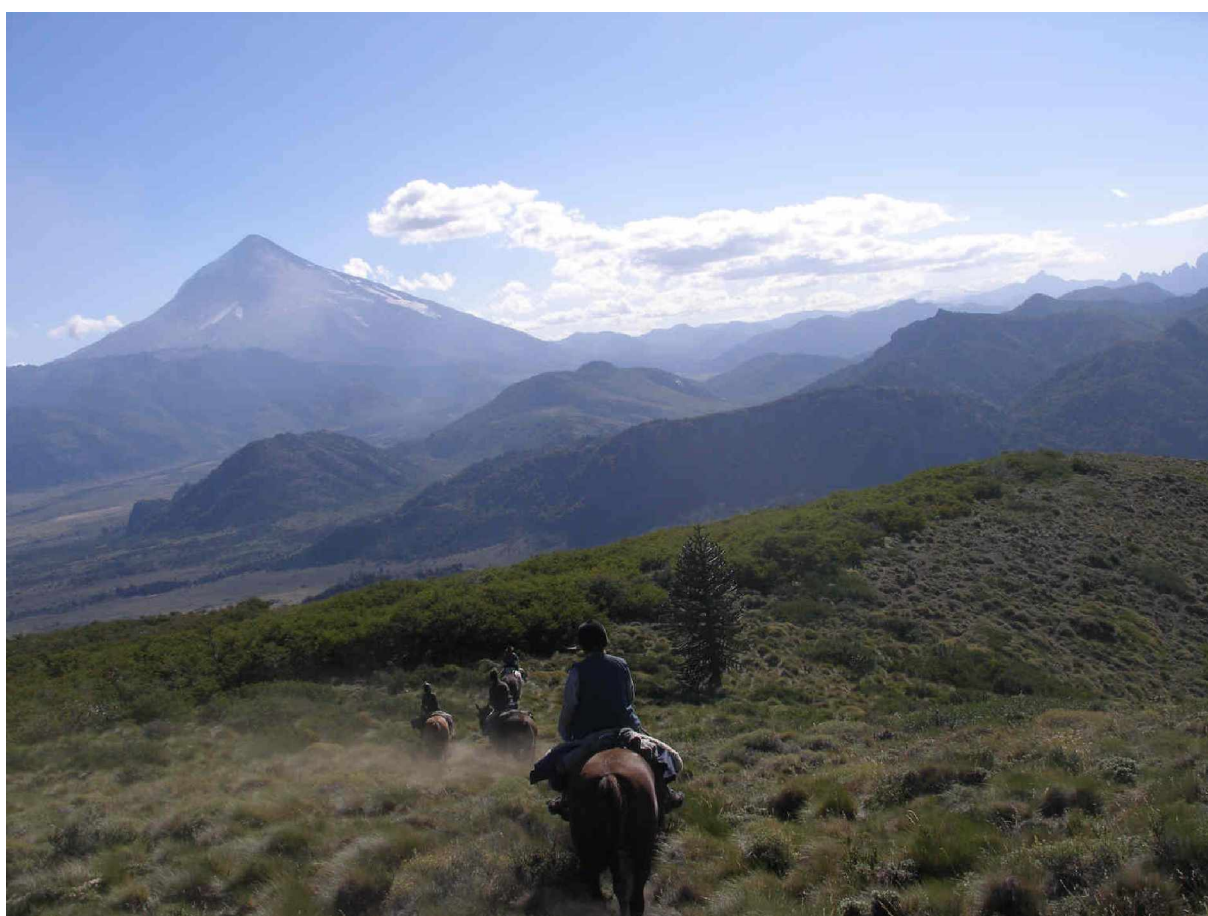


# Across the Andes: From Argentina to Chile on horseback

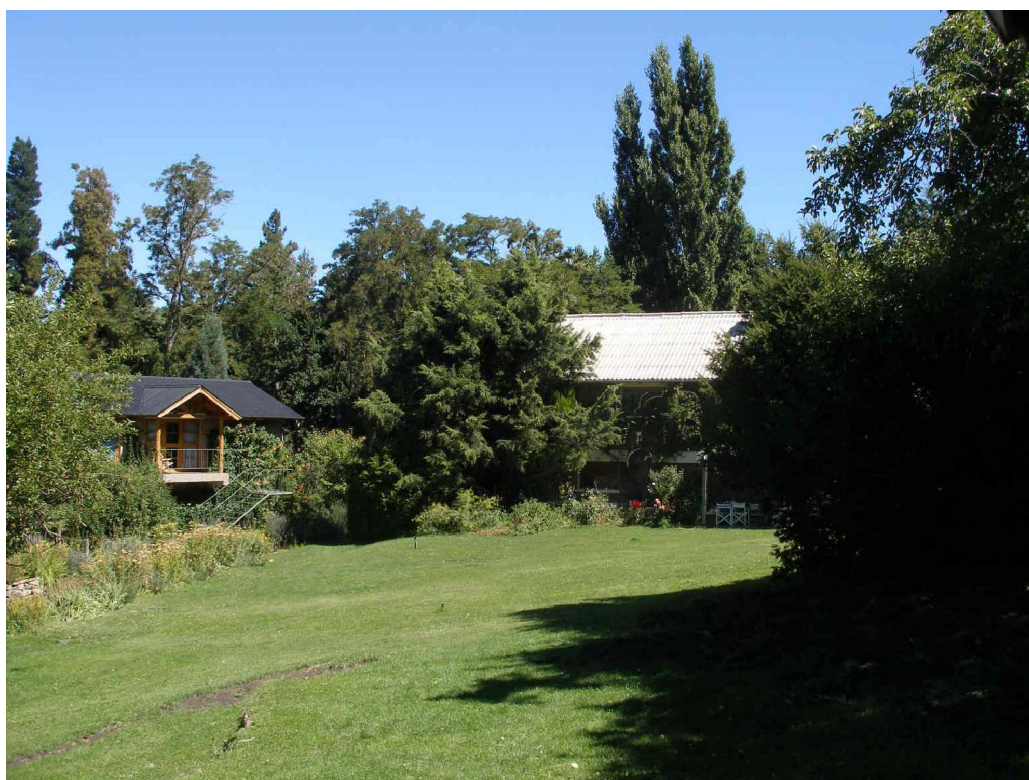
**23. 2. – 4. 3. 2009**

*A travelogue*  
*by*  
*Hartmut Porzig*



*On the way to mount Lanin*

After two days in the European flair of Buenos Aires including a Sunday among the street artists of San Telmo and a fascinating Tango Show in the Borges Cultural Centre, I started early on Monday morning to catch my plane on the domestic airport. The rain clouds of the previous day had vanished and I left Buenos Aires for San Martin de los Andes in bright sunshine. San Martin is a small town or, rather, a resort for summer and winter holidays in the foothills of the Andes situated about 40 km from the Estancia Huechahue the starting point of the trail. There is only a single and rather expensive daily flight to this destination. However, guests are picked up at the Chapelco airport and are safely carried to the rather isolated estancia. It would have also been possible to take one of the more frequent and cheaper flights from Buenos Aires to the larger airport of Bariloche and then to pay for the transport (2 hours driving) to San Martin. Taking a Taxi will probably eat up most of the savings with the flight ticket. Yet, I discovered later that there existed also a cheap bus connection that might be worthwhile taking for parsimonious travellers. Anyway, after 2.5 hours flight our plane landed in San Martin and I was met by a friendly young employee of the estancia and by one of my riding companions who had arrived with the same plane.



*On the  
estancia  
Huechahue*

