

CHRONICLE OF LA SIERRA CAVALCADE

By Paloma Palomino





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I decided to write this chronicle as a present to my friends, Lucia and Pepe, so they could use it for their web page. Since I'm a rather private and reserved person, this chronicle will appear under the alias of Paloma Palomino, rather than my own. I have ridden horses all my life, but always inside the arena. For years and years, Lucia and Pepe had been inviting me to join them on one of the several horse treks they make, but I had never accepted. Finally this last spring of 2001, I joined a group of international riders that had also gone to enjoy this "cavalcade", as my friends call their horseback-riding vacation. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that this "first world" horse trek is run with "European accuracy" by two horse lovers who really enjoy what they are doing, which is why they do it so well.

This chronicle is a brief collection of my daily impressions, which I took to writing each evening before going to sleep. Readers will find many of the Spanish words used by the hosts to name local concepts. I hope these paragraphs help foreign riders have a better idea of how great a vacation one can spend in Mexico, especially when one is lucky enough to come across such excellent horses and superb hosts.



THE ARRIVAL

Riders coming from abroad arrive to the Mexico City International Airport on a Saturday and after passing the migration area should go to Gate “E” to find the shuttle service that departs every 15 minutes to “Hotel Aeropuerto Plaza”. Reservations have been made with anticipation, so riders can go directly to the front desk with their confirmation number and ask for their rooms. This day’s meals are not included, but a nice restaurant with Mexican food and music can be recommended by someone at the front desk. Taxis taken inside the hotel are safe and someone at the front desk can even make arrangements for a guide to take you to the Saturday Bazaar in San Angel, or to the Zocalo area where you can visit the National Palace, the Cathedral and the Aztec ruins. A longer trip can be made to the Teotihuacan Pyramids or to the floating gardens of Xochimilco, but what is most recommended is a tour of the great National Museum of Anthropology on Reforma Avenue.



THE CAR TRIP

Sunday’s breakfast is not included, but the service at the hotel restaurant is nice, cheap and quick - which is important, since riders must be ready with their luggage at 8:00 a.m. to meet the outfitters in the hotel lobby, to begin the car trip to Valle de Bravo. The trip is two-and-a-half hours long and crosses the west side of one of the biggest cities in the world. Just before the entrance to the Toluca toll highway, the route passes through “Santa Fe”, a new development filled with slick, modern buildings. While



CABALGATAS LA SIERRA

MÉXICO HORSE VACATION

REVIEWS – CHRONICLE OF LA SIERRA CAVALCADE



one section of “Santa Fe” is composed of educational facilities with private universities and schools, another boasts the largest and most exclusive shopping mall in the city. An incredible assortment of business and residential high-rises, as well as individual homes that stand side by side in a strange competition of modern architectural design.

The highway continues climbing into the forest that surrounds the western side of Mexico City. With a little luck, from there, you can see the eastern side of the big valley with its two magnificent volcanoes: the “Popocatepetl”, which is still active, and the “Ixtlacihuatl” or “La Mujer Dormida” (“Sleeping Woman”). The road continues climbing, reaching altitudes of over 10,000 feet above sea level. It begins its descent toward another valley and the city of Toluca, the capital of the state of Mexico. A great statue of Emiliano Zapata on horseback welcomes you to Toluca and its impressive industrial landscape. Rows of factories, separated by magnificent gardens and trees, line an impressive eight-lane highway. A great deal of internationally-known firms have established factories in this area, such as Corona and Sol beer companies, pharmaceutical giants such as Bayer and Pfizer, and even major automotive firms such as Daimler-Chrysler, Nissan, and General Motors.

After surrounding the outskirts of Toluca, the road goes into the forest, reaching, once again, altitudes of more than 10,000 ft above sea level, where fir trees grow at the foot of another volcano, “El Volcan de Toluca”. With an altitude over 15,000 ft, this inactive volcano has a great lagoon inside its crater. It is also called “El Nevado” (nevado means “snowed-on”), because it’s the only mountain in the region that shows off a snow-covered tip during certain times of the year. After this last climb, the road descends definitively, sloping through dense fir tree forests that begin to mix with different varieties of pines. As the road continues its descent, the fir trees disappear and many different varieties of oak emerge, resulting in a breathtaking mixture of colors within the pines. With such beautiful views, two hours seem like ten minutes and one barely notices the time. Suddenly, a stupendous golf course appears on the right side of the road. The name “Rancho Avandaro” was given to this



place by its owners in reference to their first golf course, hotel & spa resort called “Avandaro”, which hosted the equestrian sports of the 1968 Olympic Games. Some houses lining the roadside let you know that you’re arriving to Valle de Bravo. After passing a curve, all of a sudden, a wonderful blue lake appears and the road becomes a cobblestone street, typical to Valle de Bravo.

THE TOWN

Once in Valle de Bravo, the brief and pleasant drive up to “Finca Enyhe” crosses the town from end to end. Narrow streets, white walls, balconies with flowers, Spanish tile roofs, and all kinds of shops keep your eyes and mind entertained, as you approach the “downtown” or



central area of town. Contrary to other Mexican towns, where the main square is called “La Plaza”, locals in Valle de Bravo call the main square “El Jardin” (the garden). A “kiosko” (kiosk) and a church sit amid a garden which in turn is surrounded by several old, two-story buildings. After a right turn, more shops, some hotels and several restaurants adorn and liven the roadside. Most of these establishments only open for the weekend, when visitors from Mexico City travel to Valle de Bravo in order to rest for one or two days trying to recover from the hustle and bustle of the big city.

In 1521, shortly after the Spanish conquest, the “conquistadores” heard of a village where the Aztecs made sacrifices in honor to their god of the sun. Worried that these Aztecs could also use this location as a gathering place for rebellious warriors, some Spanish soldiers were sent to the village. This was the way the Spanish began to settle in what is now Valle de Bravo. For over four centuries, local people earned their living by plowing the rich land of this region, naturally irrigated with the melted snow from “El Nevado”, which springs out in the form of rivers and streams that run into the valley.



In 1945, modern technology arrived to Valle de Bravo. A new road was made to communicate the town, and a dam was built in its agricultural valley to feed a water-powered electrical plant. As a consequence, a beautiful artificial lake was created, close to an old settlement next to “La Peña”, an ancient rock for Aztec sacrifices. The use of the water that came through the rivers into the valley changed. Instead of using it for local irrigation, it was used to generate electricity for Valle de Bravo and for some other nearby towns. People from Toluca and Mexico City could then travel by car to visit the town and the new lake located in the middle of evergreen forests. After some years, the calm and isolated old town had become a touristic weekend resort. People came in, bought land, and new weekend houses were built in the town, on the hills and in some far-away places inside the woods. A big change came for the peasants who now began offering different types of services as builders, housekeepers, gardeners, cooks, etc. Today, Valle de Bravo is one of the most important touristic lakeshores in Mexico. Many families from Mexico City come every weekend to enjoy the town and practice one of several sports. Sailing, water-skiing, kayaking, golfing, horseback-riding, mountain-biking, hand-gliding, or just walking and mingling around the town are all popular activities.

