

Horses & Hospitality at Rancho Las Margaritas

By Shawn Hamilton

Nestled in the San Miguel Tecpan region of Mexico lies a quaint ranch, overlooking the State of Mexico Valley, awaiting eager riders to enjoy the tranquility and beauty of the area on amazing horses. Rancho Las Margaritas, approximately 50 km northeast of the Mexico City International Airport, is named after owner Alejandro Villaseñor's wife and daughter, both named Margarita. Until now, the ranch had only received friends and family members, but Villaseñor and his best friend and business partner, Gustavo Saavedra, have decided to invite outside guests to their exquisite location. Through Unicorn Trails horse riding travel agency, myself and two friends, Ewa and Carrie, were fortunate enough to be the first official public guests in November 2024.

After flying into Mexico City on the "red eye," we spend the night in the airport hotel and take an Uber the next morning to meet Saavedra at the Holiday Inn in Santa Fe, about an hour away from the ranch. He greets us in his sweet manner and we can tell instantly how excited he is to share their piece of

paradise with us. After winding through various urban villages, two large iron gates open to reveal a stable with 10 box stalls, a small riding arena, and a quaint four-bedroom guest house perched on a hill. Just across the driveway is an additional 22-stall barn, a second riding arena, and a workers' house with a guest

apartment. The ranch is situated on five hectares bordering Cumbres Sierra Nevada National Park, which offers endless trails throughout the region. During our short four-day visit we will ride to lakes and dams and through old growth forests, lunch beside rivers, and enjoy spectacular views overlooking both the Toluca and Mexican valleys.

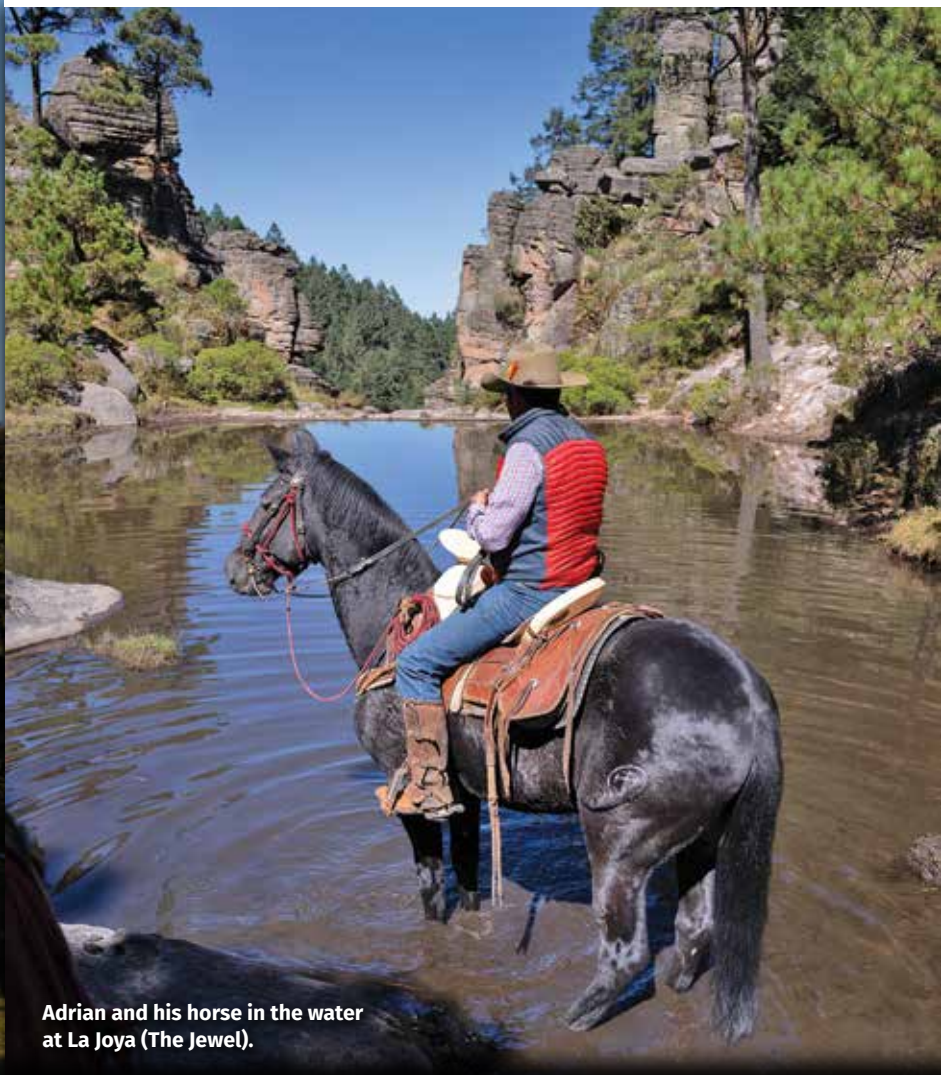
Villaseñor grew up on a cattle ranch in La Huasteca, Mexico, where his father raised beef cattle and bred Criollo and Thoroughbred horses. In 1991, Villaseñor began to breed his own line of Quarter Horses and became highly successful, as one can tell from his very full trophy room. For seven years he served as the president of the Association of Quarter Horse Breeders of Mexico and is currently the Vice President of the Mexican Trail Riding Federation.