By contrast to cool Torres de Paine here, more than 1500 km to the north it felt really like summer. The temperature reached about 25 °C and the mountainous landscape looked rather dusty and dry. Green vegetation seemed largely confined to the river valleys while the slopes of the hills and mountains were covered by dry grass and a few shrubs. About two hours after landing we reached the estancia a beautiful green oasis surrounded by huge trees, mostly eucalyptus, situated in the Aluminé river valley not far from the main road from San Martin to Bariloche. It is a working cattle estancia but a large fraction of its income derives from its tourist activities centred around shorter and longer excursions on horseback. Luxurious chalets for guests were grouped close to the farmhouse around a carefully watered, almost English-style, lawn. We were welcomed by Jane who runs the estancia after the early death of her Argentinean husband years ago. She is of English descent, middle aged and looked very much like those hardy, self confident, pioneering women I met in Africa. Her two children



had been educated in England and lived elsewhere. Hence she was very much on her own in this male-dominated world of landowners and gauchos. She had a good sense of humour but did not talk very much and never raised her voice. Yet, it was always very clear who controlled the course of action.

In the late afternoon we had a first chance to try the local horses on a ride in the beautiful evening light across the hills surrounding the estancia. Our group consisted of four people from England, a widely travelled Frenchman and me. The horses were all in excellent shape and quite large for Argentinean criollos. Most hillsides were covered with cushion-like low growing thorn bushes.



