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FIRST-CLASS SADDLE CLUB

DESTINATION ARGENTINA

Julie Miller discovers the power of the mallet as she attempts to crack the country's number one sport of polo.

It's one of the most satisfying sounds in the world: that sharp, decisive "pock" as a bat connects cleanly with a ball - so effortless, so graceful, so absent from my existence.

As any sportsman knows, it's all about hand-eye co-ordination - a genetic blessing I was cruelly denied. But I take heart that, in this game, I have a partner who knows what's she's doing. In fact, she's doing all the work - I'm just along for the ride.

The stocky, hogged-mane mare I'm riding senses she has to follow that little white ball, ducking and weaving to fend off aggressors, and compensate for my attempts to make contact with it.

To be fair, this is my first crack at polo - the world's fastest, most physical horse game.

My lesson in sporting humility takes place at Estancia Los Potreros, a 2600-hectare ranch in the moody Sierra Chicas near Cordoba, in central Argentina. Owned by the Anglo-Argentine Begg family, this working cattle and horse stud attracts international guests seeking an authentic slice of gaucho culture without sacrificing life's luxuries. The property dates back to 1574 when Jesuit priests enslaved the indigenous people to construct the dry-stone walls that scar its golden, windswept hillsides. Back then, the land was used to breed pack mules for the Bolivian salt mines, those sturdy beasts kept in the stone enclosures, or potreros, that gave the ranch its name.

A family home for four generations, the 300-year-old homestead is a time capsule; its whitewashed adobe walls, worn timber beams and original cartwheel window are portals to those turbulent colonial days. But it's the personal touches that give the old building its character: faded family photographs, original oil paintings of favourite horses, a well-stocked bilingual library and a roaring log fire.

Guest accommodation in adjoining wings is comfortable, with an enviable collection of antique furniture. It's a little like staying at a friend's rural retreat - but one where you have no obligation to contribute to the cooking or washing up.

With a maximum of 12 guests at the ranch, time spent with hosts Kevin Begg and his wife, Louisa, is guaranteed as they lead condor-watching hikes around the property, visits to local churches, painting classes on the homestead verandah or tasting sessions of the ranch's own-label malbec.

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But most guests come to Los Potreros to ride, with the reputation of its horses firmly established in equestrian circles. As well as their extensive stable of working criollo cow ponies, the Beggs raise prized paso peruanos, a rare breed renowned for its fifth gait.

Most horses have four speeds: walk, trot, canter and gallop. The paso has an extra gear, a fast amble that slots in between the walk and trot and is as smooth and exhilarating as a canter. For novices, it's a breeze; for experienced riders, a revelation. As Louisa boasts: "It's like being upgraded from economy to first class. And once that happens, there's no turning back." Both passionate riders, the Beggs lead guests out to explore the property on their horses, allowing the natural rhythm of estancia life to dictate each day's activities.

During foaling season, for instance, a ride includes rounding up pregnant mares, bringing them in for the night as protection against marauding pumas, or checking on newborn foals, still wobbly on spindly legs. In summer, barbecues, or parillas, are on the agenda.

By far the most popular ranch activity, however, is polo - Argentina's national sport. No one plays polo quite like an Argentine. They are simply better, faster and more highly ranked than anyone else in the world - not to mention ridiculously good looking. This is where other champs of the sport - including the Packer clan and Australia's polo star Ruki Baillieu - come to hone their skills; adoring crowds of more than 15,000 attend the national finals in Buenos Aires.

Despite the fame and fortune of the sport's top players, polo in Argentina is not just for the wealthy. With an abundance of good, cheap horses and plenty of land to spare, it's played by all and sundry in rural areas - and, today, that includes me.

Having had a rather inglorious fall from grace the first time I rode a polo pony, I'm nervous as I mount my horse, Polera, and begin the trek down the driveway to the Beggs's competition-sized polo pitch.

Joining Kevin, Louisa and me are two other newcomers to the sport - staff member Hedda, from Sweden, and her co-worker Holly, from Britain. Head gaucho Luis makes up the numbers, his prancing pony working up a sweat in anticipation.

At the field we dismount while Kevin takes us through the basics - don't hurt yourself, don't hurt your horse and don't hurt other players. The idea, he says, is to have fun.

"We don't teach polo here, we play polo," he emphasises. "You could pay \$150 an hour to learn to play in Australia and spend the first 10 lessons on a wooden horse. But here, the idea is to get you into a game within an hour."

More easily said than done; but as I swing back into the saddle and take my first clumsy whacks at the ball from a standstill, it seems achievable. Introducing speed into the equation, however, is another challenge. As I trot up the field, steering one-handed, it's starting to resemble a game of croquet more than polo, with most of my shots a mere dribble or complete miss.

After an hour of fumbling around, Kevin announces it's game on: the two staff girls and Louisa versus Luis, Kevin and me.

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"We'll set the shots up for you," Kevin advises. "If you miss the shot, just ride ahead - we'll get the ball back to you." Which is exactly what happens - I ride, I swing, I miss - embarrassingly squandering Luis's perfect passes and soft set-ups.

Despite the fact it's a "friendly" game, Louisa, who plays in a local competition, isn't going easy. As I canter tentatively - still too scared to give Polera her head - I sense Louisa on my left, pushing me off course. The aim is to pressure opponents physically and mentally, distracting them from taking the shot. She succeeds; I overshoot the ball, swinging back into a fray of clashing mallets.

There's a bit of cheating, a lot of shouting and plenty of laughter as Luis, Kevin and Louisa drive the game back into the open.

Suddenly, the way is clear - there's nothing between Polera and the goal as Luis flicks me a perfect pass.

"Julia, Julia, your ball!" he hollers. "Go, go, rapida!" Surely this time - but how can anyone be so hopeless? From behind, Kevin taps the ball, which rolls to a stop just in front of the line. This is my moment to shine - victory is mine! Gooaaaaaaalllllll!

FAST FACTS

Getting there Qantas flies to Buenos Aires from Sydney (13hr) for about \$2050 low-season return including tax; Melbourne passengers fly Qantas to Sydney to connect and pay about \$100 more. Austral Lineas Aereas flies to Cordoba from BA (1hr 20min) for about \$370 return including tax.

Staying there Estancia Los Potreros costs from \$US290 (\$324) a night, including accommodation, food, drinks, riding and all activities. The ranch has three dedicated polo weeks a year, with the next on November 8-15, \$US2800 a person. See ride-americas.com.