

Guided walking in the *cordillera* – itinerary

Monday March 21 to Wednesday March 30 2011

Day 1

You'll be met by taxi in the town of Zapala, in the Province of Neuquen at 9:00 a.m. and driven 4 hours up into the foothills of the Andes to a place called “Buta Mallin”. This is a cattle outpost on the estancia and the end of the road for most vehicles. Here we will have lunch with the gauchos – either an *asado* (grilled meat), or traditional *guiso* (meat stew), served with fresh bread. We will then load our luggage onto packhorses and set off on the 3.5 hour walk into the heart of the estancia where the lodge is located. See how the land lies as you catch your first magical glimpse of the valley in which the main lodge nestles. In the evening, settle in to your cottage or room, enjoy a hot shower, and then join us on the terrace of Casa Grande for wine, traditional food, and good company.

Day 2

Enjoy a hearty breakfast at Casa Grande featuring homemade yogurt, granola, and fresh eggs cooked to order. We'll spend today getting our bearings with a walk around the estancia, and a picnic lunch with time for a siesta. There will also be time to enjoy the river, the lodge, and the scenery. Finally, we'll go over personal gear, group items, food, and pack gear as we prepare to head off into the mountains. Dinner will be served family style and will feature traditional Argentine dishes.

Days 3 through 5

We'll head off early into the *cordillera* for the first of our two three-day tours of the peaks and high valleys that surround the estancia. We'll follow the course of the Gindo, one of the estancia's water sources, and then bear off towards another river, the Picunleo, admiring from high above it the lush green drainage valleys and incredible rock formations along its banks. Here, we are only a few kilometres from the border with Chile to our West, and are afforded beautiful views of the high Andes, the longest mountain range in the world. We'll camp overnight at Upper Confluencia, a stunning spot where the Picunleo meets the Trocoman river, hopefully sleeping under the stars. The only other people we're likely to see are the gauchos that follow their herds of goat into the mountains – one of the highlights of a trip out here is to stop at a twig hut and sip *mate* (tea) with these wonderful people.

The next day we'll set off after a healthy breakfast, crossing first the Picunleo, then the Trocoman, climbing through the high valleys until we reach the huge Panqueco pasture. Here we'll make camp at the ruins of an abandoned *puesto*, or outpost. It's unlikely that we'll see the elusive puma that roam here, but we may well spot their footprints along our way, and will undoubtedly catch sight of condors and eagles along the route.

On our third morning we'll begin the walk home to the lodge, Casa Grande, heading over the pass and then bearing west again, a route which takes us back to the Trocoman through a neighbouring estancia. We'll cross the river and follow its course home, where we'll be reunited with the wonderful hospitality of the lodge – hot showers, cold beers and clean sheets, followed by an excellent meal paired with local wines.

Day 6

Take time today to explore the lodge at your leisure, relaxing in the riverside sauna, swimming, or maybe trying your hand at fishing. Alternatively, see a different part of the estancia and enjoy a beautiful day's horse-ride to Lower Confluencia, with a picnic lunch, and lazy afternoon spent by the idyllic swimming holes that line the serene curves of this pristine river. We'll spend the early evening packing for tomorrow's mountain trip, before enjoying dinner family style.

Days 7 through 9

We'll set off early for our second adventure in the high mountains, passing through the vast Inte Mallin, the biggest grazing pasture you'll ever have seen. We'll camp overnight at a remote *puesto*, and set off mid-morning the following day to spend some time on the shores of Laguna Negra, maybe walking the length of this idyllic valley to admire the waterfalls at its far end, or fishing and cooking our catch for lunch. After spending a second night at the *puesto* we'll begin our long journey home to Casa Grande, where we'll celebrate our final evening together with a delicious *asado* and local wines.

Days 10

On the last day, we'll leave the estancia via a different trail from that which we came in by, enjoying the spectacular scenery and bird-life en route to the small hamlet of Villu Mallin. From here you'll be driven back to Zapala, arriving there by early evening. From Zapala, catch a bus back to BA or head to Bariloche or San Martin... or even over the border to Chile.