

THE climb up on horseback had been hard but it had not prepared the rider for what was to come. Now as he reached the crest, a heart-stopping sight greeted him – a sheer drop into a valley so narrow, there was barely room to fit a horse.

But his local guides, called *gauchos*, had already started down. Behind him, came his team of riders, of whom many had flown half-way round the world to join him. So, turn back or head down?

This was the sticky situation Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad found himself in on an Andean mountain ridge on Feb 19.

Just days before, he had endured a perilous ocean crossing on his return from a physically gruelling visit to the Antarctica. After docking at Ushuaia in southern Argentina on Feb 13, he and his group, the Malaysian Antarctic Expedition, had returned to Buenos Aires by air.

Most of the 70 Malaysians then flew home, glad to leave the bone-numbing cold for the familiar hot tropics. About 20 remained behind for the second leg of the Prime Minister's vacation which had been planned for from two years ago. It would be as unusual as the first leg and even more strenuous – daily horseback riding, initially on the more forgiving Pampas, then later in the punishing Andes at 3,000m above sea level.

They were joined by 18 Malaysians, including the Prime Minister's eldest son Mirzan and grandsons Omar, seven, and Othman eight; riding buddies of the Prime Minister and members of the Royal Malaysia Police Calvary, who had arrived in Buenos Aires earlier.

From Buenos Aires the group drove to Estancia Santa Rosa, a sprawling farm of 800ha, near Monte, west of the Argentine capital.

They arrived in the evening of Feb 13. The farm is located on the rolling plains of the fabled Pampas which provided a complete change of scenery for the Malaysians after their Antarctic experience.

At home on the range

At STAR 2 JUNE 2002

From Datin Seri Dr **Siti Hasmah's** holiday journal:

Subject: Las Lenas, Mendoza
Date: 19/2/02 Tuesday

9.30am: Visited the 2 big "dolinas" – the water holes: physical phenomena caused by underground stream which causes the earth above it to collapse & form water holes. comparable to an hour glass. The holes begin small but tend to grow bigger.

10.30am: 40 riders selected their horses & started to ride in the valley and climb the mountains with guides, gauchos & medics.

2.30pm: Returned for lunch at a nice spot. Joined them for mutton barbecue.

4.30pm 6.45pm: Group went riding again at a different place in the mountains. Returned quite tanned and exhausted but a fantastic experience.

Stories from the amateur riders will last a lifetime for them -choosing of horses and trying them out on flat land. Never did they realise that they'd be riding up & down steep mountains with no horse tracks to go by in the terrain. Even PM was scared & nervous going to the edge of the mountain and had to ride down the side to the valley. The rest felt the same & had no choice but to follow their leader.

Everyone prayed for their own safety. Allah was very kind & gave the protection they needed. The risk was very great!

"Jan", and his sons did not follow and flew home.

Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah received a warm welcome from the mayor of Malargue who presented the Prime Minister with the key to the town.

"It is a beauty of a place – miles and miles of grasslands and trees with lakes and lots of animals like birds and rabbits. Wherever we went, we would be accompanied by birds," says Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali in an interview in Sri Perdana, Putrajaya.

"It was also great to be able to wear just T-shirts again," quips Mazhar, the Prime Minister's youngest son. He and his sister Maizura, both 18, had accompanied their parents to the Antarctica and Argentina.

Like Dr Mahathir, the two youngsters are keen riders. When he has time, the Prime Minister goes horse riding in places like Bukit Tinggi and Bukit Kiara.

For the next four days, Dr Mahathir and his riders would spend hours riding over the Pampas in different directions from Estancia Santa Rosa, a farm which is contract managed by an international conglomerate specialising in seed crops like potatoes, garlic and onions.

From Datin Seri Dr **Siti Hasmah's holiday** journal:

*Subject: Santa Rosa, Monte
Date: 16/02/02 Saturday*

Woke up late & the day was warm. Turned chilly by afternoon. Omar and Othman went riding. Mai and Maz did the same.

Afternoon carriage ride around the farm - so many birds - egrets, storks, fowl - so many wildlife in the pampas apart from horses.

Evening - Maz and Mai went to B.A. with Jan for a night out and overnight stay. Det and I went to Monte for JJ's dinner at a very nice hotel. Lovely, lively music & country folk dancing. Good grilled chicken.

Returned before 11pm. Omar and Othman fast asleep.

