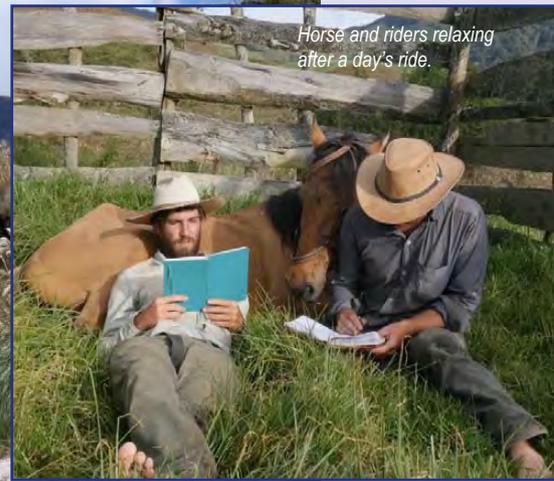


COLOMBIA

...a challenging ride



Horse and riders relaxing after a day's ride.

Jarrad Pye, from Newcastle, NSW wanted adventurous travel that was more fulfilling than the usual backpacker's trip. Five years ago he had ridden a motorbike through Latin America with his friend Jimbo and it filled the criteria for a real adventure. A few months later they were on a plane heading for Colombia, with the plan being to purchase horses and ride across the country through the Andes.



Setting up camp.

“With us both having zero experience with horses we decided to spend three months on a ranch to learn as much as we could before embarking on the journey. A friend invited us to stay with his mother-in-law in Palermo, a rural area with a lot of farms and horse ranches close by; she also had a few contacts to help us. We really struggled in the beginning. Contacts fell through, and we could tell the ranches we visited were not going to help us learn what was needed for our trip.

“A lot of people had told us that the trip would be suicide with all the guerrilla groups in Colombia, that we'd get lost, and that there are places you can't get through on horses. Having come all this way to do the trip we were not going to give up that easy. We remained positive and stuck to the plan.

“Eventually we found a ranch that was run by Carlos and his son Andreas. They had about 50 horses, mostly Paso Finos - some worth upwards of \$50, 000 USD - that they trained for competitions. We were the first 'white' people they had seen in person and they found it interesting what we were doing, so they agreed to help. The arrangement was that we worked there for free and they would teach us what we needed to know and help us get set up with horses and gear for our journey.

“I spoke 'rusty' Spanish before the trip but the slang the cowboys used was really hard to understand so we found it tough in the beginning. We started out mucking stables, carting hay, building stables, all the fun stuff. We proved ourselves to be hard workers for the first three weeks so after that we learnt how to change shoes, ride, give injections and general things you need to know when caring for horses.

“Two months in we decided it was time to buy our own horses so we could get used to them before we set off. Carlos took us from place to place in search of horses that suited us. We wanted calm, strong horses that came with papers, which proved to be tougher to find than you would imagine.

“We found two Criollo geldings, one four years and one seven. I named mine Soda (a Seinfeld reference) and Jimbo called his Wayne Keneth Glue (it's a long story). Both were calm and easy to ride. Our new 'family' was complete and a relationship I will never forget had begun.



The Ranch hands with Jarrad and Jimbo on left.

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Meeting the locals outside Salamina



Nearly at the end of the ride, coming into Salento.

"We spent the next few weeks getting used to one another and getting the horses ready. Decided to go for a camp night just to test the gear and get a feel for what we were in for. We went about 5 km from the ranch and everything was going fine until about 1.00am. Soda was neighing like crazy as Wayne had got loose and disappeared. We spent several hours looking for him with no luck so walked back to Carlos' ranch and spent what was left of the night in the hay barn. We found Wayne the next day, 15 kms away from where we camped.

"Having spent almost three months on the ranch we knew we were as ready as we'd ever be. So, we got out our big map, mounted up and started our journey through the Andes.

"Our gear was kept as light as possible; just the clothes on our back and one extra shirt, a small tranguia to cook with, hammock tents, a medical kit for us and the horses, a camera, rice and tuna (which we lived on for three months) and a few things for the horses.

"The trails were amazing; we found waterfalls, beautiful rivers and the scenery was incredible. We developed a routine where we would wake at 6am, pack up and get the horses onto good grass, leave camp around 7am, ride for three or so hours, stop for a few hours and have some porridge and a bit of a rest. We'd then go to about 3 or 4 pm, find a spot to setup camp, get the horses on good grass, have our rice and tuna and go to bed around 6.30pm. Some days it would be really hard to find camp spots due to how steep it was. We were always looking for a spot with trees to hang the hammocks, good grass for the horses, and water but sometimes this took hours to find.

"About a month into the journey Wayne had started limping on his hind leg. We met a man who offered us a place to sleep in his stable while we arranged for a vet to come see his leg. He had an infection in his hind hoof so with injections and rest it took five days before we moved on.

