

Frommer's[®]

Buenos Aires



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2nd Edition

by Michael Luongo

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PAMPAS ESTANCIAS

San Antonio is often the starting point for visiting Argentina's famous estancias, country homes, or ranches that serve as the bases for cattle culture. Estancias were a form of both farm and fortress, built through the country along trails from Buenos Aires as a way of conquering and stabilizing territory originally controlled by the Indians. The majority of them date from the middle to late 1800s. After General Roca's Campaign of the Desert in the 1870s, in which he murdered most of the Indian population within 150 miles of Buenos Aires, estancia culture, and the cattle and grain tended on them, flourished. In spite of this early and bloody history that gave birth to them, today the estancias are seen as a retreat from the chaos and stress of Buenos Aires. They are popular places for Porteños on weekends, or for day trips. With the increasing boom of tourism to Argentina, many foreigners are beginning to delight in them as well.

Most of the estancias I list here are within half an hour from San Antonio, and no more than 2 hours from Buenos Aires if heading there directly. You can drive to all these estancias on your own with a rental car, or use a bus service from Buenos Aires to San Antonio and from there catch a taxi. In addition, almost all the estancias will, for a fee in the range of US\$50 (£27), provide transportation from your hotel or the airport in Buenos Aires. Be aware that as many estancias are accessed by dirt roads, it is advisable to rent a 4×4, especially if rain is predicted during the time of your visit. The websites of the estancias listed here have detailed driving maps you can print out before your visit.

Services and features vary, but most estancias provide an atmosphere that is a cross between a rustic resort and a bed-and-breakfast. Nothing relieves stress like a day or a few in the country, and horseback riding, trekking, lounging by the pool, and eating and drinking aplenty are all part of what's on offer. In general, the rates for estancias include a full board of four meals—breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, and dinner, and sometimes all drinks including alcohol. Lunch, the true dining highlight on an estancia, is usually an *asado*, or barbecue, where everyone, including the workers, will gather and socialize. Day rates generally include only lunch and limited activities. Most estancias are real working farms, with hundreds of acres and cows, horses, and other animals being attended by real *gauchos* (not all of whom dress in the traditional way). If you're in the mood to milk a cow or watch the birth of a colt, this just may be your chance.

El Cencerro ★★★ Smaller, and more intimate and rustic than some of the other estancias listed here, you'll feel closer to the daily goings-on in this working estancia. It's owned by Buenos Aires-based psychologist Liliana Herbstein, who spends her weekends here. The ranch takes its name from the *cencerro*, a bell used by *gauchos* to tame horses. Rooms and public areas are filled with antiques, and contain odd objects Liliana and her husband have collected over the years, and antique luggage from her family's old Buenos Aires store. Eduardo is an architect and artist whose work also hangs throughout the main house. Activities include horseback riding, helping with the animals if you want, carriage rides, bicycle rides, and trekking. Only 3km (2 miles) away is the historical Capilla del Señor, a charming town established in the early 1700s. Walk or bike on your own, or ask for optional guided tours. Similar to San Antonio de Areco in feel, it's virtually unknown to non-Argentines, and thus more authentic. Real *gauchos* wander the downtown going about their business after a day tending cattle. Every second Tuesday of the month, the town has an animal auction where Liliana heads with some of her guests. The area is also the center of Argentine ballooning, offered as an option for another US\$80 (£42). Four bedrooms, some with shared bathrooms, are in the main house, where Liliana also spends her time, making you really feel more like a guest in her private home than in other estancias. One of the charms of the property is the wooded creek flowing on its edge, a relaxing place for a nap or picnic, or simply reading a book listening to the sounds of the water and the cows mooing in the distance. The property is 21 hectares (53 acres). Access the estancia by bus from Buenos Aires to Capilla del Señor and then a US\$4 (£2.10) taxi ride, or come by remis from Buenos Aires, 80km (50 miles) away, for about US\$45 (£24). They are currently expanding the property to an additional four rooms designed by Eduardo by the end of 2007.

Buenos Aires Provincial Ruta 39. 2812 Capilla del Señor. ☎ 11/4743-2319 or 15/6093-2319 (in Buenos Aires). www.estanciaelcencerro.com.ar. 4 units. From US\$95 (£50) including all meals and some drinks; US\$45 (£24) day rate includes lunch. Cash only. Free parking. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool; bird watching; bicycles; horseback riding; carriage

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