“FINCA ENYHE”

Now, the car continues through a wider street and climbs up into the hills that are in the back part of the town. After climbing a while, you can catch a different view of the lake, as it peaks out from behind the Spanish tile-roofed houses. The big rock, “La Peña”, with magnificent houses built all around it, can be seen clearly, as a peninsula that enters the lake. The street curves left and right, climbing and descending. Finally, a black gate with a





stone horse head appears on one side. This is the main entrance to “Finca Enyhe”.

Pulling the chain that hangs from a pole, the classical ring of a bell announces your arrival. Immediately, a man comes running down, opens the gate, and lets the car in through a narrow access bordered by huge bamboo trees on one side and a great variety of bushes and trees on the other. Once inside the property, the first thing you see is a big working patio surrounded by high stone walls and a magnificent white, two-story building with balconies adorned with wrought-iron railing and a blue frame around each window. Blue letters spelling the word E N Y H E curve over a huge arched gate set in the center of the building.

The two-and-a-half-hour drive has finally come to an end. The appearance of the finca is marvelous, but the car doesn’t stop there, it crosses the patio and continues again through another pathway. This time, you feel like you’re entering a jungle. The path is shaded by huge trees and runs alongside the bottom of a depression. On either side, a wide variety of lush, tropical shade plants grow without restraint, leaving only a narrow path for the car which continues along its way, brushing against the leaves, occasioning a flower or two to drop. A short, steep, last climb and a house appears.

The front view of the house is imposing. A white, fifteen-foot-high, facade supports an antique wooden door. Six vertical windows are both protected and beautifully decorated by handmade wrought-iron gates. A row of “macetas” with different types of flowers are shaded beneath a huge avocado tree. At one end of this terrace, a spectacular view of the lake shows through the vegetation. The car stops next to the door and the passengers get down and stretch their legs. Once again the sound of a bell is heard and the hosts open the door to welcome the visitors.

Entering the house, one’s soul and mind is transported to bygone times. A breathtaking and colorful patio is surrounded by four verandas with arcs. Hammocks hang from column to column, making a silent invitation to rock oneself on them. The noise of the water dripping in a fountain catches your attention and makes you turn your head to the center of the patio where



the purple flowers of the bougainvilleas mix with the pink flowers of two great bushes called “Pata de Vaca” (cow hoof). Multicolor geraniums in “macetas” mark a line dividing the patio from the corridors.

A glass of water and the opportunity to use the restroom is offered to the riders while the luggage is taken down to the rooms. Each room is decorated with Mexican handicrafts and regional furniture from different towns in Mexico. All rooms are wide and comfortably furnished, with spacious bathrooms and hand painted tiles and accessories. An appointment to meet in the living room is set for half an hour after arrival, in order to allow the riders to rest a while and arrange their belongings. During this initial gathering in the living room, the hosts explain some rules and the way they work to riders, in addition to going over schedules for the different days, and the details of the route. Useful advice on how the horses are handled comes in handy. Afterwards, a lunch is offered on a large, thick, one-piece, wooden table, set in the garden beneath the shade of a “pergola” that supports five magnificent purple wisterias.

Once the lunch has finished, the riders are introduced to their horses. Walking across the spectacular garden where, among other flowers, paradise bird flowers grow, a hidden gate located in a corner leads to a second garden with a small pond, an orchard with lots of different fruit trees, and a terrace with “barro” (Mexican clay) floors with a panoramic view of the town, the lake and the surrounding mountains. Completing this scenario, just beneath your feet, you see a great tile roof that shades a line of stalls. On the left you can see the riding arena encircled by a bamboo fence and, at the end, a line of arcs supporting more stalls with the houses of the grooms over them. On the opposite side you see a beautiful building where the office and the tack room are located. The fourth side, a wall covered with different types of plants, completes a square in which the grass grows wildly and in the center, a strange tree with a spiny trunk, a “ceiba”, is waiting to one day shade the eight poles from where eight magnificent horses are tied.

Walking down a stairway, the riders find the patio with the big gate with the word ENYHE painted above it. Coming in through this gate, you find



the tack room. It is astonishing!!! A big white saloon, longer than wider, with wooden beams supporting the roof and the classical “barro” floor. At the center of the room, three pairs of long beams filled with different types of saddles hang from the roof. A host of saddles hang down from the beams, whether Western, English, Mexican, Spanish, or Australian-style saddles, used or new, for men, women, or children. A few empty spaces reveal that some horses have been saddled. Near to the entrance, three beautiful, old-fashioned, hand-made, strange leather dresses called “anqueras”, used for breaking young horses, are piled one over the other. The four walls are filled with horseshoe hooks from where bridles, reins, bits, halters, spurs, whips, ropes, and all kinds of horse stuff hangs. Below the hooks, as if on exhibit, a line of wooden saddle stands with many Mexican saddles stand erect. All of them have different types of leatherwork; some with silver, some others with an embroidery called “chomiteado” and others with the famous “piteado” that is done with the maguey fiber. In one corner sit two big leather boxes and an enormous saddle bag with all the “arreos” used by the pack mule. The smell inside this marvelous room is fabulous, or at least, that’s what we horse-lovers say!!!

THE HORSES

The sound of some horses make the riders come out of the tack room. From there, more horses can be seen standing inside the twelve wooden stalls that are shaded by the same tile roof that can be seen from the terrace. Each horse is saddled according to its rider’s preference. The match of each rider with the horse he/she will ride during the week is carefully decided upon based on the knowledge, experience, and preferences specified in the bookings.





Tied from one pole, stands a buckskin quarter horse saddled with a black western saddle with silver ornaments. On the other side, stands another quarter horse, this one a roan, saddled with a Mexican seat with a “machete” hanging from its left side. The next horse is a chestnut trakhener, about 17.5 hands tall, and its English saddle is a Stübben! A bay trakhener, as big as the first one, has a Mexican saddle and some nice-looking saddle bags are hanging from each side. The most spectacular horse is a palomino with a reddish Western saddle that shines as much as the horse’s golden coat. Another huge bay trakhener, this one a mare and saddled with a Crosby, peeks out from inside one of the stalls. An appendix horse, tied to another pole, shows off a Mexican saddle with a “machete” on the left side and a “sarape” tied to the back. Two bay horses, maybe quarter or appendix, inside contiguous stalls, are saddled Western and English style. A big, strong, light buckskin quarter horse with an old Mexican saddle has a “falsa rienda” on his head instead of a bridle and bit. The hosts explain that this is only used while the “caporal” finishes breaking and training the horse. Tied to the last pole, a gray mare, almost white, has a black Western saddle; it looks like a Spanish horse because of her long mane and tail. The hosts explain that she’s an “Aztec” horse, a new Mexican breed achieved by crossing a Spanish horse with quarter or criollo mares. A chestnut horse is inside the stalls, saddled English style. It looks like a tall thoroughbred. Last but not least, a big black head with long ears peeps out of his stall. It is “Don Sabino”, the mule that will carry every day’s lunch. Today, “Don Sabino” is resting because the ride will be short, but as of the following day, riders will have to keep an eye on him, especially around mid-day. Some more horses are inside the other stalls. They are unsaddled, waiting to see if a rider has a problem with the horse that has been selected for him or her.

