On a Hoof and a Prayer: Exploring Argentina at a Gallop

Polly Evans
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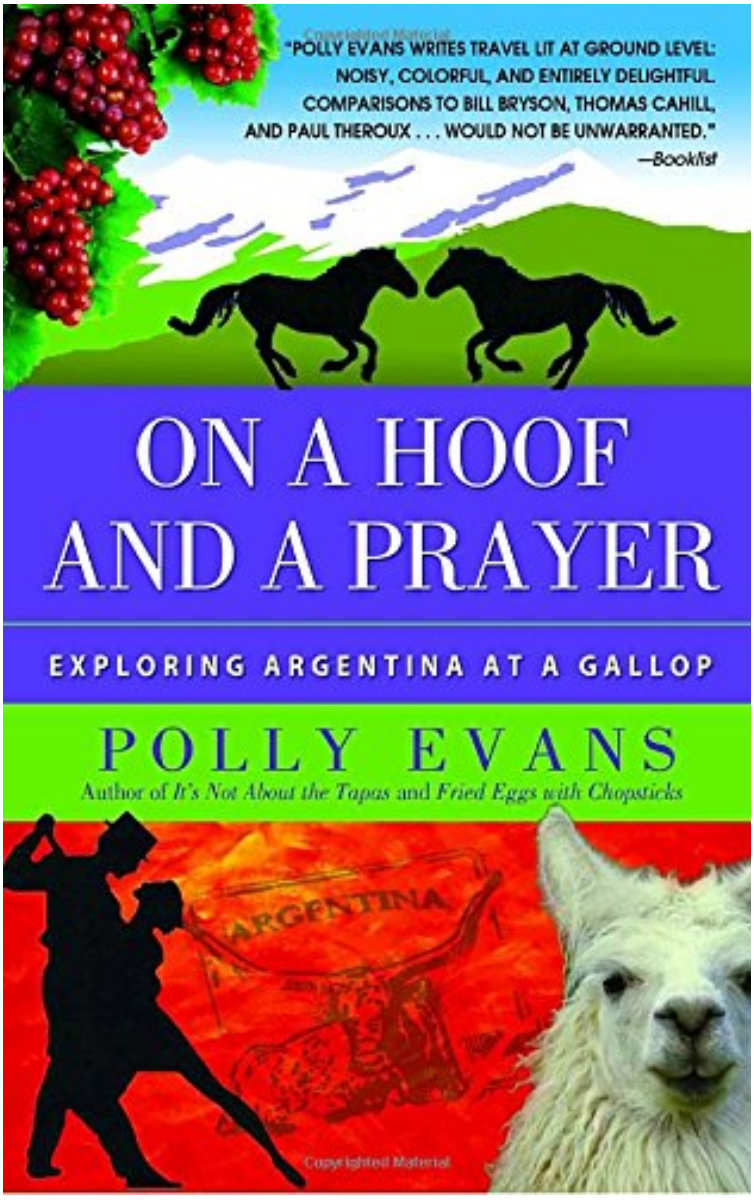

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Polly Evans : On a Hoof and a Prayer: Exploring Argentina at a Gallop before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised On a Hoof and a Prayer: Exploring Argentina at a Gallop:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. But you don't need that background to love this book and want to read her other travel ...By Felicity R.I lived there as a child and knew some of the people mentioned in the book so it

was memory lane for me. But you don't need that background to love this book and want to read her other travel stories. Here you will meet A Thoroughly Modern Millie and a courageous woman to boot!0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. but it improved and got better by the endBy christina douglasDidn't care for the writing to begin with, but it improved and got better by the end.1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Polly takes you along for the fun and discomfort!By Dodie CrossI've read Polly before and will continue to as long as she writes. Her books are like taking a class in geography and history; only it's a pleasure, not a pain. On a Hoof takes you through the beautiful countryside of Argentina. While telling you of her trials and tribulations, you also learn much about the country and how these people came to inhabit the land. Polly shares the beauty in her written word, and the country comes to life under her pen. It's a pity that these types of books aren't used in the classroom, where it makes it fun to learn about other countries and people.by: Dodie Cross, author of A Broad Abroad in Thailand. [...]