At the age of 76 he is still impressive in the saddle.

On a flight from Guadalajara 45 years ago, Villaseñor flew over the area where the ranch is now located. Liking the look of the untouched land, he explored more



The rising sun on the guest house at Rancho Las Margaritas.



Adrian and his horse in the water at La Joya (The Jewel).

by car to scope it out.

“It was just corn fields back then, but I saw the potential so bought the land,” he explains.

His brother, an architect, helped to design the house and eventually Villaseñor’s dream was complete.

Ewa, Carrie, and I are honoured to be the first-ever outside guests of Rancho Las Margaritas. Upon arrival we’re greeted by Villaseñor and three of his ranch hands, brothers Adrian, Norberto, and Gustavo, whose father also worked for the ranch before passing away.

Small cups called “cantaritos” are gifted to us, and we’re asked to bring them wherever we go in the case a shot of Tequila is necessary (I love this place already!).

A scrumptious charcuterie of guacamole, pico de gallo (a type of salsa), deli meats, chorizo, olives, cheese, and cantarito de barro juice (spiked with a little Tequila if desired), is enjoyed on the front patio looking down at the valley below. After a quick change into our riding clothes, we are given a tour of the trophy



Alejandro Villaseñor holds one of his many trophies in the trophy room at Rancho Las Margaritas.

Carrie uses her gifted cantarito for a shot of Tequila at a lunch stop by the river. Every meal, including lunch on the trail, featured delicious authentic Mexican food.



room and main stable area. Our horses, already warmed up in the small ring by ranch hands Victor and Adrian, are presented to us. Everyone's smile is warm and infectious.