"The next three weeks we passed through part of the Andes until it got down really low where we crossed the Magdalena, Colombia's largest river. The weather became really hot and dry and the horses were going through a lot of water; it was bad conditions for riding.

"As we headed for Santa Domingo we entered back into the mountain range. The rest of the trip then proceeded to get colder and colder. Santa Domingo was one of our favourite places. There we met some amazing people as, by this stage, when we'd enter a small town people would ask where we'd come from on horseback. When we told them they were blown away, and it wouldn't take long before the whole town knew our story. News reporters would often seek us out to do a story.

"In beautiful Santo Domingo we stayed a few days with a local who invited us into his home and made us feel very welcome. From here we continued to Puntanillo where we met Sebastian who ran a big coffee plantation. This time Soda was limping so he was treated and rested to ease the pain. We stayed there almost a week, during which time we helped out on the plantation.

"We knew Manizales (a huge city) was approaching and there was no way around it. And then we were on freeways, going through big city tunnels; it was a really hard day, so it was a relief to get through to the other side.

"From Manizales we found a 200 km trail that would go to Salento through a national park. We were half way through when we reached a patrolled office gate with a ranger. We were denied entry due to an active volcano. After arguing with the guy for an hour we turned around with our tails between our legs and did a week of backtracking to the outskirts of Manizales. We found another way that would lead us through snow-capped mountains to Salento. By this stage we were starting to get tired and frustrated as the rain and cold were really getting to us. Our entire trip had just five nights where it didn't rain, so we were constantly wet. After almost three months on the trail we decided to make Salento our final destination.

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"This last leg was the toughest but the most beautiful. We were so remote at this stage; we crossed beautiful lakes and mountains were visible as far as the eye could see but there was not a soul in sight.

"The temperatures were below 0 degrees at night, the puddles were all frozen and there was snow on the mountain tops. We were extremely unprepared with the gear we had, making that last leg brutal with the cold. At some points we couldn't feel our hands and feet.

"The first 'civilisation' we encountered was a basecamp, just below a large mountain we had come down. The guides at the camp stared at us in disbelief. We had seen several gates along the ways and signs that said 'no entry' but we were not backtracking a second time, so we cut through the fence or went around. Turns out special permits and a guide were needed to be in that area, and horses were not supposed to be in there at all.

"We spent the night, and after pleading our case they allowed us to continue on. A couple of days later we arrived at a village in the middle of nowhere that was home to 15 people. Two nights were spent in the schoolhouse with the local teacher, Freddy. Only three kids went to the school. The town had no electricity and the nearest town to buy food or supplies was six hours away by foot or horse.

"From this village we headed toward Salento, which, according to Freddy, was apparently three days away... but took almost a week. This was the most challenging part of the whole trip as there was no track or people to ask on the way. So we literally guessed, and were constantly on the lookout for rocks and trees where Freddy had told us to make turns.

"We were hiking straight up mountains 4000 metres above sea level. I had done some solid hikes in the past but they were nothing on this, let alone doing it while leading the horses. We didn't ride at all through that whole pass as it was way too steep and dangerous. Continuing forward we didn't have a clue if we were going the right way. After a while we found some hikers who informed us that Salento was only five hours away.

"This was by far the hardest trip of our lives, challenging us to points we did not know existed within ourselves. When we first arrived almost everyone said we were crazy and that we wouldn't be able to do this trip, that it was way too dangerous with the guerrilla groups, or we'd get lost, the horses would never make it and we would not be able to pass through certain places on horseback. It really goes to show if there's something you truly want to do you can't listen to anybody but the voice in your own head. We remained positive and there we were at our end point; all in one piece after three months on the trail and a couple thousand kilometres.

"This trip wasn't to prove anything, the main motive was to almost travel back in time before we had cars and the luxuries we have become accustomed to today, and see what it was like to have to live like that and travel by horse. I think we really achieved this and never, ever again will I take shelter, electricity, accessible shops and any kind of motor vehicle for granted.

"Before coming to Colombia we knew nothing about horses, or the country/ cowboy lifestyle, but we learnt an incredible amount while there. Colombia was a perfect destination for horseback, the people were amazing, the trails were unreal and there was no shortage of grass or water.

"We found a good owner for the horses who took both, as we didn't want to separate them, and he promised to take good care of them. I'm confident they will live a good life in his care. Saying goodbye was one of the hardest things of the trip. We had been together every day for the last four months and while we had definitely had our ups and downs, they proved to be good horses and we were so proud of them.

"A guy out there told us that horses were not born to spend their lives in paddocks, and neither were humans. You have a long life ahead of you so now is the time to get out there and enjoy."

Jarrad and Jimbo filmed and documented their entire experience and turned it into 4 x 40 min episodes. For more information contact them at throughpyeseyes@hotmail.com Check out their facebook page - [through pyes eyes](#) - for updates, photos and videos of the trip.