

Colombia Haciendas Trail, June 2017

Dawn is slowly breaking; the first rays of sunlight are fighting their way through the lush foliage of the trees, warming the earth and causing the cold and damp of the night to rise like mist. The dark silhouettes of gigantic trees and rolling hills are visible on the horizon. Photo It is now 6 o'clock in the morning; the streets were (still) deserted when we left the vast metropolis of Bogotá and have now finally reached Ubaté. This is where our hosts' hacienda is located and the starting point for our horse-riding adventure over the next few days.

Our international group consists of participants from England, Belgium, Germany and the USA. Together, we'll explore the Haciendas Trail.



Our host, Bernado, shows us round the hacienda. The approach along a small, tree-lined path already made an idyllic impression. The hacienda is owned by the Germán family, Bernado's business partners.

Picture: The house is over 300 years old and has lost none of its historic charm. Typical of the Spanish colonial era, there is a large patio (courtyard) in the centre of the building. This is lavishly adorned with plants and flowers and offers plenty of seating, inviting you to linger. Here, you can thoroughly enjoy the colonial atmosphere and feel as though you've been transported back to the bygone days of centuries past, as described, for example, in one of the historical tales by Gabriel García Márquez, the world-famous Colombian Nobel Prize-winning author.

The ten guest rooms are accessed from the patio. Today, the hacienda is used solely as a holiday home for the family or other guests. Each room has a slightly different layout and varies in size. All are beautifully furnished in an 'old-fashioned' style (in the best sense of the word) with antique furniture and chandeliers. Old family photographs from the past few decades hang on the walls. There is also a lovely fireside room for cold days, an old study with vintage equipment, and even a small chapel. The dining room features a huge table, and in the kitchen the most delicious dishes are conjured up over an old wood-burning stove. Long ago, the hacienda was a 'chicharia', where chicha was produced. Chicha is a kind of South American cider or fermented juice, also known as the 'beer' of the Incas or the Andes, which is made from different varieties of fruit and plants depending on the country or region.

Of course, a stable was also part of the estate back then. Today, this part has been converted into a guest room. Only the old saddles on the wall bear witness to that era. Nowadays, the new stables are about a 5-minute walk from the hacienda.

After a delicious coffee and a little time to rest following the long flight, we meet up to walk to the stables together. After a short stroll, we can already see the paddocks and the new stables at the foot of a mountain. The horses are usually kept outdoors all year round, so the stalls are hardly ever used. There is also a large lounge offering plenty of space and an equally spacious and extremely tidy tack room, where you can see many different types of saddles, ranging from classic English saddles, through Western and McClellan saddles, to ladies' saddles and, of course, the typical South American saddles with sheepskin covers. Our horses are already being prepared for us by the wranglers. There are around 40 horses in total, almost all of them crossbreeds of Criollos, Arabians and/or Quarter Horses. There are also a few mules in the herd. For the rides, McClellan-style saddles are usually used, along with a curb bit as in Western riding. Each horse has saddlebags, and rain ponchos are also provided. Very handy! Colombia lies in the tropical climate zone, and as we all know, it can rain there all year round.

By now, the temperatures have become pleasantly summery, although it was still quite chilly in the mornings. Sun protection is essential; after all, we are not far from the equator, and the altitude – we are at around 2,600 metres above sea level – should not be underestimated. Colombia is divided into different natural regions. The coast is renowned for its magnificent beaches and Afro-Caribbean influences, whilst in the sparsely populated east, vast wet savannahs and dense rainforest stretch out, fed by the Amazon and Orinoco rivers. The west of the country is dominated by the Andes, the world's longest mountain range. In Colombia, it runs through three distinct mountain ranges: the Western, Central and Eastern Cordilleras. We are in the eastern arm, in the province of Cundinamarca, and over the next few days we will make our way to the neighbouring province of Santander.

In the covered riding arena, we do a few short test laps on our horses until everyone has adjusted their stirrups and sorted out their gear. Then we're off!

