

Mexico's Majestic

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JO STANFORD

After a long flight from the United Kingdom, I spent my first night in Mexico in the four-star Hotel Royal Zona Rosa in Mexico City. I was about to start a week-long adventure out of Cabalgatas La Sierra, run by Pepe and Lucia Schraivesande, a charming Mexican couple with top-class equestrian credentials, fluent English, and a desire to share their knowledge and passion for rural Mexico with visitors.

I met my fellow riders at the hotel reception the next morning, when Pepe's brother, Pablo, picked us up in a minibus for our 2½-hour journey west, through Toluca. There, we got our first view of El Navado, the majestic volcano that was to be the backdrop to the week's ride.

In contrast to the desert and cacti that are synonymous with Mexico, we'd be riding in the mountains of the Sierra Madre of Central Mexico through evergreen forests and past rural communities that scratch their living from the land. Some say this is the true soul of Mexico. It was October, and the weather was hot, but not too hot — perfect for long days in the saddle.

During the journey, I got acquainted with my fellow riders. There was Geoffrey from Texas, who learned to ride at age 50; two sisters who'd been on riding holidays all over the world; Gwen from Maine; Dewey and Jan Matthews, who run Anchor D Guiding & Outfitting Ltd., in Alberta (see page 114); and 30-year-old Biggie, who has 10 horses on a 24-acre ranch in Wyoming.

A Relaxing Arrival

Arriving at Finca Enyhe in the 400-year-old mountain village of Valle de Bravo, we were immediately struck by the beauty of the colonial-style house, owned and



The ride climbs gently through ancient forests of pine and oak to heights of between 8,000 to 10,000 feet above sea level. This was the steepest descent; at the top, rider Jo Stanford estimated it would take three hours to reach the bottom; it actually took half this time.

lovingly restored by Pepe and Lucia. The striking white-and-blue-trimmed façade led into a main courtyard. Set around a lush green central garden with a bubbling fountain, the large bedrooms connected to shady verandas, equipped with colorful hammocks and seating areas.

Behind the main accommodation were beautifully tended gardens full of bougainvillea, wisteria and bird of paradise, and a gleaming blue pool with a bubbling hot tub. Everything about the Finca says relax-

ation. This is where we'd return after each daily ride.

After a delicious lunch by the pool, we went down to meet our horses. My partner for the week ahead was Moro. Known in the group as "the little blue horse," he was a 15-hand, blue roan, Mexican Criollo cross.

In the afternoon, we went for a two-hour ride in the Monte Alto forest behind the Finca to make sure we were happy with our horses and saddles. Along the way,

Mountains

Saddle up, and ride into what some call the true soul of Mexico.

Pepe and Lucia pointed out tree orchids. At the top of the hill, we were treated to a wonderful view of the village and Lake Valle De Bravo, a popular spot for hang-gliding. Lucia wore full Mexican dress on her beautiful Lipizzaner stallion, Riojano — a great photo opportunity.

There was a choice of English, Western, or Mexican *charro* saddles. For the first ride, I tried a Western saddle but found it too wide. It would've been nice to ride in Mexico in a Mexican saddle, but it was even wider!

Over a three-course dinner that night, the riders got to know each other better. It was a lovely group with a few jokers in the pack, myself included. The nights were just about cool enough for Luis, the barman, to light an atmospheric fire in my bedroom chimney; I felt I was in five-star luxury. It was a large, twin-bedded room with painted furniture from the neighboring state of Michoacan, hand-crocheted bedspreads, and a beautifully tiled bathroom.

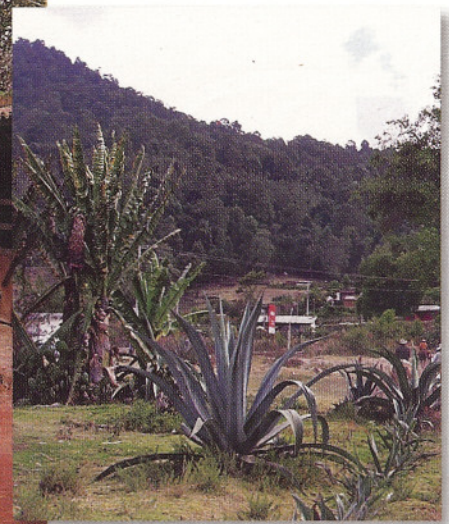
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Inn host Lucia Schraivesande poses in traditional Mexican riding wear and tack on her beautiful Lipizzaner stallion, Riojano.



The surroundings of Finca Enye are tranquil and relaxing. Colonial-style verandas surround a central courtyard of lush green vegetation, home to one of Lucia's parrots. In the gardens, there's a pool and hot tub for riders to enjoy after a long ride.



The horses wait at the stables for the riders to arrive. Trakehners, Mexican Criollos, and Quarter Horses are used for the rides, ranging from 15.2 to 17 hands high. The building at the back houses a tack room packed with saddles of all descriptions, while above is the office and groom's quarters.

Although riders primarily passed through pine mountain forests, at lower altitudes, they found the desert foliage for which Mexico is best known.

