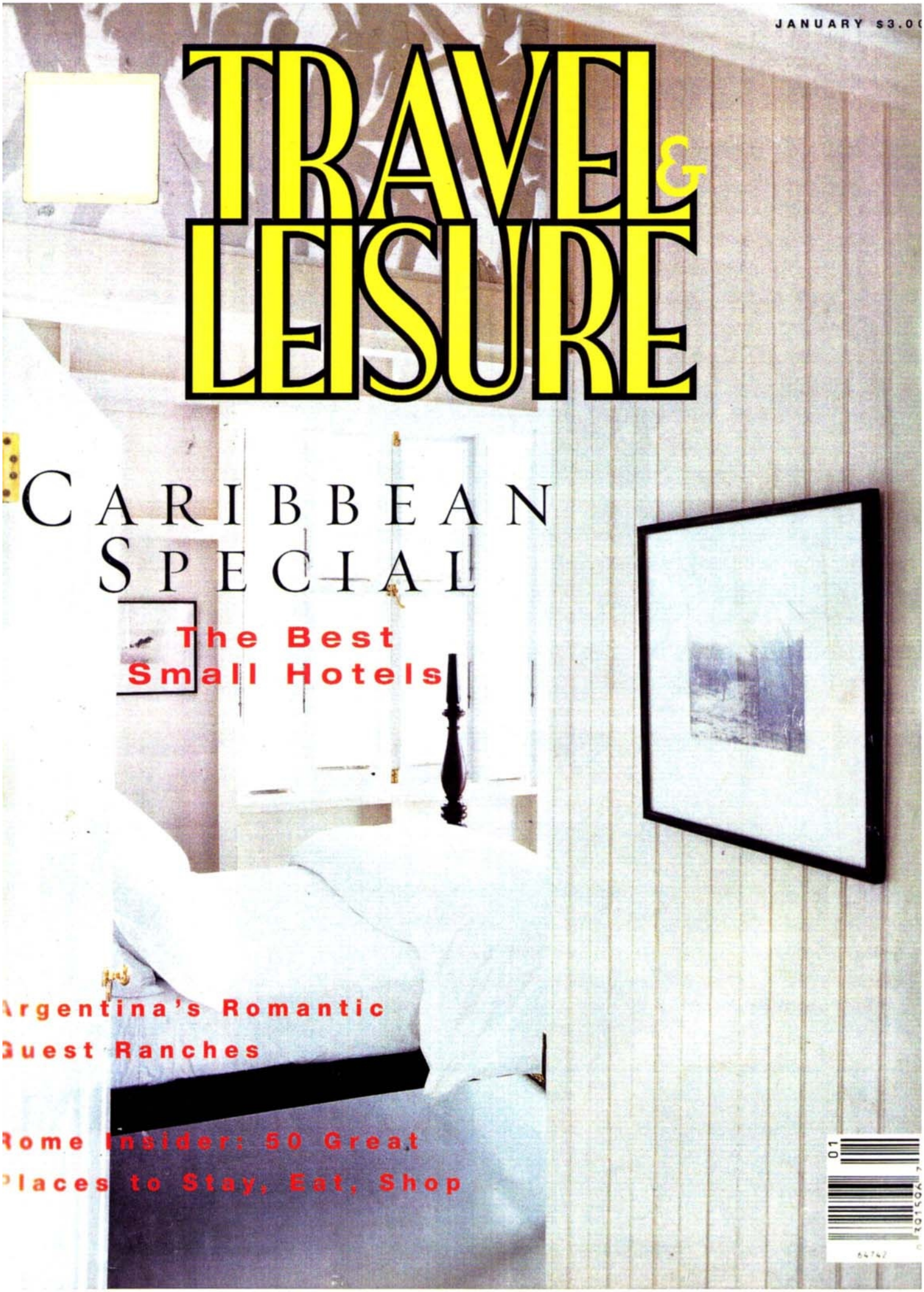
