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# Prosperity on the Pampas

**THERE'S SOMETHING OVERTLY** romantic about boarding a gigantic wide-body jet, taking off and leveling out seven miles above the Earth, and peering out the window as the pilot gradually turns the nose and points it straight south. Twelve hours later, you're in a land unlike any you've encountered: where the flora and fauna are the kind not found in your neighborhood; where the sun sets at half past 6 o'clock in the evening; where dinner is served at 11.

Along with extensive reading about the goings-on in the Southern Hemisphere, I had met plenty of people over time who experienced the friendly, inviting South American culture. Despite the articulate folks who sang the praises of Buenos Aires, Argentina, none were able to adequately verbalize the city's grandeur and majesty. None until I met Michael Luongo. But hold that thought.

I set out on a trip to this jewel of Argentina when I started working for American Airlines in 2007. I would only have five days before the domestic grind pulled me back Stateside, yet I committed to doing all those things you can't do in North America, or at least not with the same style. In addition to sightseeing, there were two equestrian activities I needed to accomplish so I could say: "I know what it's like to be an Argentine."

This is a society predicated on ranching. Many *estancias* (country homes) open their doors to visitors, and the one I chose, Estancia Villa Maria, was only a 45-minute drive into the interior Pampas region. My first equestrian experience — learning to ride a horse — would happen here. I thought I'd just climb on and work up a lather with it. Instead, I got on the horse and trotted the feeling out of my lower half. Still, I had enough saddle hours logged (about two) that I felt ready to entertain my second equestrian wish-list item: playing polo.

Argentina is considered the polo capital of the world, claiming more international championships than any other country. El Rincon del Polo Club & School is regarded in riding circles as the Harvard of polo. Owner/operator Estani Robledo Puch and his two brothers are former professionals who have competed in every country where the sport is played. They pass their knowledge on to patrons of the ranch with lessons and matches, called "chuckers." Experts and novices alike are

welcome. Even novices with only two clocked hours on horseback.

I listened with rapt interest as Estani gave a tutorial. He walked me (actually, walked my horse) through all the scenarios encountered in a match, then he took me to a family meal to meet the other players. Later that evening, I donned my red polo shirt and white jeans and played an official game of four-on-four. You can guess how that turned out. Five years later, I'm still saddle sore.

Still, when the trip came to an end, I hated to leave Argentina and the horse culture. I had those same romantic feelings as I boarded the wide-body jet for my ride home. Truthfully, they were more intense, since folklore gave way to reality.

Which brings us back to Michael Luongo. In addition to being an award-winning writer, he splits time between Buenos Aires and New York, and he writes about Argentina more thoughtfully and thoroughly than anyone I've ever read. Enjoy his story on page 42. Perhaps when you're through, you just might log on to AA.com and buy a ticket on one of our wide-body jets and go see for yourself. I'm sure Estani will have a horse saddled up and ready for you.



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