*Jane, la signora of Huechahue in the typical landscape of the Andean foothills*



*Our group in the evening sunshine*

Trees were almost absent except for groups of Eucalyptus or poplar trees planted by the hacendeiros or in the context of a re-forestation program. On the way we encountered wild boar and a kind of deer both of which have been imported long ago by European settlers and

have multiplied very successfully. Hence they are considered by the farmers more as a pest rather than a tourist asset. The riding, especially on the farm tracks was a little dusty and some of our group took the luxury of an open air Jacuzzi available close to our lodgings.

On the next day we embarked on a full days ride in the area of the hacienda equipped with a different set of horses. We had a rather relaxed start at 11h in the morning. Led by Jane we first passed through a canyon with quite impressive column basalt formations and a creek at its bottom and then across hills and valleys of the hacienda's rangeland.



*Through the basalt canyon*

It was quite hot on the shadow-less hills and we happily settled for an extended lunch break amidst a small poplar plantation. The horses were cleaned of sweat and moved freely in the surroundings during this time. They were generally better cared for and better fed than the horses at Torres de Paine. Their sure footedness was successfully tested on the way back when we had to cross a steep ridge with a very dusty and slippery descent. By 7pm we were back at the hacienda, our faces almost unrecognizable under a cover of dark volcanic dust.



*A dusty descent*



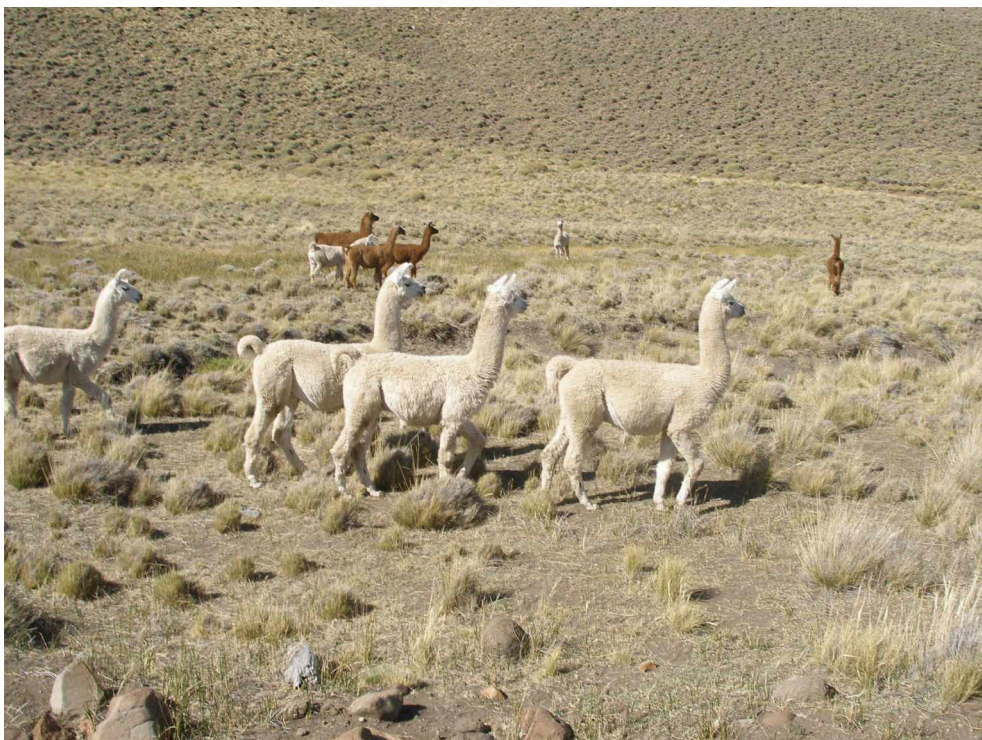
After the horse (and rider) testing phase of the first two days, we were ready to start for the Trans-Andean ride on the next day. Initially we would be 5 riders: Julie and Chel, the English couple, Lisa, a race horse trainer, also from England, Annette, a lady originally from Germany but who emigrated to England together with her husband long time ago and me. Later on the trail we were met by an additional guest, Nathalie, a young business woman from France. All proved to be reasonably good to excellent riders mastering the partially difficult track without any problems.

On the morning of this day we started together with Jane (who was to return to the hacienda after the first day) and two guides slightly earlier than usual, already at 10h. Initially we moved through relatively flat terrain that allowed some cantering until we reached the first hills with steep ascents over various ridges and intermittent small valleys. The hilltops offered immense views over dry hill slopes green valleys and, far to the east, the high mountains of the Andes with the all dominant volcano Lanin close to which we would cross the border to Chile.