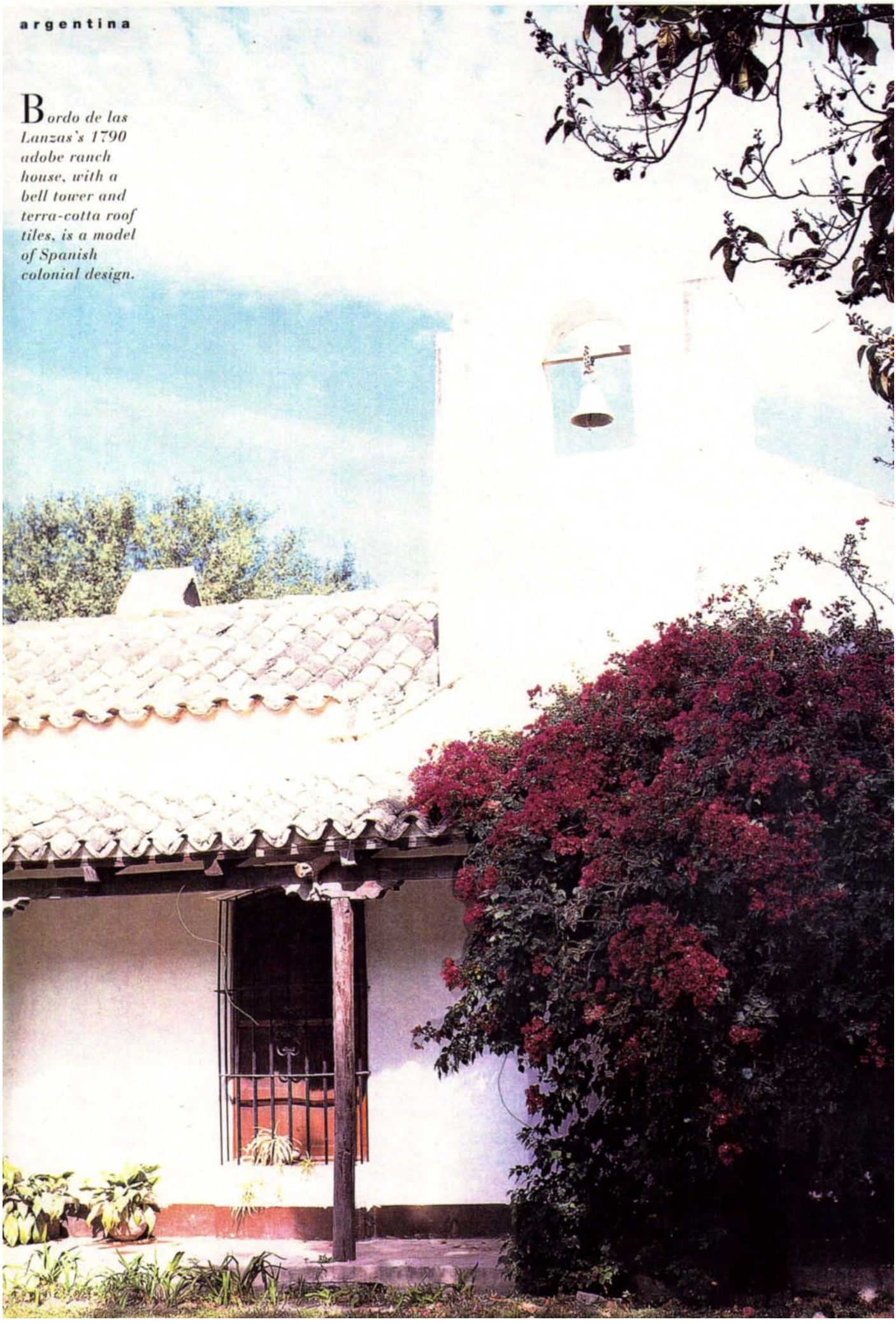