One by one, under the supervision of the hosts, the riders mount their horses. Two grooms take care of the length of the stirrups while the hosts give a short explanation to each rider about the horse he/she will ride. When horse and rider are ready, they are led into the arena, so that they can become familiar with one another, and if necessary, the riders receive some more

CABALGATAS LA SIERRA

MÉXICO HORSE VACATION

REVIEWS – CHRONICLE OF LA SIERRA CAVALCADE



advice. First a walk, then a trot and, at the end, a short canter is done by each rider before the next one comes into the arena. Waiting for their turn, some of the horses that are still tied to the poles are eager to join the group and nervously begin turning to one side and to the other. Others are almost asleep, paying no attention to the group working inside the arena. Grooms come and go from one horse to another, helping riders get mounted. Some turkeys are running away from the movement of the arena and join a group of hens and a silver-colored rooster that are digging on a horse's manure near the empty poles. One of the riders goes inside the arena with his camera and takes pictures of the already mounted ones. Lots of movement, familiar horse noises and smells, a mixture of languages, the emotion of riding a new horse, and maybe the surprise of using a different saddle, make of this moment an unforgettable one.

Once all the riders are ready and on their horses, and after being sure that nobody has a problem with the saddle or the stirrups, the hosts get mounted and, with two grooms, lead the group outside "Finca Enyhe". The cobblestone street has almost no car traffic, so horses walk quietly until they reach a path that climbs up to the mountains that are located on the back part of the town. The path is wide and riders assemble into groups of two or three, talking about the horses we are riding, sharing doubts with the hosts, or asking for some extra riding tips .

This day's ride is about three hours long and takes the riders to the top of "Monte Alto". From there, hand-gliders jump out to begin flying to later land on the shore of the lake that lies close to the foot of the mountain. Every time the wind blows with enough strength, one by one, the fliers jump off the cliff. A great panoramic view of the whole lake with "La Peña" and the tile roofs of the town keep the riders' attention while the hand-gliders begin their flight. On the way back to the house the group is taken through a beautiful narrow path that makes its way below the forest and riders have to be careful not to bump their knees against the trees! A canter is performed for some minutes and the descent from the mountain surprises the riders as we

CABALGATAS LA SIERRA

MÉXICO HORSE VACATION

REVIEWS – CHRONICLE OF LA SIERRA CAVALCADE



see our horses' ability to walk downhill. It's quite evident how familiar this type of terrain is for them!

Back again in the stalls, we dismount inside the arena and, immediately, the grooms receive the horses, unsaddle, and refresh them with a cold-water bath. The riders go to the house for a shower (though perhaps not a cold one), and after changing clothes the hosts take us to town. In town, one can visit the arts and crafts market, the food market, the two churches and a great variety of shops and small stores. After a good day with lots of new experiences, a delicious dinner with traditional Mexican food is served in the dining room of "Finca Enyhe".

THE ITINERARY

Every day, the hosts plan to begin the "cavalcade" early in the morning so the riders may have some free time in the afternoon. Breakfast is served at 7:30 in the morning and by 8:30, riders must be ready to board the car that will take them to the place where they've left the horses on the previous day. In the afternoons, riders can be dropped off in town when the car is returning from the daily ride. They can return to the house by foot, or if too tired to climb up the hill, look for a taxi to take them back to "Finca Enyhe". This way they may once again visit the town, do some shopping, shine their boots with a "bolero" in one of the benches at "El Jardin", or have a massage session at the SPA of the Avandaro Resort (very recommended). If the riders prefer to go back to the house they can lay on the hammocks, rest in their rooms, walk in the garden, or talk about Mexican history and customs with the hosts while drinking a strong "tequila" or a soft, fresh, home-made "margarita". Dinner is served every day at 7:30 in the afternoon and, usually around nine, most of the riders are more than ready for an energizing sleep.





Each day, the ride is completely different from the day before. The trails and paths, as well as the vegetation and panoramic views change from one place to the next and, obviously, from one day to the other. Each day and each route has its own special and particular story.

MONDAY:

The 8:30 appointment of this day is directly at the stalls. All the horses are saddled and ready to start the journey. “Don Sabino” has the boxes already loaded on him and the “vaquero” that’s walking him has to stop here and there to let the visitors take some pictures. One of the riders has



a last-minute change of heart and decides to try a Mexican saddle. Another rider is lengthening his stirrups to avoid problems with his knees, and the others decide to do the same. Two grooms come to help and, immediately, everything is solved. The guide wears his “sombrero charro”, a nice-looking short leather jacket and multi-button deerskin Mexican chaps that almost cover his spurs. He takes care that all the riders are well-mounted and have no problems with their saddles or horses. Finally, the guide mounts his horse, walks a while inside the arena, and makes some turns to one side and to the other. At the call of “vamonos” the group heads out of the Finca. The “caporal” is also very well dressed. His noisy silver spurs let you know that he’s still walking from one place to the other and that he’ll be the last rider of the group.

Initially using the same route as the day before, we go out of town. After climbing the first hill, we turn left and the route goes into the forest. An ostrich farm appears on one side of the path. The horses don’t remove their eyes or ears from the exotic animals, and as soon as one bird moves, one of the horses jumps to the opposite side. A big, brown, wooden cross in the middle of the road announces to visitors that they have arrived to “Acatitlan”.



Nice-looking peasant houses, as well as spectacular weekend ranches with horses in the pastures appear on the scene.

After crossing the valley with its many different types of crops, the route goes into the forest again for the first rest stop of the day. The group has been on horseback for exactly one hour and it's time to get rid of some fluids. The grooms help hold the horses while the riders run into the bushes. Back on route again, the group continues climbing, reaching an open space where a distant view of the lake lets us know how far we've ridden and how much the horses have climbed.

A small village appears and the children from school come out to say hello. It's time to canter and the guide announces it to the group... and off we go!! Some of the horses begin a quicker canter and, after a few minutes, the whole group is in a big run, leaving "Don Sabino" far behind. The path narrows again and the horses have to walk in single file. A few minutes later, the pack mule appears at the front of the group... the "vaquero" really knows the shortcuts!

The smell in the woods is magnificent, the humidity is high, and with the sun, the soil begins to evaporate. Four bluejays begin their flight when they feel the proximity of the horses and some meters ahead two squirrels jump up into a tree and disappear. The white tail of a rabbit shows the direction in which he runs away from the noisy riders. Huge pine trees grow alongside the path and three or four different types of oaks mix within the pines, making for a delightful scenery.

A white barbed-wire gate establishes the limits of one of the biggest ranches in the region. Another village is crossed. This time, the children in the school are studying and they don't come out to say hello. A lady is cleaning outside her house and happily answers back to each rider's "buenos dias". Two men are drinking beer, probably to forget Sunday's "fiesta". A group of six "burros" loaded with wood approach from the nearby forest and the guide tells the riders to beware, since the horses may suddenly turn around, frightened by the "strange moving monsters" that are "charging" toward them!



