



# Riding high in Mexico

Passionate horsewoman Julie Miller discovers a Mexican paradise offering margaritas, mariachi music and some of the best riding in the world.

A burro and a mule are blocking our path, standing patiently beside a moustachioed cowboy wearing a sombrero. From a nearby house, the discordant wail of mariachi music played over a tinny radio wafts through the pine-scented air, a joyful accompaniment to church bells echoing from the village below.

From my elevated platform on a hand-carved saddle, I feel like I've landed in a 'spaghetti western' set, or perhaps a Corona advertisement. I certainly couldn't be anywhere else but Mexico, every 'south of the border' cliché thrown in to intensify the kaleidoscope.

Our horses, however, aren't having a bar of their odd equine cousins. Our guide Lucia's mount is particularly spooked by the donkey, backing up in horror when he catches a glimpse of its long-eared, soulful presence. Ever calm, Lucia pulls her horse up, soothes him, and lets him take a good look at the fuzzy, short-legged mutant. Reassured, he then leads the rest of us on, each horse keeping its wide-eyed distance as we pick our way past on the forest trail.

Horses are a natural element of the Mexican landscape, a way of life in rural regions of the country. I can therefore think of no better way to explore this rich, vibrant culture than from the saddle, absorbing its nuances and traditions not just as an observer, but as part of its heritage.

I also happen to be riding with an equestrian outfitter widely regarded not only as Mexico's, but also one of the world's, leading trek operators. Lucia and her husband Jose Schravessande (also known as Pepe) run Cabalgatas La Sierra, riding holidays for international guests through the stunning countryside of Valle de Bravo, two and a half hour's drive west of Mexico City.

## Colonial charm

Nestled on the edge of a man-made reservoir built in the '50s to supply water to the Mexico City basin, this exquisite colonial village with its cobblestone streets and 400-year-old stucco buildings is a popular weekend retreat for wealthy city dwellers, who come to breathe the clean air of the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains and relax in the lakeside setting.

Set high on a hill overlooking the village is Pepe and Lucia's home, Finca Enyhe, a colonial-style hacienda which they also run as a full-service guesthouse. With seven spacious suites, a stunning central courtyard with bubbling fountain and hammocks, and an infinity swimming pool surrounded by climbing bougainvillea and wisteria, agapanthas, flowering prickly pear and citrus trees, this gracious oasis offers every luxury, from gourmet home-cooked meals to Mexican antique furniture, complemented by impeccable hospitality. >



Lucia and Pepe are congenial hosts, brilliantly bilingual and knowledgeable about local history, politics and culture, with lively discussions taking place over leisurely four-course Mexican feasts washed down by jugs of margaritas. Even for non-riders, Finca Enyhe is a gorgeous place to spend a few days; strolling through the village, shopping for handicrafts in local markets, admiring the church towering over the vibrant central zocalo, or taking a boat tour on the lake.

### El caballo amigos

The main lure for guests, however, are the horses, a stable of 24 handsome, well-bred steeds personally schooled by Jose and Lucia and cared for by a dedicated team of grooms. In both the large riding arena and out on the trail, each horse is well behaved and responsive, a far cry from the nose-to-tail nags of lesser riding establishments.

With its peak season from November to May, Cabalgatas La Sierra offers several different week-long vacations for riders of varying experience, capabilities and requirements. For those who want to spend time in the village or lie by the pool, the Relaxed Ride offers just a few hours riding per morning, returning to the hacienda for an afternoon siesta. There are ample short trails around Valle de Bravo that showcase the splendour of the region, with rides through pine forests, tiny rural hamlets and to peaks overlooking the lake to watch paragliders floating on thermals.

For experienced and fit riders who want to explore further afield, the Classic Ride features up to six hours a day in the saddle, with each day bringing a new and spectacular

highlight – expansive views of the valley from Monte Alto; the white village of Atezcapan; or the majesty of a rocky knoll known as Los Tres Reyes – ‘the three kings’.

Between the months of December and March, the itinerary also includes a visit to the Monarch Butterfly Sanctuary to witness the amazing natural phenomenon of millions of orange-winged butterflies, flitting in dappled sunlight deep in the forest. It’s a magical, surreal and some say spiritual experience, the whirr of fluttering wings reverberating through the still air.

On the Classic Ride, our noble steeds are stabled along the trail, resting with a solid feed after their efforts of the day. Riders, however, are transported back to the comforts of Finca Enyhe, where a salt-rimmed margarita served beside the pool awaits. It’s a glorious way to end a perfect day in horse heaven. ●

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#### FOOTNOTES

**Getting there:** Several airlines fly from Australia to Los Angeles, with transfers to Mexico City. Finca Enyhe is two and a half hour’s drive from the city, with car transfers included in the weekly rate.

**Staying there:** A two-night package, including three meals, at Finca Enyhe costs 3080 MP (A\$247) per person, with longer packages available.

The Relaxed Ride costs from US\$1900 per week (including all accommodation, meals, transfers to and from Mexico City and daily riding); while the Classic Ride costs from US\$2150.

**Further information:** [www.hotelvalledebravomexico.com](http://www.hotelvalledebravomexico.com), [www.mexicohorsevacation.com](http://www.mexicohorsevacation.com)

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- 01 Host Lucia Schravessande in her Mexican riding gear
- 02 Pepe and Lucia ride through the stable entrance
- 03 A horse waits patiently for his rider
- 04 Guest accommodation at Finca Enyhe
- 05 The courtyard at Finca Enyhe
- 06 Pepe and Lucia at Finca Enyhe