JANUARY $3.0
TRAVEL & LEISURE
CARIBBEAN SPECIAL
The Best Small Hotels
Argentina's Romantic Guest Ranches
Rome Insider: 50 Great Places to Stay, Eat, Shop

Bordo de las Lanzas's 1790 adobe ranch house, with a bell tower and terra-cotta roof tiles, is a model of Spanish colonial design.



THE SKY OVER

Salta, a northwestern province of Argentina, is still an inky blue when the birdcalls awaken me. From the trees in the courtyard of the ranch house comes the keetoopee-keetoopee of yellow-and-black kiskadees, alarmed by a long-eared armadillo shuffling after fallen guayaba fruit. A flock of aptly named southern screamers explodes in panicked flight, while a more courageous band of bay-winged cowbirds, each with a distinctive warble, sounds like an orchestra tuning its woodwinds.

At the first glimmer of dawn, with me at his side, my host, Dario Arias, begins his daily rounds of the 11,115-acre spread his family has owned for more than three centuries. Dressed in baggy gray pantaloons and a matching shirt, the 72-year-old rancher bears a striking resemblance to the late actor William Powell. Driving a pickup truck along the main dirt road of his estancia, as Argentines call a large rural estate, he brakes for a herd of cows heading out to pasture. A bearded gaucho riding in the opposite direction grins, then waves at us, and I notice a bright red smear on the neck of his white stallion. "A vampire bat," Arias informs me. "Lots of them around here. At night they sink their fangs into an animal, then hang on and lap up the blood as it trickles down."

Our first stop is a compound of tobacco sheds. The crop has just been harvested, and the leaves, tied into bundles, are being hung from poles to dry in large heated barns. Arias inspects the leaves for dark spots. The American tobacco brokers who buy the crop don't like blemishes, he explains.

By 8 A.M. the sun burns off what remains of the morning mist to unveil a chain of green mountains on the horizon. Arias dons a wide-brimmed hat, and we continue our journey through the sprawling fields of cotton, sugarcane, corn, beans, and tomatoes. He will break for lunch and a nap, inspect the cattle and horses, and return to the ranch house at nightfall. Even then, his workday won't be over. He has guests to entertain for drinks and dinner, people like me who have traveled thousands of miles to experience life on the Argentine estancias.

I have known Argentina, as a resident and a frequent visitor, for more than 20 years. Yet this trip is my first prolonged encounter with estancias. Neither willful neglect nor lack of curiosity is to blame. For two decades, acquaintances warned me that Buenos Aires, a cosmopolitan capital with European pretensions, was just a façade. Argentina's soul and romantic self-image, I was told, were rooted in the vast countryside, where hard-riding gauchos had the run of lavish estancias. But the estancieros, or ranchers, valued their privacy. At best, I might wangle an invitation to spend a day at an estate. The owners were urbane cowboys who lived and worked as businessmen in Buenos Aires and used their ranches as weekend retreats for tennis, polo, and social preening.

Over the past few years, though, numerous estancieros—guided by the same economic impulses that led postwar British aristocrats to open their manors and castles to tourists—have been forced to supplement their incomes and help save their estates by accommodating visitors. In fact, so many estancias (about 50 at last count) now welcome paying guests that it's hard to figure out where to stay. I ultimately chose three destinations, based on the following criteria: they are working estancias, not just dude ranches or faux country manors; each offers distinct leisure activities; their contrasting settings give a sense of Argentina's breadth; and, if not always luxurious, they provide comfortable living quarters, good food, and gracious hosts.

The Arias property, known as Bordo de las Lanzas, is a fine starting point. The estate and its owners are steeped in history. From a safe under his living room staircase, Dario Arias withdraws a piece of parchment documenting an ancestor's arrival in this corner of Argentina in the late 1500s. He was part of a conquering horde of Spaniards who crossed the Andes from present-day Peru. Also written in quill pen and dated a few decades later is the title deed for the estancia.

The ranch house, built in 1790, is acclaimed as a jewel of estancia architecture from the Spanish colonial era. Its thick whitewashed adobe walls are protected from rain by overlapping layers of terra-cotta tiles on the roof. The living room rises two stories to a ceiling of exposed wood beams. Bedrooms for both the family and guests are arranged in an L-shape

MAP BY RODICA PRATO

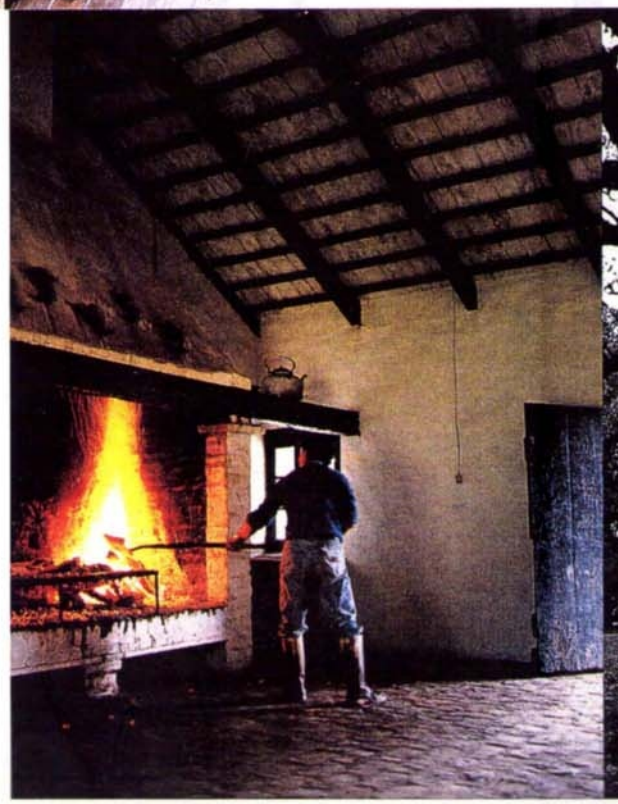
The gauchos at the guest ranch Bordo de las Lanzas in Salta wear cotton pantaloons, called bombachas; the daggers in their belts are used for cutting meat and other chores.