After three hours of riding, the horses come out to a meadow and the guide walks toward a small hill. There he stops, dismounts, and ties his horse to a tree. It's lunchtime. After helping some riders to dismount and some others to tie their horses up, the grooms easily light a fire and begin preparing lunch. Meanwhile, the guide and the more spirited riders walk down to "El Hoyo", the old crater of an ancient and extinguished volcano. Other riders prefer not to walk at this altitude and just lay on the grass enjoying the sun. Half an hour later, the group of brave scouts returns. Sweaty, breathless, and excited, they share their wonderful experience with the rest, talking about their downhill climb and about the 300 foot-high solid-rock walls that conform a perfect circle, about 600 ft in diameter. It seems that they deserve all the sodas in the cooler and the entire lunch may not be enough to restore their lost strength!

After an excellent lunch, we get mounted on our horses and the guide takes the group by a fascinating path near the edge of "El Hoyo". This way, the ones that didn't make the trip by foot can also have a look at this spectacular place. A few minutes later, just enough time to digest lunch, another canter is announced. This time, the group follows the tracks left by a car next to a pond-looking swamp. Midway, a halt is made in order to cross, one by one, a log bridge. After crossing it, the horses continue on a short canter until they reach the end of the meadow.

The horses climb to the top of the mountains once again, and the group reaches the peak. For the first time in the day, the path begins to descend. Walking downhill is easy for the horses and all the sweat accumulated during the canter dries up. At this point, all the horses have salt marks on their faces, on the sides of their necks and on their hind legs, making them look kind of funny.

The village named "Los Saucos" rests down in a valley. The horses know they are close to the stalls and begin to walk faster. The voices of some people can be heard, and a couple of peasants that are plowing their land remove their hats in a gesture "hello". A detour in the path takes the horses out of the woods, and some meters ahead, a large black wooden roof appears



down by the side of the path. Nearby, the van is parked and the truck has some hay and grain still loaded into it. The grooms approach the horses and begin helping the riders dismount. After unsaddling, they lead the horses to drink some water from a big canoe made from the log of a pine tree. The riders also go to the canoe in order to wash our hands and faces with the fresh, running water that springs some meters above and is brought into the canoe through a plastic pipeline.

The riding has finished for the day. The grooms are unsaddling, refreshing, cleaning, feeding, and in summary, taking care of the horses. The riders hop into the car and go back to town via a bumpy road.

TUESDAY:

The riders are ready and the car departs from “Finca Enyhe” at exactly 8.30 a.m. After crossing town, the car heads back out to Toluca, taking a brief detour to “Los Saucos” and the bumpy road that was used the previous afternoon. As soon as the grooms see the car, a couple of them come to



help with the baskets and bags that should be loaded onto “Don Sabino”. Some riders are putting on their chaps and others make a quick run into the nearby bushes or to the back part of the stalls. A new rider is mounted on a black, nice-looking mare. He’s got a funny way of talking and his constant laughter reveals bright, white teeth. He’s the owner of the rustic wooden stalls where the horses spent the night, as well as a professional guide of the Monarch Butterfly Sanctuary. Today, he helps lead the group up to the sanctuary to see the butterflies.

As soon as the grooms finish loading the mule and all the riders are mounted on their horses, the new rider begins leading the group. His black mare makes a special type of “over-walk” and advances quite fast. Most of the horses have to trot so they’re not left behind. The paved road has to be



crossed twice but the guide easily stops the cars by flapping his hat, letting the group of horses cross without any hassle. A big meadow springs up along the way. There, we come across thirty or forty small criollo horses tied to the bushes, alongside a group of men seated on the grass, talking and laughing. The men raise their hats “hello” and bid the riders “buenos dias”, in an almost perfectly-synchronized chorus. They’re tour guides waiting to take visitors on horseback, to see the butterflies .

The path veers off into a dense forest, and an amazing descent begins. Riders have to be careful that the trunks of the trees don’t bump up against our knees. We also watch out for bushes that may brush against our faces. We can feel the horses’ great efforts to climb the hill. The heavy breathing and the thumping heart beneath your legs, makes you grateful you’re mounted on a good horse, rather than on your own legs. The path continues this way for several minutes, then onto a flat and wider path. But it only lasts for a few meters and then again, climb, climb, climb. The horses reach a point where they can’t continue climbing. The riders must dismount, tie our horses to the trees and continue on foot.

Then, five basic questions come to mind: Can I continue climbing this mountain on my own feet? Am I going to breath as heavily as my horse? Will I feel my heart as I felt his? How long is the climb? Can’t the butterflies come down here to say hello? The two guides begin to walk slowly upwards and the whole group follows them. Carefully breathing through their noses and checking their heartbeat every 13 seconds, some riders aren’t sure if they’ll make it to the top!!! But, ultimately, riders realize it’s not as hard as it seemed at first. The key is to walk slowly and constantly.

Far ahead, almost at the top of the mountain, the two guides stop. They are having a good time. You can see it in their smiles. The riders reach the spot and the guides point toward some dead oaks in the middle of the fir trees. We can then see some butterflies flying around the dead oaks. Suddenly, the sunrays stream into the woods and hit the oaks. Immediately, hundreds of butterflies begin flying and the entire sky seems to go from blue to orange. When the calm returns, we see that the dead oaks are gone, and, in



their place, some fir trees have appeared. We are then surrounded by thousands of fluttering butterflies that have been warmed up by the sun. Only then do we realize that there were never any dead oaks at all, but rather thousands of butterflies hanging from the branches of the fir trees.

We spend several minutes taking pictures and more pictures of the butterflies. The guides have to work hard to convince everybody to return to where we left our horses. Going downhill is easy; people say that even rocks can roll down!!! The grooms untie the horses, check the girths and help the riders get mounted. The guide begins descending and, some meters ahead, he takes a different path than the one used going uphill. This path is easier and although it also goes downhill, it's not as steep as the one used in the morning.

A nice lope is started as the group reaches the foot of the mountain and we encounter a beautiful meadow. The wind is cold, faces are red, manes are flying, and the view of the forest-covered mountains, with huge rocks scattered here and there, is breathtaking. Following the guide, the horses leave the path and the pace slows. Some minutes later, we arrive to a river where the horses have some fresh, cool water. The riders are hungry and soon after, we stop for lunch on the top of a hill shaded by huge pines with a peaceful view of a valley and a pond.

The route continues along another valley called “Corral de Piedra” that goes up into the forest. The smell of the pines and the fir trees is delicious. The horses have to form a line until they reach another meadow where once again, a canter is performed. Five minutes later, we enter the woods. Some branches have to be cut with the “machetes” hanging off the Mexican saddles. A wider log that's obstructing the road is also cut with one of the two axes that “Don Sabino” carries every day.