*View onto  
Mount Lanin,  
a volcano  
close to the  
Chilean  
border*

After crossing the highest ridge we descended into a wide somewhat wetter valley with extended pastures for cattle and lamas grazing together quite peacefully. After a long siesta and the next ridge we encountered a long and steep descent into a deep and narrow valley cut by a larger river. It was so steep that we had to dismount and to lead our horses down the extremely dusty path through the rocks until we arrived on a small carriage way that followed the course of the water. We had to follow this way upstream for quite a distance until we reached an idyllic campsite where we were received by our support crew. With the tents already pitched we were offered an almost safari-like comfortable meal service. This was the place where Jane left us to ride back to the farm leaving us entrusted to the care of Juan our indigenous guide. He proved to be a patient and kind yet taciturn guy without the slightest knowledge of English. But even when addressed in Spanish he was not very talkative. In addition a young employee of the farm who spoke English quite fluently rode with us and served as interpreter.



*White and brown llamas on the way*



*The river valley*

Also on the next day we first followed this same valley further upstream. Unfortunately, the whole morning was spent marching in shadow-less heat on the shoulder of a major street which did not exactly make for an inspired riding experience. However our spirits were considerably lifted when we arrived at an idyllic lunch station underneath large willow trees right at the riverside. Even the table was decorated with fresh green branches and the shadowy place looked perfect for an extended siesta. In the afternoon we changed to the opposite bank of the river and followed a partially dusty, partially marshy path until we arrived at the



campsite on a grassy spot between the river and a daunting basaltic rock. As a special attraction fresh drinking water sprang from a source at the foot of the rock that overhung our little camp.



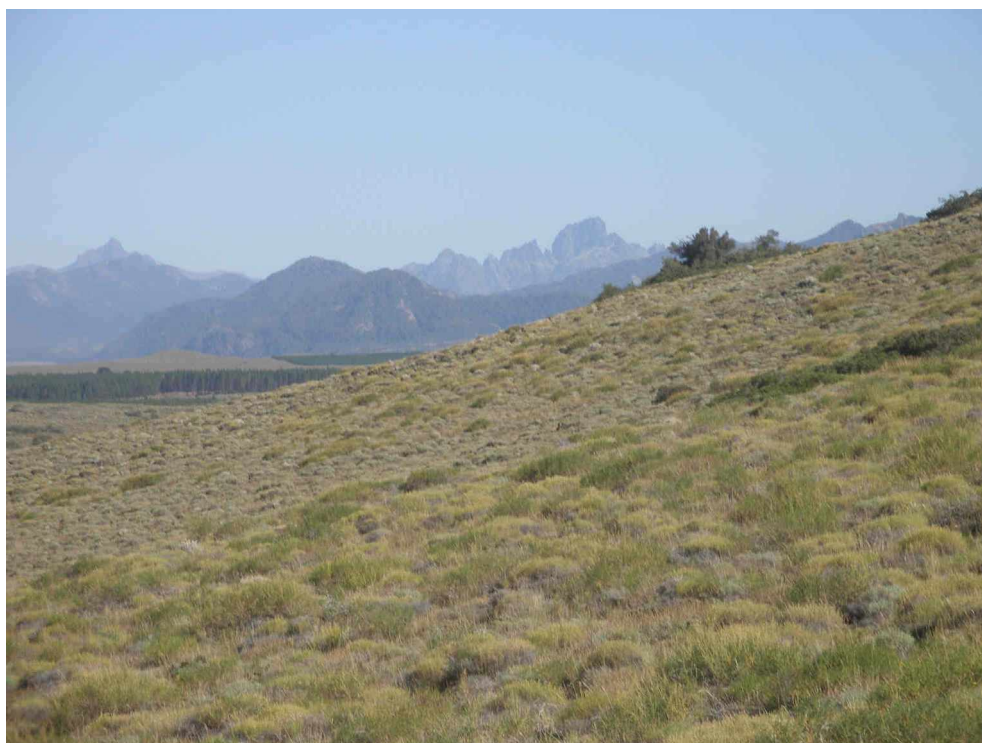
*First camp site*



*Second Camp site*

The next morning everybody had to pack his or her most essential belongings including the sleeping bag into individual special transport bags. These would later be taken over by pack horses because we were supposed to spend the next night a place in the mountains that could not be reached by the support car. After two hours along yesterday's street, we reached a building that looked like a repair shop for farmer's equipment. Several people were busy to load the pack-horses with our bags from the support car and an additional local Indian gaucho

joined us for the trail through the mountains. He was even more taciturn than Juan and did not even care to introduce himself. When we finally asked him he revealed at least his name. He was called 'Segundo' i.e. 'The Second'. Maybe his parents just numbered their children and did not bother to search for fanciful names.