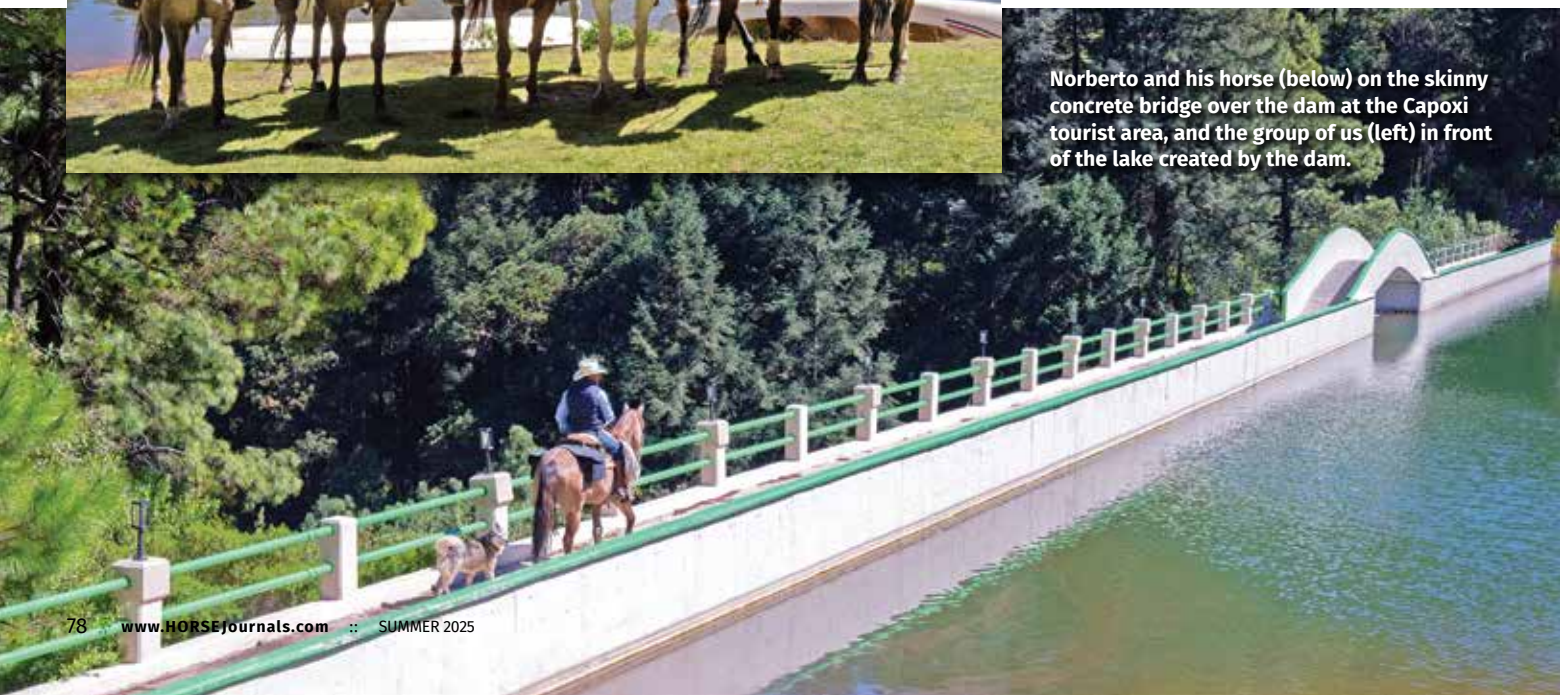
Carrie's mount is Cornelia, a 14-year-old elegant grey mare. Ewa will ride Avellana, a six-year-old bay mare, and I am given Granada, a 10-year-old bay mare. Our stirrups are adjusted, and we have a short lesson in the small riding ring. There we all learn very quickly how well-trained the horses are, responding well to the seat, a small amount of leg pressure, and a very light touch of the reins. Joined by Saavedra, Villaseñor, and a few of the other ranch hands, we head out through the small village of San Miguel Tecpan to an old-growth pine forest, terrain I had never before experienced and didn't know existed in Mexico. On arriving at a local traditional restaurant called Jess Dean, we dismount, tie up the horses and go in for lunch. Saavedra is delighted to introduce us to the traditional dish of sope, made up of corn bread with frijoles, guacamole, cheese, and an assortment of hot sauces.

Hunger sated, we continue riding through the forest, passing farms with freshly cut hay stacked in the shape of upside-down cones. We are all very pleased with our horses and have a fun canter before returning to the ranch, where Villaseñor's daughter, Margarita, has prepared a delicious dinner of mushroom soup, fish, and rice with strawberry shortcake for dessert. We realize that no matter how many hours we spend in the saddle we are not going to lose weight on this trip.

It is a chilly night and the room's extra blankets come in handy. Waking early, I



Norberto and his horse (below) on the skinny concrete bridge over the dam at the Capoxi tourist area, and the group of us (left) in front of the lake created by the dam.



View of the riding stable and ring from the guest house.



venture outside in my slippers to watch the sun rise over the valley, the night's dew glistening in the warmth of the new day. Margarita serves up a hearty breakfast of traditional chilaquiles, fried tortillas with cream sauce, cheese, chopped onion, and our choice of eggs on top.

Before heading to the horses, we are gifted with plastic water canteens inside handmade leather carriers crafted by Juan, a local leather maker who lives on the ranch and helps with the training. We fill the canteens and clasp them to our saddles before mounting up. The trail quickly turns into a steep ascend. Our sure-footed horses navigate the roots and rocks that line the skinny trail through the trees, and we stop numerous times to allow them to catch their breath. The sound of springs running in the old growth forest gets louder as we near a small waterfall at the edge of Capoxi, a popular tourist camp for picnics, swimming, and canoeing in the small lake created by the dam. Norberto encourages his horse to venture out onto the skinny concrete bridge hovering over the dam, and his trusting mount obliges. The horses partake of well-deserved drinks in the lake while we enjoy the scenery. Canters in the sadly loam are fun before we head back into the forest. The trail opens into what appears to be a Christmas tree farm, a small area of perfectly pruned trees, and then to a beautiful valley where we are greeted with Tequila in hand. We whip out our tiny cantaritos and enjoy a quick shot before lunch. A small fire has been lit to heat up the tortillas and we gather at picnic tables to enjoy mushroom-filled quesadillas with frijoles and cheese burritos while enjoying the view at 3,200 metres.