The noise of running water announces a river with a trout farm next to it. After crossing the river, the path continues alongside it. The path is rocky and with steep descents here and there. The horses easily walk over the rocks and they never mind about walking downhill. The riders keep silent and we can only hear the breathing of the horses and the noise of the water jumping among the rocks. Everything we see during the next half hour looks

CABALGATAS LA SIERRA

MÉXICO HORSE VACATION

REVIEWS – CHRONICLE OF LA SIERRA CAVALCADE



wonderful with the evening light: the river, the forest, the flowers, the birds, and the horses that are walking in front.

In “San Simon”, some cabins and small huts lie close to the plowed soil and green crops. Irrigation channels give life to sweet peas, corn, potatoes, wheat, oats and “habas”. The guide chases some cows off the path, when a group of barking dogs approaches from the direction of the houses . The horses are well-trained and don’t mind the cattle or the dogs. One can also feel how they begin to walk faster. Surely, home is near. Ahead, a golf course emerges. The lush green and well-kept grass seems to invite the riders to perform the greatest gallop of our lives. Unfortunately, the path turns to the left and we’re are left to imagine how great it could have been!!!

At last, after a long day, the group arrives to Rancho Avandaro. The pink clubhouse looks inviting with its wonderful indoor swimming pool. A racetrack with white rails surrounds a show jumping arena. The yellow walls of the stalls can be seen behind some huge elm trees. The grooms are waiting for the horses. The van is waiting for the riders. The riders anxiously get inside it and can’t wait to arrive to Finca Enyhe and have a hot, an invigorating bath!!

WEDNESDAY:

The third day is the best day! There’s no more pain after the third day! After the third day, one is certainly ready to continue for the whole week! That’s what experienced riders say, anyway, and it seems to be true for all the riders in our group. But, just in case, the hosts have planned a shorter



ride for this day. Once mounted, the group passes by the pink clubhouse. Riding along the edge of the golf course, the horses arrive to the cross-country area. Walking near some of the jumps, it’s easy to imagine how hard it must be to go over them... and none of the riders attempt to do so.



A narrow gate that was once white, opens into the front “patio” of a white “hacienda”. The “patio” is really big and the house can take your breath away forever. The group has yet to recover from the lovely surprise, when some mares with their colts begin running in a nearby pasture. A group of antelopes also begin running when they hear the horses. Some buffaloes raise their huge heads in order to see what’s going on. Three zebras make a short canter and stop to see who is comming. The English red deer just remain alert, waiting to see what happens. A big camel with a mean look on his face, moves his tail to scare off some flies, while he walks slowly toward the gate that separates him from the horses. Down the road, a beautiful pond surrounded by trees, becomes part of the landscape. Walking along its edge, the riders reach a meadow where some sheep are grazing. It looks like a good place for a short canter. Further ahead, a second pond appears. This one has lots of flowers surrounding it. Finally, a huge, wide, black iron gate beneath a tall tile roof shows you out of this paradise. Are all Mexican ranches like this one?

After two and a half hours, lunch is served in “Peña Blanca”. The spot has a magnificent view of the town and lake. From there, we can see most of the areas we’ve ridden through over the past three days. We spot some white towers in the far-away mountains. The guide explains that these towers, built in the 1980’s, have pumps that carry water from the lake to Mexico City. He says it was during those years that the government closed the water-powered electrical plant, and in it’s place, built the biggest system to supply Mexico City with water!!!

After lunch, we ride through a tiny little village where most of the houses are built with wooden planks. Three gates are opened by the guide at the front of the group, while the “caporal”, in charge of the back, closes them. Two valleys separated by a small hill are an inviting place to race the horses. After it, the path descends and some riders still continue galloping downhill. Once again, the route veers off into the forest. The path climbs a little, and at the bottom of the mountain, we can hear the noise of a river which prepares the thirsty horses for a refreshing drink. After letting the horses have a sip of

CABALGATAS LA SIERRA

MÉXICO HORSE VACATION

REVIEWS – CHRONICLE OF LA SIERRA CAVALCADE



water, the guide crosses the river and takes a wide road into a village settled on the foot of an isolated mountain called “Cerro Gordo”. It’s only two in the afternoon, and the grooms have already prepared, next to a saw mill, the place where the horses will spend the night.

On the way home, the car passes by “Avandaro”, a wealthy development area with beautiful houses built around the Golf and Spa Resort. Three riders are dropped off at the resort for a massage session. The rest of the riders decide to shop in town. Who do you think made the best choice?

THURSDAY:

Early in the morning, before breakfast, some riders take a walk in the garden to stretch their legs. Lots of birds are digging in the grass, searching for worms. You can see five thrashers with their long, curved bills and four orange-breasted robins. A couple of strange big birds covered with dark blue feathers and a darker mask over their face are singing loudly. These last birds are called “mulatos”.



The riders show up ten minutes late, so the driver decides to take a shortcut and give us a tour through small and narrow streets located in the highest parts of town. The view is breathtaking and we thank God we don’t have to do the driving, especially after a 120 degree turn with a steep descent which, incidentally, offers the driver the opportunity to prove his capacity and expertise!

As usual, the horses are ready and within a few minutes all the riders are mounted and we ride through a forest with huge pine trees. These are “*Pinus montezumae*”, explains the guide, named in honor of the Aztec emperor that received Hernan Cortes. The noise of a bird singing “cuaaa-cuaaa” is heard and the group begins looking for him. We never see it and the guide explains it is a tricolored bird named “*Trogon elegans*” who the locals



call “Cua”. Having ridden for one hour and after crossing a log bridge with a gate at the end of it, we make the usual stop, so everyone dismounts and rushes behind the bushes.

The path is wide and the riders spread out in groups, talking and enjoying their horses. A long canter is performed before reaching a white gate. The gate opens. It appears to be the entrance to a ranch, and we enter. Some meters ahead, we come across quite the “post-card view”. A house built on the edge of a big lagoon is surrounded by towering pine trees. Despite its clean, fresh water, the lagoon looks black, this being the reason for its name: “Laguna Negra” (black lagoon).

After going past another white gate, the horses pass by some barns, a water tank, and a pasture where, it is said, a mean stallion who was a menace to any rider that dared trespass the property, once roamed. The guide entertains us with anecdotes of past encounters with the stallion and, although he assures us the horse is now dead, all the riders prefer to move quickly ahead, in a tight group. A stream crosses the path and the horses can refresh, while some riders dismount and wet their bandanas. The sun is at the cusp of the sky and the heat is well-received by some of us, although others wet their bandanas to soak up some sweat and relieve themselves from the sun.