*The high mountains draw closer*

After the stop with the pack horses we took small tracks that lead us steeply uphill into the mountains. Gradually the vegetation changed from relatively dry mountain pastures to partially forested areas with the first specimens of big araucaria (monkey ball trees).



*Araucaria tree*



With their characteristic shingle-type leaves they looked like plants from another age. Soon we immersed into a pristine wood of old araucaria and southern beeches that left, however, enough space between the trunks and fallen trees to allow our horses to pass. From time to time we encountered clearings where sheep, goats and horses were grazing and where, occasionally a hoard of wildly barking dogs emerged from a ramshackle cottage. It remained unclear whether people were living there permanently or whether it was just a shelter for the shepherd during the summer season.



*In the Araucaria forest*

After many steep ascents and subsequent descents into brook valleys, we finally came down into the most beautiful valley of a larger river. Except for some small pastures along the water and a rather miserable hut constructed from locally available wood there was no other sign of human activity as far as one could see: no carriage way, no village no nothing only pristine woods, rocky mountain slopes and the crystal clear stream.



*Lorenzo's place with our tents*

The packing horses had already arrived and our tents were pitched close to a singular boulder in the middle of the pasture. Our cook was already busy preparing the dinner on a impressive fire. It did not take long until the owner of the hut showed up, a friendly man in his forties whose face was covered by a wild beard yet, in honour of the rare visitors, dressed in his best clean shirt and trousers. He was called Lorenzo and apparently lived a hermitic and extremely modest life together with his goats in this idyllic but totally isolated spot. The rare but regular visits of the trail raiders from Huechahue seemed to be a very welcome change in his lonesome days. Of course he was invited to our spaghetti dinner and developed a formidable appetite. I would have loved to learn a little more about his life, but our guides did not tell us much except stating that he was 'muy, muy pobre' (very poor). Yeah, I would have guessed that. The only living relative was said to be his aged mother living in a little hut somewhere up in the mountains.

The next day started with a rather frugal breakfast since during the night Lorenzo's dog had managed to find and to eat all our supply of butter. After stowing our belongings in the transport bags we took a breathtaking steep path out of the valley and across a high and rocky ridge far above the timber line into the valley of the next river.



*José at the  
highest point  
of today's  
climb*

I would not have imagined that this kind of mountain tracks, barely suitable for pedestrians, could be used by horses. I forced myself to look only uphill rather than to look downhill imagining what would happen if a horse would stumble and take an abbreviation in the fall line. However, the horses seemed utterly unimpressed and moved along the path without ever hesitating. During the steep descent towards our lunch place, a clearing in the woods on the flank of the mountain, we were constantly walking in dense clouds of dust created by the front horses for those in the back. But as soon as we arrived in the tree zone all complaints were forgotten. We barely finished un-tacking the horses when already the pack horses arrived which had taken the same breakneck path with considerable speed.



After a lot of grilled meat and a siesta on the shore of a small creek we embarked on the second part of the steep and dusty descent mostly through virgin woods into the valley of a small river. Only around our eyes protected by sunglasses was there any hint of the normal skin colour all the rest of our faces was covered with a dark brown crust of Andean dust.



Swallowing  
dust

After a short distance on a carriage way along the river we found the camp already set up by the support crew on a pasture at the shore of the river protected by a group of magnificent Araucaria. This spot was accessible to the support car and hence the cook, busy to prepare the dinner, was supported by rather noisy gaucho music from the car radio. Of course there was another 'asado' tonight this time from goat (delicious). The eating and drinking lasted till rather late since this was the last night in Argentina. On the next day we would cross the border to Chile.



*Approaching Mount Lanin*

The morning came and we had less than one hour riding before we met the people from the hacienda with a big van suitable to transport the horses back to Huechahue. No horses or cattle are allowed to cross the border into Chile because of fear to import animal diseases that had reached Argentina but did not yet spread to Chile. The border station was located in the middle of a broad wooded valley at the feet of mount Lanin, the beautiful huge volcano that we had used as a landmark on the whole trail but which we had never seen so close.



*Mount Lanin  
at the Chilean  
border*

A small bus with a somewhat overweight but friendly driver waited for us at the Argentinean border to carry us and our luggage to the Chilean entry building. Very few people were crossing the border at this lonely spot but the bureaucratic procedures, nevertheless, took quite some time. The border control people seemed to be happy to have so many visitors. They even examined the soles of our shoes for horse droppings. Juan, our Argentinean guide had joined us in the role of a tourist because had never had a chance to take part in the Chilean part of the trail. All said and done it took the best part of the morning to finish all formalities but then we were free to meet our Chilean hosts and their horses.