Mexico's Majestic Mountains

CONTINUED

Day 1: Monday

The Finca stands at 6,000 feet above sea level; today, we'd planned to start climbing through forests of endemic oak and more than 100 species of pine.

We started by riding back through the Monte Alto forest that we first viewed the day before. Then the land opened up, and we climbed into the hills, past many rural smallholdings on the way to the tiny village of El Temporal. There, the children

came to the school gates to watch the ride and laughed as we took their pictures.

After around 15 kilometers (9.3 miles), at 9,000 feet, we arrived in a clearing near an old volcanic crater called El Hoyo, where we were to have lunch. Lunch was sausage, cheese, and guacamole in flour tortillas, washed down with a welcome cold beer.

In the afternoon, we continued wending our happy way through pine forest. After covering around 29 kilometers (18 miles), we reached the first night's resting place for

the horses, in the hilltop village of Los Saucos. The children, still in their school uniforms, crowded round Pepe for sweets and oranges, and posed giggling for pictures.

That night over a dinner at the Finca, Pepe told us the amazing story of the monarch butterflies, which we'd planned to see the next day. He explained that monarchs summer in North America, then fly up to 3,000 kilometers (about 1,800 miles) to winter in California and Mexico. It takes up to eight generations of monarch, each undertaking a short migratory journey,



Left: "Everywhere we went, locals greeted us with a friendly 'buenos dias,'" says Stanford. Above: The group passes through forest up to a wide meadow with a view of the volcano at Toluca.



Left: Riders walk through scenes of agricultural life, passing smallholdings with their collections of chicken, sheep, and goats. Above: Each night, the hardy crew returned to the hacienda for a three-course Mexican dinner.

until a special generation is born with the ability to fly long distances. Unlike butterflies born in the spring and summer that have a lifespan of just four to six weeks, this special generation can live up to eight months. It's believed that each butterfly in this generation will return to exactly the same spot, even the same tree, that their ancestors came to, so many generations removed.

Day 2: Tuesday

There was an aura of excitement as we rejoined our horses at Los Saucos. Before we left, Pepe pointed out a faraway mountain, El Peñon, which would apparently be our lunch spot the following day. It seemed a very long way off.

Moro had a real spring in his step. He knew the trail had begun proper, and he really seemed to enjoy his work. His ears always pointed forward, and he never required any leg at all.

After about an hour's ride, we arrived halfway up the mountain of Piedra Herrada, one of the monarch butterflies' five winter homes in Mexico. We continued on foot to around 10,500 feet. It was only a short walk, but we soon realized the hard work the horses put in.

At that altitude, the pine had given way to fir trees, but even so, something about the shape of the trees was alien. The branches were shrouded in great cloaks of brown; butterfly on top of butterfly on top of butterfly — each with its wings wrapped

around the one underneath until the tree became indistinguishable. As the sun came out, hundreds took to the air in a gentle whirl of wings; a magical sight.

Back aboard our horses, we continued out of the forest into magnificent meadows perfect for a long canter. Our horses were raring to go, but politely cantered along at a steady pace. It was blissful, with soft turf underfoot, a river to the side, and a mountain backdrop.

A little farther on, we reached a crop



"Seeing the amazing Monarch butterfly in its winter home was a special treat," says Stanford.

of trees on a hill and learned this was our lunch spot. I got used to these lunches; after diving into the fantastic food, we'd enjoy a power siesta, then some sweet local offering, such as sugar-coated tamarind fruit.

We were free to ride wherever we liked in the group, as long as we stayed in front of the mule that brought up the rear. Sometimes, I'd drop back to ride with Melaton or Marcus, friendly wranglers who taught me a bit of Spanish and whistled all day long. They took turns leading the pretty pack mule, Macherella.

Late that afternoon, we arrived at the magnificent Rancho La Compania; the horses would stay in luxurious surroundings! This is the oldest ranch in the region, where Quarter Horses are bred for racing.

As we left in the minibus, Macherella enjoyed a well-deserved roll in the sand. It was a long day, covering about 32 kilometers (19.8 miles); back at the house, there was a rush to the hot tub. Sitting in the bubbling water, watching hummingbirds flit from flower to flower and looking over the gardens, I felt as though I was in a five-star health spa.

Day 3: Wednesday

On this day, we were told to expect the most magnificent views. Leaving the ranch's well-kept paddocks and picturesque ponds, we crossed the highway, then climbed through the tiny villages of San Agustin and Mesa Rica, and delved deep

CONTINUED ➔



Left: Stanford's mount, Moro, surveys the view from El Coloso, the big flat rock from where the riders saw Los Tres Reyes (above) for the first time. *Right:* Packing the mule was an art in itself, as the weight had to be correctly distributed on Macherella's back.



Mexico's Majestic Mountains

CONTINUED

into forests of pine and oak at around 8,000 feet. All the while, we tried to spot tree orchids and bromeliads.