The food is exquisite, and we are filled to the brim when we hop back on the horses. I was surprised that we were still climbing after lunch and more surprised at how much energy the horses still had. We reach

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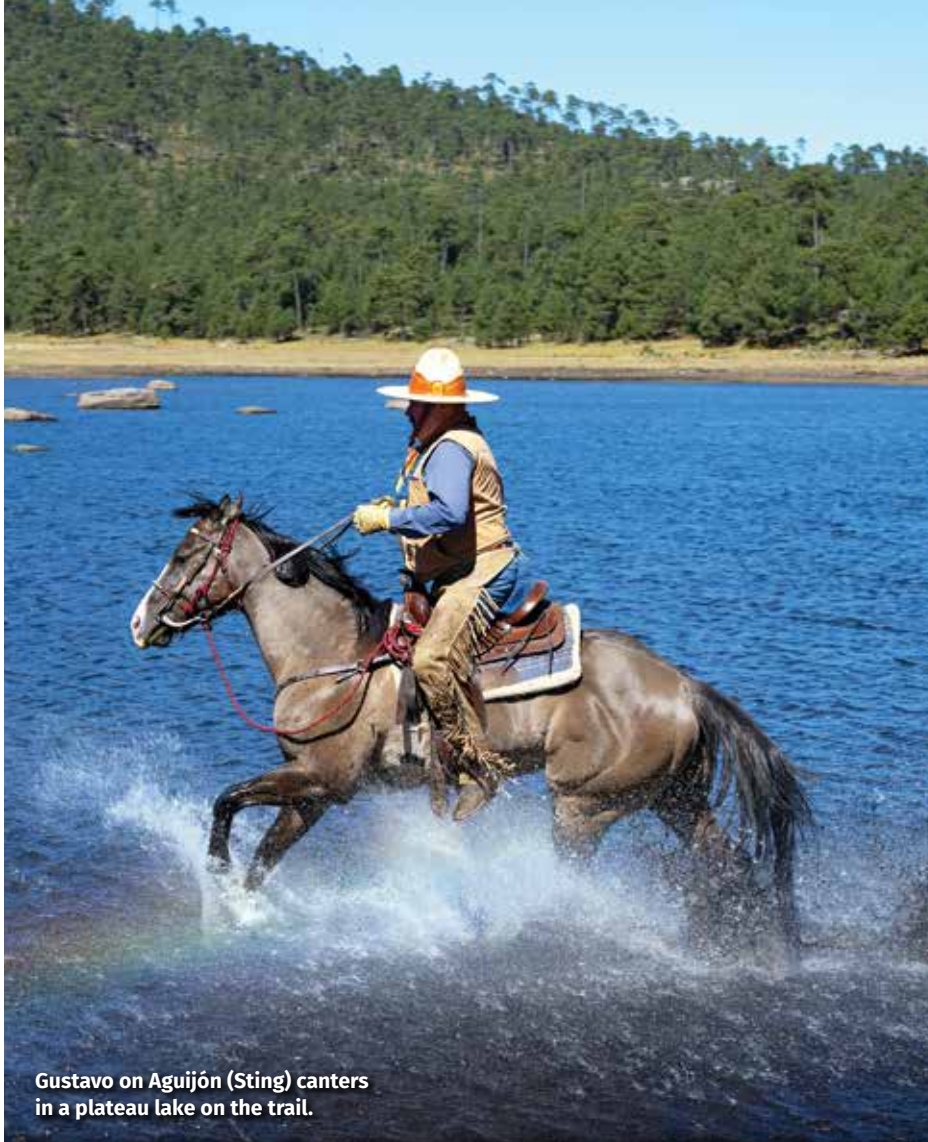


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Gustavo on Aguijón (Sting) canters in a plateau lake on the trail.

a large flat plateau, perfect for a good long canter. A herd of wild horses, not bothered by our presence, grazes on the edges of a small lake. Back into the forest the terrain becomes steep, tricky in areas, and somewhat slippery. The horses carefully pick their way. I put my trust in Granada and let her find her path. The sun is setting, and we can feel the cold in shady areas. Passing a water pipe that supplies fresh spring water to the town, we see that ice has formed overnight from a small leak in the pipe. The trees open in spots to show us spectacular views of the State of Mexico below.