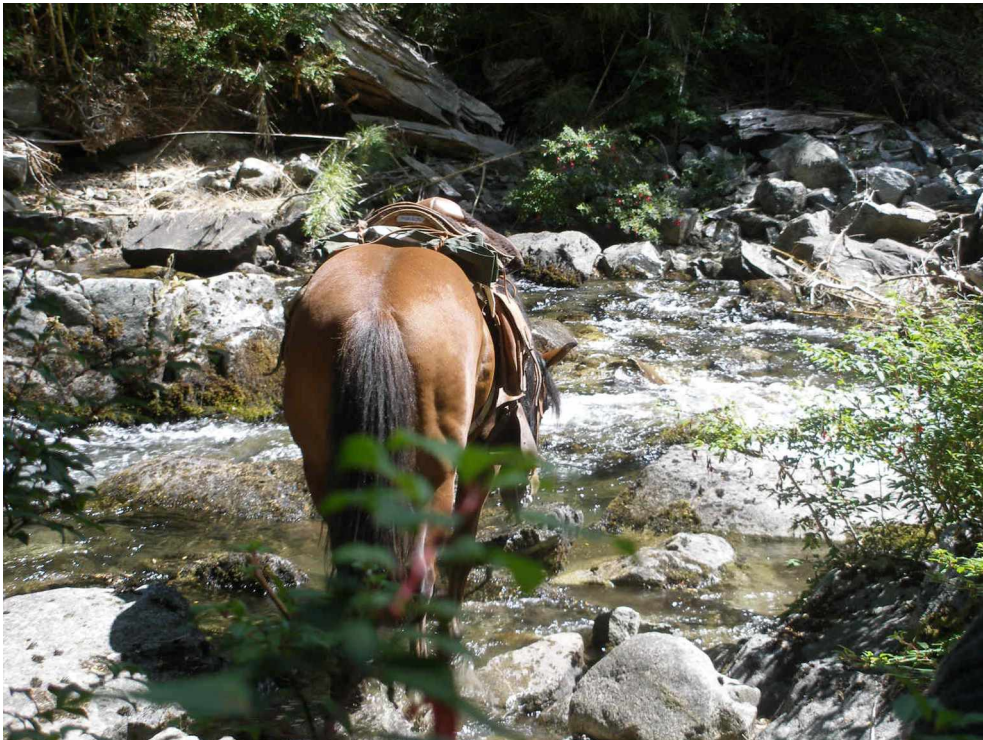
The corpulent driver and his bus carried us about 20 km into the Chilean part of the Andes. All of a sudden the landscape changed from the relatively dry open valley with isolated araucaria to lush primeval forest with all kinds of unknown tree species interspersed by beautiful small lakes and running creeks. In the middle of the woods on a small abandoned and overgrown road we met our Chilean hosts Pamela and Loth with their horses and a richly endowed lunch table. The Chileans received us with great geniality and proved much more communicative than most of the Argentineans even though their English was not any better. While Pamela looked young, pretty and very civilized, Loth, though not much older, with long red hairs and big hands looked like somebody who spent most of his time in the woods. The horses were significantly smaller than their Argentinean colleagues but later proved highly agile and strong. I ended up with a rather pretty dun horse that was comfortable to ride and tremendously forward going.