As promised, we arrived at El Peñon for lunch, and I reflected how far the little blue horse had carried me so far. Leaving the horses in the shade, we made our way to the very edge of the lookout rock for lunch. This was an amazing spot; the top of the world. The panorama was spectacular, all the way out to the volcano at Toluca.

After lunch, it was just a short ride to another amazing viewpoint — a huge flat rock called El Coloso. It was the perfect platform to stand in turn and have our picture taken; our backdrop was Los Tres Reyes (The Three Kings) — three pointed rocks, each atop its own hill and all in a perfect line.

Dragging ourselves away from the view, we plunged deep into the forest again, riding by a creek until we found a long, wide track for a canter. Pepe joked that we were going to canter for 15 minutes, which sparked a frenzy of stirrup-checking and getting into position. In fact, it was about a five-minute canter, then a walk downhill to the stalls that Pepe had built at a place called Cerro Gordo (the Fat Hill).

At the stalls, I sat with Geoffrey, a psychiatrist, under the shade of a huge mesquite tree. He told me why he suddenly decided to learn to ride at age 50. It seems a client informed him that to help her,

he'd have to listen to a lot of horsey stories, as that was what her life was all about. After a few consultations, Geoffrey found himself becoming more and more intrigued. He then bought a horse of his own and never looked back. Now, at age 57, he show jumps regularly and looks as though he's spent his life in the saddle.

Day 4: Thursday

The next morning, we saddled up and rode along the Cerro Gordo, then headed back into the mountains for another view of Los Tres Reyes, with the Pena Sola (Lonely Rock) to the side. Continuing along the southern side of the mountains, we reached another lookout called the Pena de Marzo (the March Rock), where we saw the town of Zacazonapan at the bottom of the valley, 1,000 meters (3,280 feet) below, in the Tierra Caliente (Hot Land).

We lunched atop the next rock, El Divisadera, where a feast of mountain ranges was spread before us. We tasted the Mexican specialty of Mole Poblano, a kind of turkey stew in a mole sauce of spices, chili, vegetables, and chocolate. Delicious!

Mid-afternoon, we reached another rock, where we could see the whole of Lake Valle De Bravo. Pepe mapped out our route so far. We were particularly interested in a little red spot way below us, which was apparently a red trailer by the horse stalls. The trailer looked far away, and I estimated it'd take at least three hours to get

there. In fact, the trip down the mountain was via quite a steep track, so it took half the time.

This was the longest day — almost 40 kilometers (24.8 miles) — but we were all still full of energy and looking forward to the boat ride we knew was in store for us. The trip across the serenely calm lake was the perfect end to yet another perfect day on the trail. Even better when we learned we'd be having drinks in a lakeside bar to watch the sun set over the water.

Day 5: Friday

The next morning, we headed across the lake to rejoin our horses. It was as still as a millpond and a lovely, peaceful start to the day. The morning was spent riding alongside the lake, past smallholdings with their chickens and dogs; a colorful scene. We passed the huge lake dam and rode into the hot lands we saw from our viewpoint the day before.

Pepe pointed out a farmer plowing with oxen; to the right, a goatherd stood with his flock. I felt very privileged, passing through these scenes, becoming a part of the landscape. It was much hotter than previous days; a lunch of cheese and chorizo tacos was served in the shade of a stand of pines.

That afternoon, I started to feel quite ill and began to wish for the only time on the whole ride that I could get off. Finally, I mentioned it to Dewey, the Canadian

CONTINUED ON PAGE 90 ➔



No big machinery here; farmers still rely heavily on their horses and cattle.

A marvelous view of Lake Valle De Bravo. From here, Pepe pointed out the route the group had traveled and the location of Finca Enyhe, which the riders will reach in two more days.



After descending down to lake level, the group rode along the shore and enjoyed beautiful views across the lake.

Mexico's Majestic Mountains

CONTINUED

outfitter, who said I must have a little sunstroke and needed to cool down. He insisted on tipping his water bottle over me, and there wasn't much time for protest! Soon after my drenching, we thankfully reached the trailer with a long-line for the horses, so I didn't have to ride through any villages looking as though I was in a wet T-shirt competition!

Even though the day's ride was 36 kilometers (22.3 miles), we got back in good time for a relaxing swim and a tour of the place before dinner. Jan and Dewey had a huge room that was almost an apartment on its own, with wall-to-wall wardrobes, a squishy red sofa, and a fireplace. The two sisters and Gwen shared a three-bedroom suite with a lovely sitting area.

Day 6: Saturday

On the final morning, we covered our last 20 kilometers (12.4 miles), passing through the historic village of San Francisco Mihualtepec with its two churches. As we rode through the village, we saw a young girl with her goatherd and men in the fields picking gladioli for the market.

We reached the Finca at midday. I was so sad to dismount from Moro for the last time. We had lunch by the pool, then went shopping at the weekend artisan market in town.

As the week came to



an end, it was hard to say goodbye to the riders, staff, and owners who'd become my family, the beautiful surroundings of the Finca that had become home, and, most of all, the little blue horse who'd carried me with ears forward and a spring in his step for 210 kilometers — 130 miles. **TTR**

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