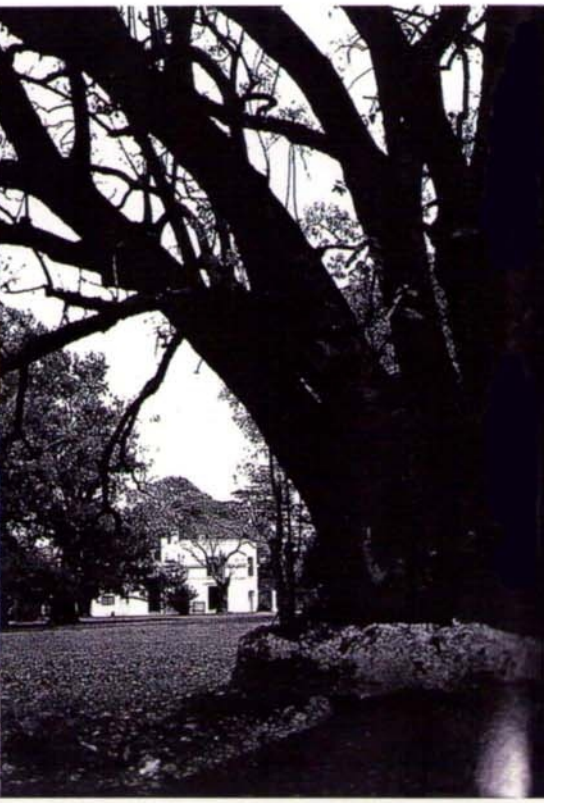
BY 8 A.M. THE SUN BURNS OFF WHAT REMAINS OF THE MORNING MIST TO UNVEIL A CHAIN OF MOUNTAINS ON THE HORIZON

A cotton field on the 11,115-acre Bordo de las Lanzas spread, with the Andes foothills in the background. OPPOSITE: The upstairs library at Bordo de las Lanzas is used by guests as well as the Arias family, the owners of the estate.

GUESTS ARE DRAWN BY THE SIMPLICITY OF ESTANCIA LIFE: WALKS THROUGH LARCH COPSES, DRINKS ON A PORCH, AND THE SMELL OF BEEF BARBECUING OVER WOOD EMBERS

La Porteña: a typical guest room, ABOVE. *FAR RIGHT: The whitewashed ranch house overlooks the estate's giant ombu, a shrub under which Ricardo Güiraldes wrote much of his classic gaucho novel,* Don Segundo Sombra. *RIGHT: Chicken, lamb, and every cut of beef imaginable are barbecued in an open hearth, or fogón, next to the stable.*





around an inner courtyard brightened by roses, geraniums, and bougainvillea. Afternoon tea is served in a 60-foot-long gallery that faces the outer garden, an expanse of green lawn with frangipani, hibiscus, palms, and flame trees. The house is decorated with Precolumbian artifacts, uncovered in the fields, and Latin American religious paintings and sculptures, mostly family heirlooms, from the colonial period.

Arias has had as illustrious a career as any of his ancestors. He was a lawyer, newspaper publisher, banker, and governor of Jujuy Province before becoming a full-time estanciero 25 years ago. His wife, Graciela, a native of Buenos Aires, studied briefly in the United States and served as a social worker with Delaware farm laborers. After returning to Argentina, she met her husband in Salta and bore him 10 children, now 10 to 26 years old. Husband and wife, both strong-willed, settled long ago on a formula for domestic tranquillity by dividing estancia tasks between them. Doña Graciela runs the household and arranges side trips for guests to the nearby city of Salta, known for its colonial-era buildings, and to the valley of Humahuaca, with its bare multicolored mountains and artisan villages.

