a closed breed type, due the absence of European breeds in a country that was convinced they had the best horses in South America. The isolation that resulted from the geographical definition of its borders also made imports less probable. When modern transport made new breeds more accessible, Chile was one of the last places in South America to see them arrive. Even so, the innumerable mountains, ridges and valleys over a 4,300 km (2,700 mi) long landscape assured that the purity of many Chilean Horses remained intact. Faithful traditional breeders also were critical contributors to breed purity by not succumbing to



After leaving our Argentinian horses for the final time, we were once again ferried by minibus to our elegant 1940's style hotel in Uspallata, where we enjoyed the farewell dinner, gratefully received our 'medals' (stylish embroidered polo shirts), swapped contact details and said our tearful good-byes; these were not just normal 'holiday good-byes' – we had shared and achieved so much more than that together: we had crossed the mighty High Andes on horseback!! 🐾



*Top: The High Andes
Above: The steep Espinacito Slope 4,500m
Left: At the Chile border - we crossed the High Andes together.*

the temptations of cross-breeding. The critical period that popularized the use of other breeds was shortened even more when Chile became the first country to register their national breed. The real stroke of genius was formalizing and popularising a sport where no other breed could be its equal.

Ever since the beginning of the 20th century, the sport of rodeo has become bigger and more organized. Meanwhile the qualities required to excel in this sport were increasingly implanted in the breeding of the Chilean Horse. Nothing has assured the purity of this breed more than its specialization in a sport for which it has been exclusively selected for over 150 years. Outcrossing to other breeds has never been a temptation since the Chilean Horse is well-suited for the Chilean rodeo sport. (courtesy of Wikipedia) 🐾