The stampeding true story of one womans journey from timorous equestrian novice to wildly whooping cowgirla madcap ride through Argentina that will fascinate horse lovers, travelers, and armchair adventurers alike.As a girl, Polly Evans dreamed about learning to rideand in her mid-thirties the obsession returned. Determined to finally bite the bullet and saddle up, she set off for Argentina, home of the nomadic gaucho whose spirit still gallops across the plains. In this sprawling country, six-year-olds travel to school on horseback. How difficult could it be? As she learns to sit astride a horse without falling off and befriends the marvelous creatures around her, Polly leaps into the sights and sounds of Argentina past and present: a hair-raising mystery involving Evita Pern becomes a parable about women, politics, and religion; a tango performance in Buenos Aires an occasion for both sorrow and rejoicing. From wine tasting in the Andes to exploring the legendary Perito Moreno Glacier, from investigating the myth of the gaucho to discovering her Welsh roots in Patagonia, Polly takes us along for an exhilarating, unforgettable ride as she finally lives out her dreamat a trot, a canter, and a gallop.

A jolly romp of a read. Sunday Telegraph,UKBreezy, lighthearted.Kirkus sAbout the AuthorPolly Evans studied modern languages at Cambridge University, where she learned a little about Spanish and a little more about men. The hours of hard research she poured into these two subjects, plus a four-year stint at Hong Kong's largest weekly magazine, inspired her first three books, all available from Delta. Polly now lives in London, where she is at work on the tale of her attempts to learn to ride in horse-mad Argentina.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Chapter OneThe Starting GateAs a child, I longed to ride a horse. My girlish dreams were peppered with fantasies of bright red horse-show rosettes and deliciously exciting grooming sessions in which I would brush my pet's sleek coat till it gleamed like polished ebony.I devoured the adventures of Black Beauty. I was given an old hardcover copy of Jill's Gymkhana with a sand-colored binding that must have been bought at a tag sale somewhere, and I read and reread it with avid enthusiasm. After all, if Jill had managed to happen upon enough money to buy herself a pony, why shouldn't I? I gazed enraptured through National Velvet. But those Grand National fences seemed nothing to the hurdle I faced: convincing my parents of my need.For years I pestered them. I wanted riding lessons. They thought the piano more suitable. I still wanted riding lessons. But ballet was so much more ladylike. I wanted a horse. Where would it live? I thought the backyard would do fine. Who would look after it? I would, of course. Who was going to pay for it? Well, they could couldn't they? But realistically they could not, and so the horse was never forthcoming. Christmases and birthdays came and went, and I never unwrapped so much as a My Little Pony. Not even my Barbie doll was given a horse. Barbie, instead, received a bathtub and a wedding dressclean, wholesome, morally upright playthings.The time went by and the obsession died. Through my teenage years, I don't suppose I'd have been seen dead around a horse. In my twenties, I developed an unhealthy preoccupation with swimming and biking and running. It wasn't until I was in my mid-thirties that the niggling little thought began to trot around inside my head once more: Wouldn't it be fun to learn to ride?But where should I go for lessons? I didn't much like the idea of plodding around a London park for ninety dollars an hour. And why spend week after week joggling around a riding-school ring attempting to master the very British rising trot, when there was a world out there with wide-open spaces to gallop through, places where nobody cared if my heels were down or my head was high? Why squeeze into an unflattering pair of jodhpurs when I could deck myself out in leather chaps and jingling spurs, and gallop with the cowboys through the ranches of Wyoming? Why strap on a hard black hat when I could wear a fur-trimmed bonnet and ride wild with the nomads across the Mongolian steppe? There were the Berber horsemen of Morocco. Surely they could do with a new companion with whom to charge across the desert; perhaps they needed a tea girl to serve their mint infusions as they rested beneath the stars. Or maybe I should grab a saber and head to the spice-scented East to ride with the Rajputs through the ancient battlegrounds of princely Rajasthan.But the Rajputs' horse days were gone, and the offspring of those famously wild warriors probably spent their days not in the saddle but selling secondhand Ambassador cars on the streets of Jaipur. In any case, I reflected, it might make sense to take lessons in a country where I at least spoke the language. Should I, then, join up with the Canadian Mounties? Or with the gardiens of the Camargue? Or, perhaps, I could head for the far-flung south, to Argentina, and take my first equine steps among the gauchos.Horsemanship courses through Argentina's fiery Latin veins. The country as we know it owes its very