*Meeting the  
Chilean horses*

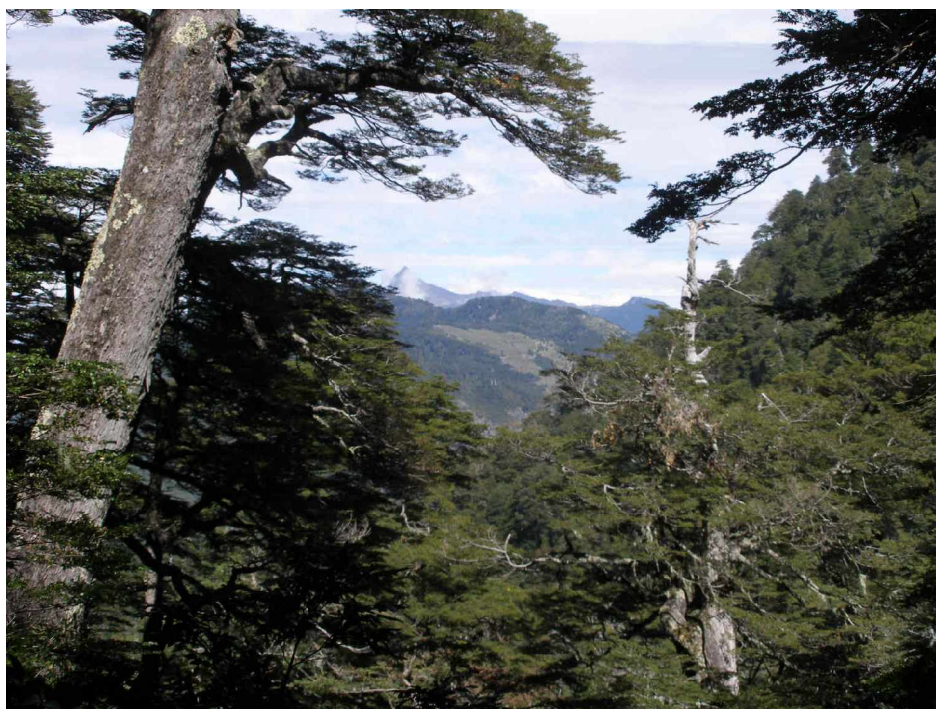
First we followed the old road barely recognizable as such since it was completely overgrown and dilapidated. Only a few road signs had survived which appeared utterly out of place in this wilderness. After a steep decent we arrived at a small wild river with a broken down bridge. The remainder of the bridge could still be used for pedestrians to cross the river, but appeared much too small and too shaky for the horses. Therefore the horses had to cross the water that gurgled around the rocks on their own while the riders did not wet their shoes. The whole procedure went remarkably fast and without complications.



*The horses  
crossing the  
river on their  
own*



We followed the river on a romantic downhill pathway. It was lined by huge blackberry shrubs that carried masses of big sweet berries that we plucked in passing. Loth tested my poor Spanish by explaining all kinds of strange-looking and –smelling trees and interesting plants (some with edible fruits) that our Argentineans would probably have generally classified as weeds. Anyway, none of Argentinean guides would ever have taken the trouble to explain any botany. One of the smaller trees possessed leaves and fruits emanating a strong but pleasant citrus smell. After a few hours we arrived at a wooden chalet that was equipped as an unpretentious guest-house. But the prospect of a real bed and a hot (well, tepid) shower provided a whiff of luxury. The Chileans were quite surprised when we started to long for our beds already at half past nine. Like the Spanish, they like to stay up late. But we had accumulated a fair amount of sleep deficit during the camping intermezzo.



*In the Chilean forest*

After some rain during the night the morning broke with some fog and clouds and we started on an overgrown path leading steeply uphill through virgin forest with dense vegetation interspersed with huge old trees. After a long while we crossed a mountain ridge and began a steep decent into the next valley using an old transit way for cattle. It was probably the steepest path I ever managed to get over on horseback but it looked less dangerous because it looped down between shrubs and trees. The horses walked down sure-footedly and never hesitating. All one could do was to put blind trust into the animals especially if they had to climb down intimidating high steps between rocks and roots. It was just amazing but we all reached the end of this path after a 5 hours ride without accident. The bottom of the valley was less narrow than expected. There was room for pastures and a decent farm track. In the meantime the weather had cleared up and we spent a siesta underneath shadowy trees. In the afternoon we followed the track for another 2 hours among a rich supply of blackberries until we reached the farm of Loth and Pamela.

Apparently the farm belongs already for three generations to Loth's family but it was only 7 years ago that it had been converted from husbandry to an enterprise for horse riding adventures. Since then they are continuously working to improve the facilities, But since they do most of the construction work with their own hands, some of their projects still remained unfinished. Nevertheless, tents for the guests were established on fixed platforms and hot



showers were available in perfectly equipped bathrooms. In the orchard that surrounds the house some 100-years old farming machines preserved memories of the family tradition.



*On the way  
to Loth's  
farm*

We could not spend our last evening in Chile without an impressive asado that was prepared at the fireplace while Pamela's sister who spent her holidays in the neighbourhood came over for a chat. She is married to a Scotsman from Dundee, lives in England and, unlike her sister, has a perfect command of English. Both sisters were active, talkative and humorous. They spoke English and Spanish simultaneously and very fast. The most hilarious part came when Pamela described her adventures in England where she had visited her sister and her brother in law. Listening to her when she contrasted a civilized English barbecue (with small slices of meat or hamburgers matching in number to the number of guests) with a Chilean asado was extremely funny. Drinking, eating and talking lasted till half past twelve at night when it got really cool and we gladly huddled in our sleeping bags.