The kitchen prepares northern Argentine recipes that rarely appear on Buenos Aires menus. Among the more memorable dishes are locro, a hearty stew of corn, beans, bacon, and dried beef; carbonada, a sweeter stew of corn, squash, peaches, and meat; and Andean tamales, known as humitas. The bacon and beef are from Arias's pigs and cattle, the fruit and vegetables are grown on the estate, and the smooth full-bodied wines are from local vineyards.

Meals offer a glimpse of family life on a traditional estancia. Three or four of the older Arias children are always at the table, recounting their day's work for their parents. The eldest daughter, a business school graduate who oversees the ranch's finances, leafs through bills she has recently paid. The eldest son, a lawyer who, like his father, seems destined to become a politician, explains a pro bono case he has accepted against a local municipality attempting to obliterate its only green space.

Several family members provide a running translation in English for the foreign visitors—two Australian couples and me. The children respond readily to queries about their romances and the attractions of provincial life; not one of them seems drawn by Buenos Aires. We guests quickly discover that we aren't mere spectators. The Arias family is hungry for news from abroad. It's easy enough to describe nightlife in New York and Sydney, but try explaining the intricacies of Whitewater.

The following day I saddle up for a two-hour ride around the estancia, guided by Lozano, a 70-year-old gaucho *(continued on page 92; see page 95 for The Facts)*

with a jutting jaw, a fiery mustache, and a cataract-clouded eye. His other eye is sharp enough to spot legions of birds long before I do. The subtropical mosaic of mountain, water, forest, and farmland makes the estate home to more than 200 avian species. At the edges of the crop fields we see buzzard eagles and caracara hawks, cattle tyrants and southern lapwings, rock doves and burrowing parrots.

In the afternoon, joined by the Australians and a chauffeur-guide, I visit two of the ranch's outlying lagoons. One of them is alive with waterfowl: herons, cormorants, roseate spoonbills, grebes, and ducks. The other seems empty except for pairs of leather-browed eyes, peering above the green water, which belong to jacares, South American crocodiles. There are scores of them, the largest about nine feet long. One of the Arias boys feeds them with a sack of cattle lungs—the only parts of a steer Argentines won't consume—but the open-jawed jacares, still hungry, swarm up the embankment and send us into a hasty retreat.

The dining room at Bordo de las Lanzas.

Back at the corral, Dario Arias supervises the training of horses he sells to other estancieros. One by one, young steers are led into the enclosure and chased by gauchos on mounts who either lasso them to the ground or teach their horses to waltz the cattle around the corral. This isn't just a spectacle for the benefit of guests. Argentina, unlike the United States, has almost no feedlots. Livestock graze in open fields, and the services of skilled horses and riders are still in heavy demand. There are about 84 million head of sheep and cattle in Argentina—more than twice the human population—and they are tended by 450,000 gauchos.

MOST GAUCHOS MAKE THEIR HOME ON the pampa, the fertile plain that stretches in an arc of several hundred miles around Buenos Aires. The pampa is also the training ground for the world's best polo players. While the social gap between elite sportsman and humble roughrider seems unbridgeable, both traditions have in fact fed upon each other. The aspiring polo player—son of a wealthy estanciero—depends on the gaucho to act as a groom for his ponies and as a teammate when friends aren't available. Occasionally, like a caddie rising to golf pro, a gaucho becomes a ranked polo player. This is what happened to Manuel Güiraldes.

Estancieros often joke that they carried out agrarian reform in Argentina by dividing their lands among their numerous offspring. At the turn of the century the Güiraldes family had more than 100,000 acres of pampa ranchland. But by the time Manuel was born 47 years ago, one of 13 siblings, there was none left for him. He is an estanciero-turned-gaucho, and his story is all the more poignant because his rich granduncle, Ricardo Güiraldes, wrote the great gaucho novel *Don Segundo Sombra*.

Manuel, a tall blond fellow, devoted himself to the sport of kings. He was so poor that he carved his own wood mallets and balls. But his charm and athletic talents made him a favorite among wealthier polo players, and he fashioned a career both as a player and a coach in Europe.

After returning to Argentina a few years ago, he agreed to manage a polo school on the same estancia, La Porteña, where his granduncle lived and wrote his masterpiece. Guests stay in the original 19th-century ranch house, a whitewashed rectangular building. The bedrooms and common areas are decorated with English sideboards, rustic antiques, and old family portraits. Polo lessons are also given at a dozen nearby estancias, yet none has a more gaucho atmosphere, or gentler instruction for a rank beginner.