The “caporal” opens the “falsete”, a gate made of barbed wire and branches. He holds it open until the last rider has passed through. The path narrows. The pines diminish and a great variety of oaks are now the predominant vegetation. Some huge rounded rocks, about 20 ft high, lie alongside the path. The landscape seems dry, with almost no vegetation with the exception of a few oaks shading the path. You can feel a delicious, hot wind blowing from the south. Up ahead, the guide dismounts and ties his horse to the branch of a “madroño”. He then helps the riders dismount and tie our horses to trees. Although it seems to be lunchtime and the “vaquero” has tied his own horse as well as “Don Sabino” to an oak, he doesn’t unload the food. Without saying a word, the guide walks ahead and we follow in silence. It seems that a rock is obstructing the way and the guide must surround it. As we approach the rock, the group can’t help but express our

CABALGATAS LA SIERRA

MÉXICO HORSE VACATION

REVIEWS – CHRONICLE OF LA SIERRA CAVALCADE



awe and admiration. The view is amazing!!! The rock rests on the edge of a cliff, 3000 ft above the small town of “Zacazonapan”, located in the big valley below. The mountains surrounding the valley are far away and seem almost like giant shadows touching the white clouds. The clarity and luminosity of the air is incredible!!! It’s really a fantastic place!!! On the left side, three immense rocks perched on the tip of a row of mountains, catch our eye. The rocks are called “Los Tres Reyes” (the three kings). The group is “busy” sitting on the rock on the edge of the cliff, enjoying the view, when the delicious aroma of charcoal and onion announces that lunch is cooking. The “caporal” and the “vaquero” are preparing it in a pot behind the rock. After lunch, it’s even more difficult to part from such a beautiful place; all the riders wish we could stay in “El Divisadero” forever.

Four new gates have to be opened by the guide and closed by the “caporal” before the group reaches another big rock. This rock faces north and has a large, flat surface, wide enough for the horses to stand on. From there, in the distance, we see “Monte Alto”, behind Valle de Bravo and the lake in front of the town. On the opposite side, we see two other small towns, each with their own little lake. It’s impossible to decide which rock is more spectacular!!!

The route continues through another village with houses built far away from one another. A new gate is opened and the route continues as we enter the woods. After some time, the path starts to descend and one can see the lake drawing near. The guide makes a stop and explains that riders should form a single file and keep a safe distance between the horses. The descent is spectacular, with the lake on one side and a green valley with a chapel on the other. The horses are really good!!! We simply enjoy the view, while the horses take care of the descent, moving along calmly and slowly through the narrow path, avoiding holes and ditches. Twenty minutes later, the descent is concluded and the horses continue walking on a wide, flat road that crosses the town of “Atezcapa” and ends at the shore of the lake where a village called “El Cerrillo” is located, and where the horses will rest that night.

CABALGATAS LA SIERRA

MÉXICO HORSE VACATION

REVIEWS – CHRONICLE OF LA SIERRA CAVALCADE



We are dismounted with the help of the grooms and after drinking the last sodas from the cooler, we walk to the shore and get in the boat that will take us to the other side of the lake. The trip across the lake is a relaxing one for all of us, especially after that amazingly steep descent (where the horses nonetheless demonstrated a high level of training and fitness needed for this type of terrain). From the boat, a 180 degree view reveals many of the places where the “cavalcade” has taken place. The other 180 degrees will have to be covered the next day!!!

FRIDAY:

After breakfast, the car takes the group to the official deck of the lake. People that see us getting on the boat probably think we’re a crazy group of sailors using boots, spurs and hats instead of shorts, sneakers and caps!!! The boat trip is half-and-hour long and we use the time to compare notes on which day we’ve enjoyed most . The answer isn’t easy, since we’ve seen so much over the past five days. One rider comments that each day has been better than the previous one. Another says all the days have been so great, it would be impossible for him to choose only one. The unanimous agreement is that today the guide will be with the challenge of improving upon what we’ve seen over the past few days... or even in just fulfilling our built-up expectations!!



Riding along the shore of the lake is great and some riders decide to do an early morning canter that gets them completely wet (as well as their horses and saddles). After this early bath, the guide leads us across the village of “El Cerrillo” and continues by a path that runs some meters above the shore. Six fishermen fix their nets at the edge of the lake and their children play on a boat while the adults start their daily work. Some meters away, hundreds of ducks are having a noisy bath, eager to see what the nets pull out.

CABALGATAS LA SIERRA

MÉXICO HORSE VACATION

REVIEWS – CHRONICLE OF LA SIERRA CAVALCADE



Two or three weekend houses are the only ones built on this side of the lake. The guide has predicted a hot day, and at that point, starting to feel a difference in the temperature, we pull out our lighter jackets. The sound of some cars lets us know there's a road up ahead. We cross it easily, with the help of our guide's flapping "sombbrero".

We then ride just beneath the back of the dam that supports all the water of the lake. We notice a sign, with the date "1944", on one of the walls of the pumping house. The horses walk next to a pipeline made with gigantic white tubes which don't seem to bother them. Some meters ahead, a big blue tower appears on the foot of a hill and, in the middle of it, sits another tower. These are the first two of a line of pumps that take the water from the lake up to Mexico City. It's a 150 km-long pipeline that has to elevate the water 2,500 ft!! The horses pass by the side of the first tower and begin climbing until they reach the base of the second one. We make a stop and the "caporal" checks all the girths. The guide tells us that when the horses begin their ascent on the mountain, we may hold their mane, and that we should beware not to hold or pull from the reins. We all look up and, within a few minutes, the horses have managed to climb to the top of the hill. Once there, at an altitude almost 300 ft higher than the valley of "Tilostoc" (where the girths were tightened), they are loosened again. The horses are sweating and we can also feel the heat. We drink some water from the thermos that each one carries in our saddle bags.

The route continues along the top of the mountains that surround the lake on its northern side. The temperature on this side of the lake is completely different; drier and hotter than the previous days. Few pines grow there and the vegetation is mostly comprised of small oaks. Lots of bromelias grow on the bark of the oaks and some are blooming with beautiful yellow and red flowers. Groups of hummingbirds are delighted with the nectar. The view of the lake on the right side is incredible!!! On the left side, we see the valley of "Tilostoc" with its quadrangular, multicolored parcels. It's a wonder we don't develop stiff necks, turning in so many directions to see so many marvelous things!!!



The path turns onto a cobblestone street alongside an exhilaratingly beautiful and gorgeous house with a blue swimming pool. It belongs to the owner of “El Santuario”, a new residential development literally cut into the mountainside. Far below, next to the lake, you can see the cobblestone street that leads up to the house. What a place, and what a house!!!

The street we’re on turns and begins to descent, so the guide takes a different path that runs along the top of the mountain. The path is narrow and the low branches of the oaks hit the legs of some distracted riders, occasionally lifting their hats away. The path goes up and down with the ascending and descending profile of the mountain. Far away, there is another white tower on the top of another mountain. A stop is made and the guide opens some barbed-wire fences to lead the horses down a wider path. A few meters ahead, the group reaches the spot that has been chosen for lunchtime. The horses are tied to some pine trees growing in a lonely spot in the middle of the oaks and some of us lay on a great bed of dry pine needles.

After lunch, we stop to give some water to the horses. Women from “San Gabriel Ixtla” who wash their clothes there, help to fill the buckets from the big tank that has been built for their use. The children also help and, within a few minutes, all the horses have been refreshed. Though we’ve had no opportunity for a canter the entire day, we then come across a great meadow, and at the count of three, everyone begins cantering. At the end of the meadow, the guide shows us the lake and the exact spot where the ride began that morning. It seems that more than three quarters of a semicircle has been covered.