*On Loth's farm*

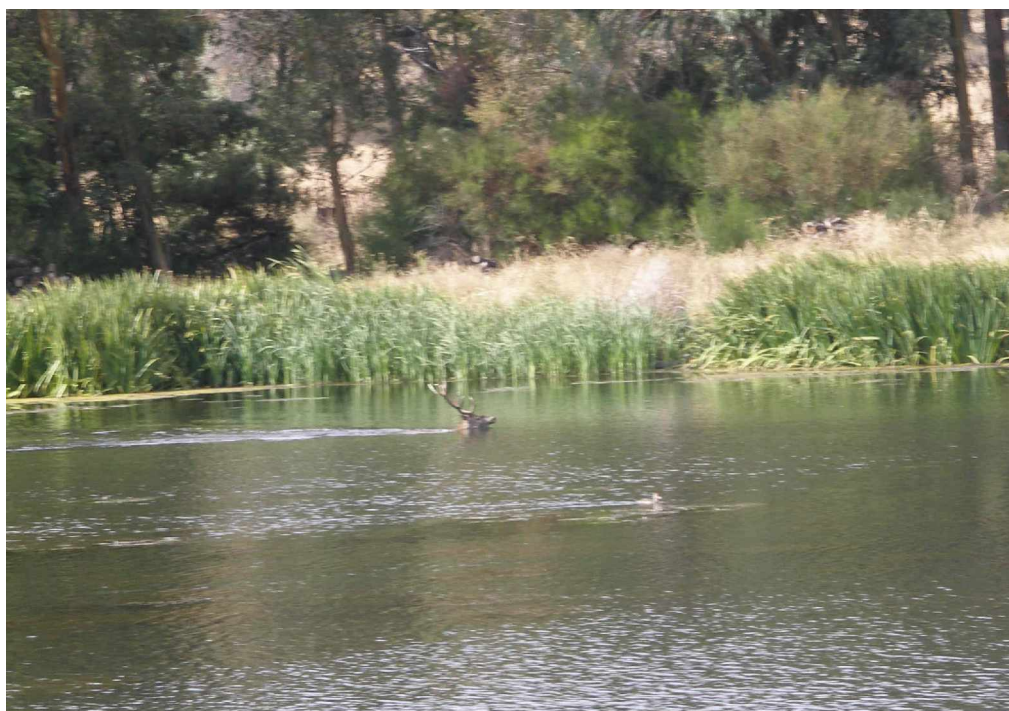


The next morning we bade farewell to our genial and generous hosts and boarded the bus of the friendly corpulent driver from two days ago to return to Huechahue. It lasted only about 3 hours to cover the distance that had required 6 days and many hours on horseback in the opposite direction.



*Our group with the Chilean hosts (Loth with hat and Pamela second from the right in the front row))*

Only three people of our group remained to enjoy a last ride in Huechahue the next morning. The others had to leave by 10 am to catch their plane in Bariloche. We departed with Jane, one of the gauchos and all three dogs to collect the herd of young horses in the outer reaches of the farm and to drive them back to a corral for sorting.



The stag in the water



When we passed a small lake all of a sudden the dogs started to bark like hell and there was a lot of noise from the water. It turned out they had flushed a stag which had tried to escape by jumping into the water. The two larger dogs followed him and tried to catch up by swimming while the small Jack Russell stood at the shore and supported his colleagues by barking furiously. First I thought it was a rather cruel chase and feared for the stag. However, the stag behaved rather cleverly and soon realized that he was the faster swimmer. Therefore, instead of going ashore he circled the lake with the dogs in his coat-tails until the dogs were completely exhausted and gave up, whereupon he climbed ashore and vanished.

Later we indeed helped in rounding up the young horses and brought them back to the farm with a fair amount of fast galloping. They were quite well behaved and seemed to know the procedure.



Young horses in the corral

In the afternoon we bade farewell to Jane and her beautiful hacienda and caught the plane in St. Martin de los Andes. I was back to Buenos Aires well in time to reach my late night plane back to Europe. Here I have a last tip for those who, like me, need a trip from the Buenos Aires national airport (Aeroparque) to the international airport (Ezeiza): Manuel Tienda de Leon S.A. runs a comfortable and relatively cheap (about 10 \$) bus service between the two airports. Tickets and information on the departing times are available at the Tienda de Leon office in the entrance hall of the Aeroparque. If you have enough time to wait for the next bus avoid Taxis which are neither much faster nor more comfortable but significantly more expensive.

*The end*