"I'll have you out on the playing field in a half hour," promises Güiraldes. And that's how long it takes to get through a lesson on a wood training horse he has installed in a barn. There are forward and backward swings delivered from either side of the horse. The forward motion can best be described as a tennis serve that turns into a one-arm golf stroke. Reverse that for a backward swing. Then, from the other side of the horse, the motion seems more like a tennis backhand that finishes in a croquet stroke. Soon I am hitting balls with the same sweet thwack I've heard at polo matches in Palm Beach and Buenos Aires.

On a real horse that is almost as tame as the wood one, I follow Güiraldes and his mount to the polo field and watch him hammer the ball from every angle at full gallop. As my mare moves between a trot and a canter I swing and miss on my first half-dozen attempts. The horse, sensing trouble, passes closer to the ball and . . . thwack. Within minutes I am making contact on almost every swing and eventually manage to nudge the ball between the posts for my first goal.

Most guests at 500-acre La Porteña, which sits about 70 miles northwest of Buenos Aires, are neither aspiring nor practicing polo players. Nonequestrian visitors are drawn by the simple aesthetics and solitude of a classic estancia on the pampa: walks through pine and larch copses, drinks on a wisteria-shrouded porch to the mournful strains of an accordion-like bandonion, and the smell of beef barbecuing over the wood embers of a fogón, or open hearth. Güiraldes and his wife, Queca, never break the reverie induced by the surroundings. "We know if guests want us to join them for meals, or be left alone," he says.

OBERTO GILI

ARGENTINA

hare's ears, and woolly buggers. The guides inform us that we'll be fishing tomorrow on the Collón Curá River, the best of the estancia's trout waters, and we retire for the night to our rooms, furnished as sparsely as mountain cabins with beds, small dressers, doorless closets, and electric heaters.

The Collón Curá is a half-hour ride from the main compound, on a gravel road with the snowcapped Lanín volcano in constant view. We reach the river at about 10 A.M., hours later than the conventional dawn start that I'm used to back in the United States. But this far south the summer sun sets close to 10, so fishing days tend to be long anyway. The river is perfect: broad, yet shallow enough to wade in, with a smooth pebble bed and banks almost bare of bushes that can tangle a cast.

My guide is Jorge Trucco, who after 15 years as an outfitter in Patagonia has become something of a local legend. So many trout are rippling the river's surface, though, that my first thought is, "Who needs him?" I'm soon humbled after several dismal dry fly casts. The fish are feasting on minnows, not insects, Trucco explains. He suggests that I use a wet fly instead, a marabou muddler, which wriggles underwater.

On his first cast, Trucco's reel whines and a huge trout leaps out of the river. After a 10-minute struggle, he lands the fish, a 25-inch rainbow. "This is why gringos come all the way down here," he gloats. In observance of the strict catch-and-release philosophy at Quemquemtreu, he quickly unhooks the fish, holds its mouth against the current to oxygenate the gills better, and lets it swim away.

I land a 15-inch brown trout on my second cast, using the fly Trucco has tied to my line, and then three like-size rainbows in quick succession, all of them duly photographed before release. We make our way down the Collón Curá on a rubber raft, hopscotching past the other anglers, a New York couple and their guide. Late in the afternoon the wind kicks up, and Trucco suggests we head back to the ranch house, but I plead for a few more casts. At a narrow bend in the river I feel a tug on my line and foolishly walk forward into the strongest part of the current. Trucco shouts at me to hold on and reaches out a hand. But it's too late. I'm swept away and my waders bloat with cold water like a clown outfit.

That evening at the lodge, warmed by a crackling fire and a glass of Argentine Burgundy, I can laugh about my plunge. I discover the real damage only after returning to New York. My camera is waterlogged, and I'm reduced to hand gestures as I describe to my wife and friends the largest trout I ever caught.

You'll Strike

Our exciting 1995

Gold In

Pennsylvania Visitors Guide

Pennsylvania

is a treasure map that will lead you to hundreds of sophisticated diversions, from art galleries and museums to music, theater and gourmet dining.

For your free guide, call

1-800-VISIT PA, ext. 618

Hearing impaired persons can call TDD 1-800-332-8338

ARGENTINE ESTANCIAS

The water-soaked landscape around Quemquemtreu in Patagonia.