existence to the horse, for without their steeds the Spanish could never have conquered the ferocious native tribes who had inhabited South America for many thousands of years. The natives had never set eyes on these four-legged creatures before the Spaniards arrived, and they viewed them at first with utter, debilitating terror. They believed horse and rider formed a single supernatural monstrosity and that the Spaniards' gunfire constituted the roar of an animal enraged. It didn't take long for them to conquer their fear. In 1536, the Spaniard Pedro de Mendoza founded the settlement of Buenos Aires, but he was soon overwhelmed by the indigenous population. Mendoza fled back to Spain, abandoning a handful of horses to run wild on the pampas. It was the perfect environment for them: There were endless grass plains, plenty of water, a temperate climate, and very few predators. The horses bred. By 1580, when Juan de Garay returned to retake Buenos Aires, he found the province full of wild herdsand, gradually, the natives learned to ride them.Today, horses still play a vital role in Argentine life. The cattle on the estancias, or ranches, are herded on horseback just as they were a century ago. Horses continue to provide the principal form of transport for many rural folk. In the plush Buenos Aires district of Palermo, the polo ground plays host to the finest players in the world. I did a little research. I sent some e-mails. I received a reply from Robin Begg, an Anglo-Argentine whose family had owned their six-thousand-acre cattle farm in Crdoba province for generations. Now Robin's father handled the cattle-breeding operation while Robin used the estancia to run horse-riding holidays for visitors. He invited me to his farm for a week. He would, he proclaimed with disarming confidence, teach me to ride. After my week at Robin's, I'd take off to tour the country for eight further weeks, riding horses wherever I could find them. I'd canter across Argentina's flat open grasslands, into its spectacular Andean mountains, and through its southern Patagonian parks where mighty condors would soar before snowcapped peaks and pristine lakes.Joyfully, I drew a line through my diary from mid-October to mid-December: While in England the days would be drawing short and gray, in Argentina it would be springtime. The trees would be sprouting fresh green shoots, the cattle would be suckling their knock-kneed calvesand I'd be sauntering among them all, high on my horse. "Aren't you scared?" my friends asked me again and again. After the tenth time, I started to wonder if, perhaps, they knew something I didn't."What will happen if you get there and find that you really hate riding?" some forward-thinking souls asked with the chipper confidence of those who know they are going to spend the next few months safe and warm in a centrally heated office with nothing more frightening than a weekend break to France thrown in to ease the tedium."Whatever you do, don't ride in jeans," my friend Ruth advised me when I told her of my forthcoming adventure. She pulled up her trouser legs and showed me scars on her calves: Ruth used to ride daily as a teenager, and the sores caused by denim seams rubbing her skin had apparently marked her for life. "Oh yes, and also, remember that after you've been riding you will really stink.""Pack painkillers," said some."Take arnica," declared others."Always wear gloves," instructed my friend Jenny."You must take Elliman's horse liniment to rub into your legs," Pam, a septuagenarian friend, pronounced imperiously."Horse liniment? But isn't that for horses?" I asked, trying hard to hide my horror."Oh yes, but I know plenty of humans who use it too. It's powerful stuff and you might be needing it," she said in a no-nonsense kind of way.I went nervously to the pharmacist. They didn't stock Elliman's; I settled for arnica and ibuprofen. I packed sweatpantsand threw in a pair of jeans just in case. I blithely ignored the instruction regarding riding gloves. And then, I boarded the plane.Chapter TwoA Foot in the StirrupsRobin's driver, Fabio, collected me from the Crdoba airport in a longhooded Ford pickup. Its leather-upholstered banquette stretched wide enough to accommodate a family. We drove out of the city and passed through flat fields and grasslandsome green, some the color of pale straw. Cattle and horses grazed. We came into the town of Ro Ceballos, where Ford Dodges and huge, antiquated American cars ornamented with rust weaved through the streets."Argentines can't drive," Fabio said, shrugging as he swung out of the way of a truck intent on collision.Leaving the Chevrolets, we turned right onto an unpaved track, then climbed higher and higher into the Sierra Chica hills. The land undulated green and gold for as far as the eye could see. The buzz of the city was far below us now."That building there." Fabio pointed across the hillside to a tiny, one-story whitewashed construction. "That's the local school. It's very smallonly about ten or twenty children go there."The schoolhouse was right in the middle of nowhere. No roads seemed to lead to it. I asked Fabio how the children traveled there each day."Oh," he said, "they ride there on horseback."He said it nonchalantly, as if to ride one's horse to school were the most natural thing in the world. "How old are the children?" I asked, trying to hide my urbanite's surprise."Oh, the youngest ones are probably about six, I suppose.""And they ride a horse to school, all alone?" "Oh, the little ones ride with the older kids." So here I was at last in Argentina, where six-year-olds traveled to school on horseback. I was a long, long way from home, where harassed, highlighted mothers ferried their offspring through city streets in outsized SUVs. Here in the Sierra Chica there was no school bus. And if the six-year-olds were so competent, why, after a couple of lessons, shouldn't I be? A small current of euphoria sparked within me. I hadn't even made it to the corral, yet already I felt a powerful sense of arrival.We wound our way higher into the hills. A tinamou scuttled out of our path. As we drove through the gates of Estancia Los Potreros, a pair of bright green monk parakeets flitted between the trees."You can teach those birds to talk," Fabio told me. "You have to cover up their cage, then give them a piece of bread soaked in wine. It loosens their tongues."We rattled along a track until we finally arrived in front of an L-shaped whitewashed house. The house sat slightly elevated from the lawn that spread before it: At intervals, staircases of five or six stone steps led up to a terrace, raised to the same level as the floor of the house. Along the outside of the terrace a series of square