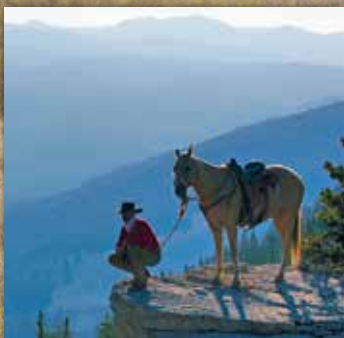
Arriving at our meeting spot, we dismount and let the cowboys take the horses back through the small pueblo (village) to the ranch.

We enjoy hot tea overlooking the stable area before heading in for a dinner of chicken with thin pasta covered in Margarita's great grandmother's secret sauce and accompanied by roasted vegetables. After dinner Margarita joins us and we enjoy a beverage while recounting the day. Jorge, Villaseñor's son-in-law and Margarita's husband, is bursting with hospitable energy and shares some of his hilarious stories with us. It feels like a Thanksgiving dinner reconnecting with family. We head outside to sit by a bonfire and learn a few traditional Mexican songs before retiring to bed.

Sunrise at 6 am finds the vaqueros



Ewa with Avellana (left) and Carrie with Cornelia (right) ready to hit the trails.



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Ewa and Adrian enjoy a canter on the dirt trail.



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Ranch hands
 Gustavo, Adrian,
 and Victor.

already tending to the horses. After breakfast the horses are loaded onto trailers, and we are driven to Valle de Las Navajas to begin our ride. Today's scenery is totally different, as we ride through cattle and sheep farms. The high elevation is cooler and perfect for growing potatoes. Open fields allow for good long canters, which my horse and I enjoy. The brisk cool air is refreshing. The trail narrows in parts as we climb to another lake on a plateau and have a blast cantering through the shallow waters. We are all smiling and laughing. After our horses rest, a short ride later we arrive at one of the most beautiful lunch spots beside a small river. Alambre, a scrumptious combination of steak, bacon, onion and three kinds of peppers, is scooped into warm tacos from the small fire and topped with fresh guacamole. We eat, drink, and laugh as our horses graze nearby.

"I feel like royalty," Ewa exclaims.

With each passing day, we feel increasingly like members of the warm and welcoming ranch family. Their genuine hospitality is matched only by the extraordinary quality of their horses.

On the return ride we take in the spectacular view of the Toluca valley to the west. Open areas allow for some good long gallops, leading us to an area of man-made small rectangular ponds to preserve water for cattle during the dry season. Gustavo rides out to the ridge, creating a beautiful reflection.

That night as we dine on filet mignon, mashed potatoes, and asparagus, Margarita's family favourite, we realize that tomorrow will already be our last day.

Villaseñor shares some of his prize mezcals with us and we chat about horses, the travel business, and potential horse photography workshops at local Charras, traditional Mexican rodeos where people go all out in their attire. Carrie, Ewa, and I agree that this is an exquisite place to have a horse vacation, thanks to extremely well-trained horses, spectacular scenery, and hospitality second to none. Villaseñor expresses his gratitude of our riding experience and how we treated his horses, taking good care of them and riding with soft hands. I reflect on how his horses took good care of us.

In the early morning, we are treated to a reining demonstration by Juan and his horse nicknamed Almendrino due to his almond colouring. We mount up for our last day's ride, climbing high into the forest before dismounting, handing off our horses to Saavedra and Villaseñor and following Adrian to some large rocks clinging to a cliff — the perfect spot to take in the vastness of the Valley of Mexico below.

Back in the saddle we head to the last scenic stop, aptly called La Joya ("The Jewel"), where deep blue mountain water is collected and bordered by large pillar-shaped rocks. It feels like a scene out of a movie. I could not believe how, in such a short time, we could take in so much diverse and spectacular scenery. After a steep descent — with no worries as we all fully trusted our mounts — we give our last thanks to our horses and head in for lunch. A group photo is organized before we reluctantly say our goodbyes, with tears in everyone's eyes.