We ride leisurely away from the stables, passing the stable's own llama, which is lying down grazing contentedly, and head towards the surrounding hills that we're going to climb. We ride through magnificent forests of pine trees and huge, fragrant eucalyptus trees; here and there we pass a cactus and

time and again we're treated to stunning views of the mountain panorama. Photo: My hard-working Criollo-Arabian cross is eager to move forward and carries me safely over every type of terrain we encounter along the route. Happy and content, we return to the stables after a very lovely first ride. Lunch is already waiting for us under a pergola at the hacienda. There's a barbecue – 'asado' in Spanish – of the very finest kind, a real feast for the eyes! We wonder who else, apart from us, these huge piles of meat are meant for? We do our best not to leave anything behind, but the mission is doomed to failure from the outset. We enjoy delicious beef, chicken thighs, sausages, two different types of potatoes, accompanied by an exquisite avocado dip and an equally superb fresh mango juice. All the tropical fruits that we have to pay a fortune for in our supermarkets simply grow here in abundance on the trees. There's always a full fruit basket on the patio for us to help ourselves to. I've never even heard of some of the fruits I'm trying before....



A little highlight awaits us in the afternoon. We visit the neighbouring farm where Paso Finos are bred and trained. This gaited horse breed has its origins in Colombia, amongst other places, and the Colombians are absolutely mad about their Paso Fino! The breed is named after its gait (roughly 'fine gait'), which is a tölt-like gait. Competitions are held throughout the country, in which riders and horses must march on the spot on a wooden floor whilst being cheered on by the audience. The horse with the fastest and purest rhythm wins. The Paso Fino also enjoys great popularity abroad (e.g. Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, USA.....) the Paso Fino enjoys great popularity. We are allowed to watch one of the staff members during training, which is really very interesting. There are different types within the breed: the 'normal' Paso Fino/tölting horse, the

Trochador (Trocha = trotting tölt) and the 'Trote y Galope' (trot & canter). Competitions also distinguish between different age groups of horses. Picture After a few horses were shown to us, we had the honour of riding one of these noble horses ourselves. A truly memorable riding experience! The horse rattles across the wooden floor like a sewing machine, whilst you yourself can barely feel a movement. In the evening, another delicious meal awaits us. We're having ajiaco, a typical Colombian dish. It's a sort of soup or stew with chicken, potatoes, sweetcorn, capers, avocado and a dash of cream. Now we also get to meet our other host, Germán, who will be accompanying us from now on. Together with Bernado, he has been running the Haciendas Trail for a few years now, showing his guests Colombia from horseback. Until a few years ago, Bernado was still working as a lawyer, but at some point he resigned to devote himself entirely to his passion for horses and riding. After dessert, the bottle of aguardiente ('firewater') makes the rounds once more before we all head off to our rooms, tired.

The next morning, our riding adventure continues. First, we ride over a few hills to a village, where we stop at a small shop and enjoy a few refreshing drinks. Afterwards, the route continues over the hills and through some woods. The mule that Germán is riding is a constant source of delight. He's a big fan of mules, as despite their generally smaller size, they're very hardy and can carry more weight than many horses, whilst still marching diligently forward. I'm able to see this for myself when Germán lets me ride the mule and I get to experience its qualities during an enjoyable gallop. Despite its shorter legs, we can easily keep up with the front of the group. Photo

In terms of scenery, this riding tour has a great deal to offer – from the forests already mentioned, through vast green plains and steep mountain passes, to desert-like rocky terrain. We often ride through small villages or stop at historic haciendas, where we are warmly welcomed and treated to refreshments by our hosts.



All the accommodation is also extremely charming, and each has its own style and unique character. Often these are old historic haciendas that have been lovingly restored and furnished, but we also stayed at a sort of eco-lodge in the mountains with a variety of small cabins for guests, as well as a modern hotel in the Monasterio de la Candelaria, the oldest Augustinian monastery in the Americas.

The final stage of our ride is the town of Villa de Leyva. With its cobbled streets and white façades, it is considered the most beautiful colonial town in the country. Its huge main square in the town centre is one of the largest in Latin America and has served as the backdrop for several Hollywood films (e.g. Zorro).

It's brilliant that, as well as enjoying the nature and the countryside, you also get to learn so much about Colombia's culture and fascinating history.

Unfortunately, time flies far too quickly and it's time to say goodbye to our friendly guides and the horses we've grown so fond of. Luckily, I don't have to head home just yet; instead, I get to stay in Colombia a little longer and embark on another riding adventure. But more on that later....

Denise Neufeld, June 2017

Full details of the Colombia Haciendas Trail can be found at:

http://www.equitour.com/pegasus/d/reisen/amerika/sued_am/colombia/col008.htm