AMERICAN, UNITED, AND AEROLÍNEAS ARGENTINAS all fly from New York to Buenos Aires for about $1,350 round-trip (economy fare) or from Miami for about $1,200. December–February is Argentina's summer. At Bordo de las Lanzas in Salta, the temperature can rise to more than 90 degrees on summer days and drop to the high 70s at night. Even in winter you will rarely need more than a sweater or light wool jacket. At La Porteña on the pampa around Buenos Aires, the temperature is about 10 degrees cooler during the summer than it is in Salta, and it can fall to the 30s in winter, though 60 is the average. At Quemquemtreu in Patagonia, where it snows heavily in winter, you will need a sweater or jacket on summer nights. At all three estancias the water is safe to drink, and the risk of getting an upset stomach is minimal.

BOOKING AGENTS

Bordo de las Lanzas and La Porteña can be booked through either **CAMPOS & TRADICIÓN** (652 Avenida Córdoba, Buenos Aires; 54-1/322-6023, fax 54-1/322-6683) or **CIRCULOS MAGICOS** (864 Calle Uruguay, Buenos Aires; 54-1/815-2803, fax 54-1/814-3344). U.S. reservations for Quemquemtreu are handled by **FRONTIERS** (100 Logan Rd., Wexford, PA 15090; 800/245-1950 or 412/935-1577, fax 412/935-5388).

ESTANCIAS

BORDO DE LAS LANZAS *Doubles $320 (includes all meals and ranch activities).* This estancia, in the northwestern province of Salta, is best reached by flying into San Salvador de Jujuy Airport, which is about 15 miles to the north. The Buenos Aires–Jujuy flight (about two hours) costs about $440 round-trip on Aerolíneas Argentinas or Austral Líneas Aéreas. The estate has seven guest rooms and a swimming pool. The Arias family consults visitors about food preferences before preparing any meals. Breakfast is usually served at 8 A.M., lunch at 2 P.M., tea in the late afternoon, drinks about 9, and dinner shortly thereafter.

There is an extra charge for side trips, depending on the destination and the size of the party. Salta, a colonial city about a 40-minute drive from the ranch, is well worth a half-day visit. The Valley of Humahuaca has stunning mountain views and villages, such as Purmamarca, that are notable for crafts and woven goods. This trip takes most of the day; the altitude—as high as 9,000 feet—can cause fatigue.

LA PORTEÑA *Doubles $620 for polo-playing guests taking lessons, $280 for other guests (includes all meals and ranch activities); no credit cards.* There are six guest rooms and a swimming pool at this property 70 miles northwest of Buenos Aires. Argentine beef, justifiably famous, is served in copious quantities; chicken and pasta dishes are also good. Side trips include the small town of San Antonio de Areco, a 15-minute drive from the estancia, which has a renowned gaucho museum; Casa Pérez, a store that sells gaucho hats and pantaloons; and, around the block, the studio of Juan José Draghi, a master silversmith who crafts gaucho gear like buckles, belts, tea gourds, and saddles. About an hour's drive away is Tigre, the Paraná River delta where boat trips past dozens of tiny islands offer remarkable birdwatching.

QUEMQUEMTREU *$2,800 per person for a six-day stay (includes all meals, a fishing guide shared by two anglers, and transfers to and from San Martín Airport).* The estancia lies 90 minutes by car south of San Martín de los Andes, which is 1,023 miles southwest of Buenos Aires. The flight from Buenos Aires to San Martín costs $475 round-trip on Aerolíneas Argentinas or Austral Líneas Aéreas. There are four double rooms at the estancia's fishing lodge. The fishing season runs mid November–mid April. The only recommended side trip is to San Martín, which looks like a slice of the Swiss Alps transplanted to Patagonia. You can spend an hour strolling around, perhaps before boarding your return flight to the capital.

BEST BOOKS

INSIGHT GUIDE: ARGENTINA (*Houghton Mifflin*)—Pleasurable to read, with its in-depth coverage of the country's history and culture, as well as practical tips for travelers.

IN PATAGONIA by Bruce Chatwin (*Viking Penguin*)—A brilliant and witty narrative that portrays the strange history and unusual people of Argentina's remote region.

THE WHISPERING LAND by Gerald Durrell (*Viking Penguin*)—A hilarious retelling of the author's ranging through Patagonia and rain forests on a quest for rare additions to his private zoo.

—MARTIN RAPP