This was Ewa's first-ever riding vacation and I wonder if she will be able



Riding out from the ranch through the village of San Miguel Tecpan on day one.

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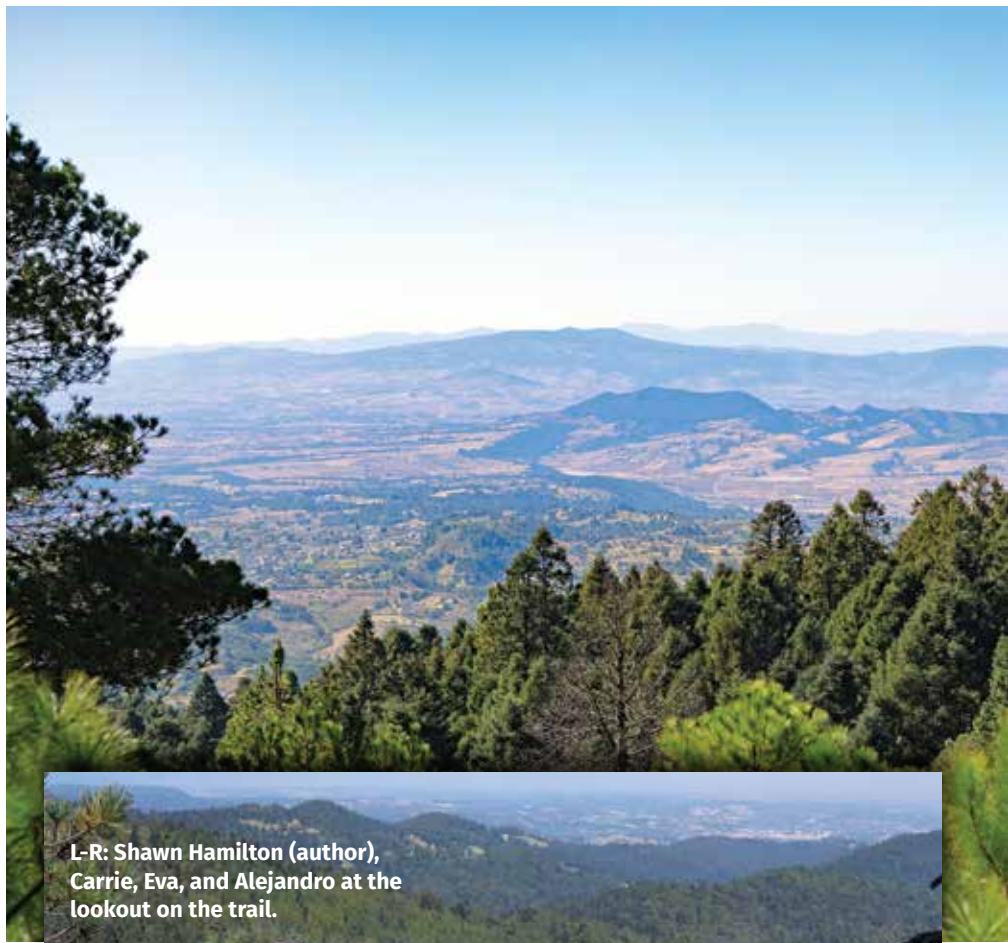
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L-R: Shawn Hamilton (author), Carrie, Eva, and Alejandro at the lookout on the trail.



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The ranch community gave us a warm welcome and made us feel like part of the family.

View of the Toluca Valley
from the trail



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to top this one in the future. She sums up her experience: "I loved Rancho Las Margaritas as it combined all the things I love into one truly beautiful experience; riding amazing horses, immersing in the food, language, and culture of another country, and meeting wonderful new friends who made me feel like family. It is something I will treasure forever as one of the most special trips of my life."

Carrie, who has been on several horse-riding vacations including in India and Mongolia, is equally impressed: "Las Margaritas is the real deal for challenging trail riding, varied terrain, and beautiful views. The hosts, guides, horses, and hospitality are all top-notch."

I wholeheartedly agree with their sentiments and the three of us are honoured to be the first-ever outside guests of Rancho Las Margaritas. We depart feeling like part of the very large community the ranch entails. 🍁

To learn more visit

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(Photos are by Clix Photography.)

> **Shawn Hamilton** is a frequent contributor to this magazine — read her bio on page 94.



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