Some dogs barking let us know there are residents in the area. First, only a few houses pop up here and there, then a church, and then lots of houses with family orchards that conform the town of “Mihualtepec”. The horses move through the streets in the company of packs of barking dogs which have come out to find out what all the fuss is about. Children playing with a ball on the street stop their game and run away, afraid that the horses might kick them. The noise of the bells of the church announce a service is about to begin. Noise and movement everywhere. But the horses stay calm



and continue walking as if nothing. Either they're extremely well-trained, or they're just plain tired after a week of hard work!!???

A big “adobe” wall and an aqueduct are part of the facade of “Hacienda Pipioltepec”. The horses go in and we all dismount to visit the place. The guide tells us that the construction of the buildings began in the first half of the 16th Century. It's a fascinating place where one can only imagine all the stories seen and heard by those old walls. After visiting the “patio”, the “casa grande”, the “graneros”, and the “molino”, the riders, below the shade of a big elm tree, drink the last beers and sodas from “Don Sabino´s” cooler. Mounted again, the group crosses through the village that surrounds the “hacienda” and goes by a path that allows us another canter. Peasants are plowing their fields like in the old days: a pair of oxen tied by their heads to a piece of wood that pulls the plough made with the curved branch of a tree. Lots of irrigated fields give a multicolored shape to the valley. Another village, “Rincon de Estradas”, appears at the end of the path. It has only one main street with ten or twelve peasant houses sitting on either side. The guide announces the last canter of the ride and we join him cheerfully.

The last surprise of the day occurs almost at the end of the ride. The riders have to dismount and lead our horses down a 15-ft-long rock which is as slippery as it is bumpy! Having ridden the horses for a week, everyone seems to have confidence in his or her horse. Regardless, the guide and the “caporal” help the riders. After passing the rock, everyone claims the walk was “a piece of cake”!!! We continue along the path until reaching a cobblestone street that leads us directly to “Finca Enyhe”.

It looks like this is the end of the ride. The grooms unsaddle the horses and refresh them with a cold water bath. The riders take off their chaps and empty the saddle bags of personal belongings. The guide and the “caporal” check all the horses. They make a list with all the things that need doing, such as repairing some “bosalillos” or curing slight injuries on some horses. The riders snap their last pictures of the horses, some of which are still saddled, while others have been unsaddled or are busy having a bath. Finally,



a picture of the whole group is taken in front of the stalls, with different cameras, of course, so everyone's got a picture.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, amazing music streams in, causing all of us, horses and riders alike, to turn our heads in the direction of the “mariachis”. From the entrance, a group of elegant, black-dressed “charros” walk toward us, blowing their horns, playing their guitars and singing “La Negra”. You can feel the strings of emotion are being plucked in your body. The music is simply the best farewell to this marvelous Mexican “cavalcade” !!!!!

THE MONARCH BUTTERFLIES

No words can describe in its full dimension what this natural phenomenon is like. Not any photograph or video can compare to seeing something like this for oneself, in this fir tree forest. A picture or even a moving image can't do for your soul, what being there can. Being there, you understand that there's nothing like experiencing the phenomenon in person... it's really the only way that one can truly appreciate it.



Thousands and thousands of butterflies. Some are lying on the floor, looking for the warm rays of the sun. Others, already warm, fly, in search of food or water. Many more are hanging from trunks and branches, transforming the trees in such a way that the human eye is easily deceived; the fir trees wear a disguise made of butterflies that makes them look like oak trees.

The orange color of the Monarch Butterflies' wings shows up brilliantly when they are flying. When they're not flying and close their wings, these turn into different shades of brown. So, what initially looks like dead oak leaves, are in fact bunches and bunches of these marvelous insects piled

CABALGATAS LA SIERRA

MÉXICO HORSE VACATION

REVIEWS – CHRONICLE OF LA SIERRA CAVALCADE



one over the other, in an effort to keep warm and protect themselves from the wind and rain. They don't move until the rays of the sun stimulate them to shake their wings and fly again.

That moment when the sun streams into the forest and the butterflies begin flying is beyond description. One can even hear the sound of their wings. It is really a once-in-a-lifetime experience!!! You don't dare talk or move; all five senses are focused on witnessing and enjoying the grandiose nature of what you are living. The truth is that the only way to know what this is like is to experience it.

THE CREW

As mentioned before, the hosts do a great job throughout the week and really give visitors the best they have to offer. They most certainly couldn't make it without the help of a crew of workers that really deserve some lines in this chronicle.



The chauffeur that picks up the riders in the hotel in Mexico City is also in charge of moving the truck and trailer that are used as barn, tack room, and grooms' bedroom. Although he doesn't speak English, he manages to answer most of the riders doubts during the trip, through signs. He also helps with the horses and one can easily see that he is the "chief of chiefs" among the grooms.

Mounted on his young horse, the "caporal" is always ready to help. During the trek, whenever a stop is made, he easily finds a place to tie his horse and help. He does anything from replacing a lost shoe if a horse has dropped it along the way, he starts the fire for lunch, and even makes a pretty good cook for those occasions.

The toughest job of all belongs to the "vaquero" in charge of leading "Don Sabino". Mounted on his own horse named LAP (because of a white



brand in his left hind leg), the “vaquero” leads the mule during the entire day. He has to make sure that the loaded boxes arrive safely and in one piece, through narrow paths in between the trunks of the trees, steep mountains and across rivers. I imagine his right arm alone must need another week to return to its normal position after holding the rope for hours and hours. He has to pay special attention and make sure that it doesn’t get caught beneath his horse’s tail. If it did, a real rodeo would begin, right smack in the middle of the forest! As if this weren’t enough hard work, the “vaquero” is always ready to help a rider in distress, or even to lend a hand fixing lunch.

Every night, other grooms also help take care of the horses. They are always smiling, eager, and helpful. They feed and clean the horses, take care of saddling and make sure that the saddle bags are ready. When riders mount, they help by tightening the girths, holding the saddle, and helping the riders get mounted. They work silently but efficiently; one could say that they are the souls of the “cavalcade”.

Back in the house, another group of workers are always ready to serve visitors. In the kitchen, the cook’s always got something on the stove, brewing some magnificent treat in one of her huge, beautiful “cazuelas”, while two waitresses are busy either washing dishes or setting the table. Once it’s all ready, the three of them emerge from the kitchen and serve an invariably amazing meal in the marvelous hacienda dining room. While everybody rides, they also take care of cleaning the corridors and bedrooms of the big hacienda. I happened to catch a glimpse or two of a couple of them attempting to make heads and tails of some pretty messy rooms, with riding clothes, boots, and hats hanging from anything and everything.

The last to on my little list, is also likely to be the most... how should I put it... “popular” one. The barman. Every day, from 5 to 9 in the afternoon, he appears in the most unexpected corners of the house, always with a big smile and notebook in hand, offering “tequilas”, “margaritas”, “coronas” or whichever drink quenches your thirst, soothes your muscles, or makes you happy. By the second day, he remembers all the names of the riders and



their drinking preferences, so it's then only a matter of raising your hand and, immediately, he pops up with your drink in hand!