white pillars supported a low-pitched corrugated metal roof. Robin was standing in front of the house as we drew up. He was in his mid-forties, his brown hair just starting to thin. He was dressed in beige chinos and a blue cotton short-sleeved shirt, and wore large horn-rimmed glasses."Hello, welcome!" He shook my hand in a very English way. Robin was born in Argentina, but went to boarding school in England from the age of thirteen. He then worked a long stint in London and married his English wife, Teleri, before returning to Argentina seven years ago. Robin and Teleri now had four children; at the time of my visit the oldest, Elicia, was eight. Teleri lived with the children during the week in the nearby village of La Cumbre, where there was an English school; the two older girls went to the regular Argentine school in the morning and studied the British syllabus in the afternoon. Robin showed me to my room, where a wooden four-poster bed took prominence, its dark, polished pillars spiraling dramatically skyward. In the corner of the room a wood-burning stove sat alongside a basket full of logs. The floor was constructed from parquet squares of gleaming algarrobocarob treewood the color of bitter chocolate; a vase of fresh pink roses stood on the table. On the wall hung old sepia photographs of Robin's family."There's a key here if you want it," said Robin, "but we never bother to lock anything ourselves."***Robin's family moved to Argentina in 1825, he told me a little later over a lunch of milanesasbreaded cutletsand salad, which we ate on the terrace before the emerald green lawn and rolling golden hills. The day was sunny without being hot, the perfect temperature for sitting out in shirtsleeves."That wasn't the Begg branch of the family, but another lot. They moved from Scotland with an entire community. They brought everyonethe doctor, carpenters, bricklayers, an architect, a schoolteacheron three ships."The head of this part of the family was William Grierson: He was Robin's great-great-great-grandfather. Grierson was a farmer. He sailed to Argentina on the Symmetry with his familyhis wife, Catherine, and, at that time, three childrento help found the Monte Grande settlement just south of Buenos Aires. The wave of British immigration to Argentina in the 1820s was encouraged by a liberal government eager to attract educated people to its shores. Europeans had first colonized this land three hundred years previously, but the descendants of those early settlers had only very rudimentary education. Argentina needed to instill learning into its peoplebut the process would take time. The government therefore came up with the expedient solution of importing a population ready-schooled.The government drew up an attractive package of land grants and financial incentives for its citizens-to-be. Still, those Scots' pioneer optimism must have been blended with a heady dread of the unknown that Friday in May 1825 when they assembled at Leith and prepared for their long voyage across a tempestuous ocean. They knew next to nothing about the land that would be their home, yet there would be little opportunity ever to return to Scotland, for the journey was horribly long and prohibitively expensive. Grierson wrote a diary during his Atlantic voyage which has subsequently been reprinted in a book, From Caledonia to the Pampas."Found the greatest confusion in every part, the Steerage baffles all description, Beds, Blankets, Clothes, Bales, Packages. Items of every kind all in a huddle. Sailors, Passengers, Strangers, sick, healthy old and young, sober, tipsy, crying, praying, scolding . . . If things are to continue as they begin, the sooner our voyage is at an end, the better," wrote Grierson in his diary on May 20, 1825, of his first boarding of the Symmetry.From his diaries, Grierson comes across as a stalwart Georgian gentleman. When in need of light entertainment, he partook of a round of whist. On Sundays, he joined the captain in reading sermons in his cabin. He was not given to namby-pamby ailments such as seasicknessyet there must have been times during the voyage when even the ever-upright William Grierson wondered whether it had really been such a great idea to throw in his familiar life in Scotland in order to pitch and roll across the Atlantic just so he could set up home on a patch of grass he'd never seen.