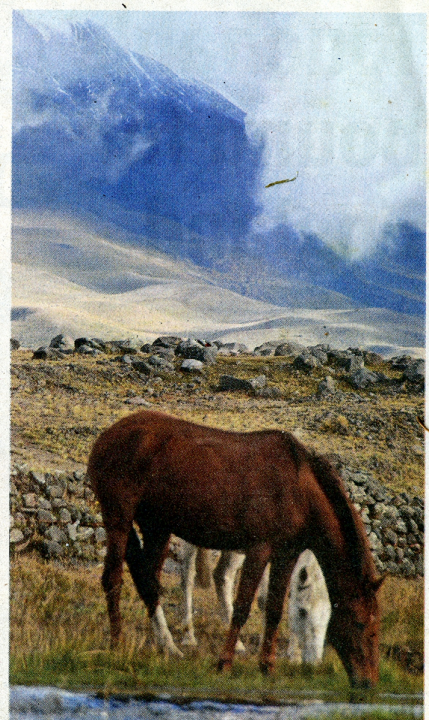




The group of Irish riders and part of their support team



Grazing at the foot of the Cotopaxi volcano

Living the high life in the Andes

Gwen Wilkinson recaps on a memorable few days in the saddle in Ecuador raising money for the charity Bóthar

Steads, steeds, what steeds! Has the whirlwind a home in your manes? • **Nikolay Gogal.**

Horses are born to run, and so, as we turned ours towards the open plains before us, they needed no encouragement to break their stride. With his ears pricked forward, my sure-footed pinto, Manchas, clearly relished the opportunity to accelerate. Not even the glacial winds screaming down at us from Cotopaxi volcano, the highest active volcano in the world, at 4,500 metres, could dull the thundering pound of horses' hooves as we raced across a valley floor high in the Andes of Ecuador.

Our group of 11 riders from Ireland had been brought together at this spectacular location of Cotopaxi National Park by a shared passion for horses, a sense of adventure and a willingness to accept the challenge of raising funds for the Irish charity, Bóthar.

Circumnavigating the vol-

cano in a clockwise direction and covering distances of up to 30kms each day, our route unfolded in one breathtaking vista after another.

Each day afforded new obstacles to challenge both horses and riders; rocky ravines to descend, glacier-fed rivers to ford, loose volcanic shale to scramble up and some tricky navigation through boggy valley floors. There were plenty of opportunities too for some fast-paced riding, with long canters across soft undulating plains carpeted with violet gentians, pursuing herds of wild horses.

Our fit and sure-footed mounts quickly won our grateful and reverential respect. These mixed blood horses, local Criollo, Andalusian, Arab and Peruvian Paso, combined the best features of

these breeds – stamina, agility and intelligence.

Over the course of the trek we rode at least three different horses, each rider matched to one that complemented their riding ability. All horses were clearly well schooled, alert and forward going.

Spending up to nine hours in the saddle at a time prompted initial concerns of tender rear ends, but thankfully there were few complaints! Most of the horses were equipped with McClenan saddles, a combination of English and Western-style, covered with an additional thick layer of sheepskin.

Accommodation was as varied and interesting as our days spent riding. We stayed in enchanting historic haciendas, charming adobe

(mud) and thatch farmhouses, with neither electricity nor hot running water, and rustic and rambling inns. At each venue our group was treated to exceptional hospitality by our hosts and served delicious native dishes.

The smooth operation of such an endeavour all came down to our indefatigable trek leader, English-born Sally Vergette, and her trusted Chagras (Ecuadorian cowboys).

Her love for the country, in which she has lived for over 12 years, served to enhance the overall experience of the trek. In addition to maintaining a close eye on the welfare of horses and riders, she always had time to explain the landscape, identifying wildlife and vegetation, pointing out Inca ruins and regaling us

with the life stories of each of her horses.

The Chagras rode with the group throughout the trek, scouting the terrain ahead, leading spare horses, feeding and tacking at the start and finish of each day. Language barriers evaporated as each evening culminated in music and ballad sessions.

VARIETY

Situated on the Equator, from which the country is named, Ecuador is the second smallest country in South America. By nature of the variety of ecosystems – Andean peaks, Amazonian jungle, high sierra plains and the Galapagos Islands – Ecuador is home to the majority of the world's plant and animal species. In a country of such outstanding natural beauty, the visitor is simply spoiled for choice.

Its multi-ethnic culture is the most colourful and varied in Latin America. A visit to Otavalo's famous traditional Indian market is an unmissable opportunity to appreciate and purchase beautifully woven handicrafts created by the industrious Otavaleños community.

Nearby, the model village of Cotacachi showcases the area's high quality craftsmanship in the leather industry. For a truly unforgettable experience of rural/culture you can immerse yourself in the crowded markets in the Andean villages of Saquisilí and Zumbahua. Here brightly clothed Quechua Indians crowd the streets, trading everything from pigs and lla-

mas to on-the-spot tailoring services.

The economic difficulties that Ecuador is experiencing are acute, with poverty in rural communities particularly severe. The history of the country is a tale of Incan invasion and Colonial conquest that inevitably resulted in massacres and centuries of suppression of its peoples, and the looting of natural resources. Throughout the 20th century political instability further handicapped the nation's economic and social development.

Aside from the Galapagos Islands, tourism on mainland Ecuador is underdeveloped. Until recently the country was but a brief stopover for independent backpackers making their way to more popular destinations in neighbouring Peru. However, in recent years there has been a steady growth in tourism and an international approach to marketing its natural assets.

Indeed, Ecuador is slowly establishing itself as a model in sustainable tourism with determined efforts to develop projects that are ecologically and socially enhancing. Such initiatives include the establishing of two UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the marketing of its capital Quito as a centre of learning for the Spanish language, the building of world-class ecological lodges and long-term volunteer programmes which assist environmental and community projects in rural areas.



A chagra transporting animal fodder

i Bóthar, the Irish rural development agency, has been working in Ecuador since 2003. It is currently engaged with assisting communities in the region of southern Ecuador close to the border with Peru. Working with individual families it encourages the proper management of the area's rapidly disappearing native forests and the farming of animals in an ecological and sustainable manner. All proceeds from the fundraising trek are being used to assist this work by Bóthar in the country.