THE FOOD

A special chapter must be dedicated to the food that is served in “Finca Enyhe”. Concerning this sophisticated delight, the hosts make a perfect couple! She not only enjoys, but really knows how to cook excellent Mexican and international food, while he enjoys eating it (although, of



course, he claims it's just his way of encouraging her hobby!). No matter who you believe, the only truth you need to know is that all the food that is offered to the riders during the six days of vacation is simply delicious. If you plan to lose some weight on this vacation, don't count on it. Rather, be ready to gain some pounds in the most delicious way possible!!!

During the first day's gathering in the living room of the house, the hosts emphasize the fact that they only use purified, bottled water for anything from cooking, to filling the saddle bag thermoses with, and to prepare the “agua fresca” that's always ready for thirsty riders upon their return. They also explain that all the vegetables they use are fresh, bought locally from a well-known peasant, as well as rigorously washed and disinfected before preparation, especially in the case of salads. I bet none of the riders thought they would be eating fresh salads in Mexico!!! Another thing that may worry the visitors has, happily, been foreseen by the hosts. Large amounts of spicy chile that is common to traditional Mexican food is used in very small quantities in the finca's kitchen. They only use what's necessary to give the specific flavors to the “guisados”. For the bolder riders who may be unafraid of “picante”, there's always a “salsa” or two on the side, which visitors are welcome to try at their own risk. The hosts have taken all the precautions necessary, so that riders can forget about all the warnings they have heard



(including digestive ailments otherwise known as “La Venganza de Moctezuma”), and focus on enjoying all the dishes that are offered during the week.

Breakfast is served buffet-style. To keep the body fit, you can find the typical coffee, toast, yogurt, and cereal. In addition, typical Mexican “almuerzos” are offered. You can try a different dish each day. Eggs are served in a variety of styles. “Huevos rancheros” and “huevos a la mexicana” are great. The “chilaquiles” with beans and sour cream are unforgettable. If you like fruit, a delicious variety is offered every day. Depending on the season, you might find exotic Mexican fruits such as “guanabana”, “chirimoya”, “mamey”, or “chicozapote”. There’s always the more conventional but no less delicious fruits such as papaya, cantaloupe, watermelon, mango, plumb or grapefruit. Juice is made with freshly-cut oranges from the orchard. The taste, though slightly tart, is truly refreshing. Each day, a basket of sweet breads sits in the middle of the table. The favorites are some with names like “conchas”, “polvorones”, and “campechanas”.

The first day, at lunch, a delicious salad with nuts and brie with apricot jelly is served beneath the “pergola”. During the week, lunch is served after three or four hours of riding, always in a perfect spot, especially selected for amazing views. At times, a cold lunch is served, while at others, a fire might be lit to cook a hot meal. “Don Sabino” carries huge leather boxes filled with a great amount of food, as well as a cooler with cold sodas and beers. To the delight of some riders, (particularly European visitors), a bottle of wine is occasionally brought along. From the cold lunches, the “tortas” are really good. They’re a Mexican sandwich made with a bread called “telera”. The “tortas” are dabbed with mayonnaise, mustard, and avocado, then filled with a few marinated onions, a bit of “chipotle”, and a variety of cheeses and cold meats. Preparing these sandwiches can make anyone feel like a perfect chef, even if in fact you may not even know how to boil an egg!! The hot lunches are sensational; the first task at hand being a search for dry branches. Once the items have been unloaded from the pack mule, the colored blanket is set



on a flat spot for the display of all the ingredients . Finally, the preparation of the food. A delicious assortment of chiles, onions, cheese, “chorizo”, meat, or sausages, go into making anything from “choriqueso”, to spicy “butifarras” or an aromatic “cecina encebollada”. A variety of salads (previously prepared in the kitchen of the house), are also delicious and always available, whether one made from cactus leaves, from fresh fruits, or nuts. On the last day, a gourmet-style lunch with smoked trout and “alcaparras” is served with a delicious Spanish wine.

Each day, dinner is a banquet that includes a soup, three or four different “guisados”, salad, rice or beans, a dessert, and a good cup of decaffeinated coffee or tea (so riders have no problem getting to sleep). The “tortillas” are always hot and served in a special basket, ready to wrap into a “taco”...after the hosts explain how one is made and eaten without dropping it onto your shirt! Among the soups the riders will never forget the “sopa de cilantro”, the “consome de pollo” with its aromatic spices and the “sopa de habas con nopales” with the unmistakable flavor of the fresh cactus. The different “guisados” are placed in beautiful “cazuelas” on the table so the riders can have a taste of anything they wish. You can try “chicharron en salsa”, “cochinita pibil”, “tamales”, “tostadas”, “pozole”, and many other delicious dishes that would be too long to detail. Believe me, it really makes a difference to try the real thing, as opposed to the strange concoctions that can be found in the so-called Mexican restaurants outside of Mexico. Big jars of “agua fresca” are emptied once and twice by some riders, while some others prefer to have a delicious cold “corona” directly from the bottle, or even a glass of good Chilean wine to refresh their palate.

Keeping in mind and respecting the fact that not everyone shares the same eating habits, the hosts are more than willing to accommodate special requests, whether this be for a vegetarian diet, or any other kinds of restrictions. This, by no means, translates into dull dishes. Many times, this type of food will include traditional dishes such as “tortitas de platano” or “pastel de queso y rajas”. Even those who prefer to eat less elaborate foods



will be eagerly accommodated (they may live longer, but the rest of us will definitely enjoy our perhaps shorter lives!!!)

BACK TO THE CITY

On the last day, riders are allowed to wake up half an hour later (granted, it's not much, but it's something). After having another excellent breakfast, this time without worrying about riding on a full stomach, a short questionnaire regarding the quality of the services is filled out by the visitors. This activity is followed by the time to pay drinks and special services. In a dash, the luggage is taken to the car and, after exchanging addresses, phone numbers, and e-mails, the hosts bid good-bye to the group of new friends.



While the town begins to prepare for the next busy weekend, the car crosses it and takes the same road used only one week before. Lots of images come to mind as one goes by familiar places. The conversation revolves around the adventures and experiences of the week, recollections of the lovely spots that were visited, and the extreme quality of all the services offered by the hosts. Once again, the trip seems to be only five minutes long and the car enters Mexico City.

A half-hour stop is made in “Talabarateria La Herradura”, a fantastic Mexican tack shop, where riders have just enough time to buy some of the things they saw during the “cavalcade”. Afterwards, a second stop over at a hotel, to drop off a couple that will continue their vacation in Huatulco. Finally, the last stop is at the international airport “Benito Juarez”.

It's time to get on the plane and go back to our daily life. Although it may include riding our own horses, it will never be the same as it was during this week. The help of all the staff and the knowledge, experience and hospitality of the hosts has made this trip an unforgettable one.