Pampas ranches and farms are apparently not allowed to fence their properties which allowed the riders to fan out as far as they wished. On their rides covering an average of 50km each trip, the Malaysians, accompanied by gauchos, would cross three or four farms.

Apart from Feb 14, when he paid a courtesy call on the Argentine president Eduardo Duhalde, a typical day for Dr Mahathir and his riders would begin at 5.45am. They would be driven to a meeting point a distance from the farm where the horses would be stationed.

From there, they would ride for about two hours in the morning to places of interest like the Salado River, 25km away, stop for breakfast at the home of a gaucho, and resume riding for another two or three hours before returning to the guesthouse on the farm just before noon.

After resting in the afternoon, the riders would be off again from 5pm till 8pm. After each day's ride, a quick shower would usually be followed by a simple dinner (often a barbecue) and then it was bedtime at 11pm. An exception was a dinner at a hotel in the nearby town of Monte hosted by fellow rider Tenaga Nasional chairman Datuk Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis, who is known as "JJ".

While it was obviously no laze-by-the-pool kind of a holiday for Dr Mahathir, Dr Siti Hasmah was able to take it more leisurely as she did not join in the rides.

"I would spend my time on the porch writ-

From Datin Seri Dr **Siti Hasmah's** holiday journal:

*Subject: Santa Rosa, Monte
Date: 17/2/02 Sunday*

AM.: Started to pack bags after seeing the rest go off riding. Jan, Maz and Mai returned from B.A. while Omar, Othman & I were having breakfast.

Went to Monte town to shop. Most closed but some opened specially for us. Didn't buy anything for myself. Returned for lunch & rested till 4pm.

Aru had a very historical photo of himself on the iceberg with stern of ship & iceberg as background. Signed to certify that photo was authentic! Should have done the same!

Mai and Maz exhausted!

ing about the Antarctica although I did follow in the 4X4 and joined them for breakfast," she says. On one occasion, she enjoyed a carriage ride around the farm.

Going horseback on the rolling Pampas, however, was a breeze compared to what was to come.

On Feb 18, the Malaysians bade farewell to Santa Rosa and headed for Buenos Aires to catch a two-hour flight to Malargue, a town in the mountainous western province of Mendoza. Mirzan, whose family name is

Their destination, however, was further north-west to a hotel in the ski resort of Las Lenas. Since it was summer, the Malaysians pretty much had the three-star hotel to themselves.

"We were at 7,000ft (2,100m) above sea level. It affected our breathing but it was manageable," says Dr Siti Hasmah.

This time their chief guide was a mountain gaucho named Nacho. "He was the one who picked the horses for us," says Mazhar.

These creatures were unlike the ones they had ridden in the Pampas.

"They are born and bred mountain horses; they look rather like donkeys with shorter backs. They are very sure-footed. Daddy said he never imagined a horse could be so good at climbing cliffs and going over loose rocks."

Mazhar also noted that the saddles were different: "The ones we used on the Pampas were flatter but these were specially curved in front and back."

They were soon to find out why.

"We were going up and down mountain sides and some were like 80-degree cliffs. If we walked, we would have fallen off the mountain but not on these saddles," marvels Mazhar.

The Malaysians very quickly learned to respect their sure-footed mounts as Nacho and his gauchos led them on hair-raising trails that were steep and slippery.

"Pampas horses gallop very smoothly but they can trip over holes, not these mountain horses though. They are very careful at picking out trails and where they step. They also have a way of sliding down slopes without letting the riders fall," says Mazhar.

This excellent trait was most appreciated on their first day out, Feb 19, when they had to face that terrifying descent.

One novice rider who first climbed on the back of a horse in Santa Rosa at the Prime Minister's insistence, was so unnerved by the sight that he asked for another route down.

Roaming the Andes

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"But his gaucho led him to another spot which was even steeper so he had no choice but to go back and follow the rest. He told us he surrendered to God and to his horse," reveals Dr Siti Hasmah.

He wasn't the only white-faced, clenched-teeth rider. "Everyone closed their eyes going down and was praying!" quips Mazhar, who readily admits that his heart was pounding.

He says that Dr Mahathir, riding out in front with Nacho, already suspected that something exciting lay ahead when the gaucho turned off the trail and led him up to the edge of that cliff. Now it was up to him to lead the way for his riders and truly show the "Malaysia boleh" spirit, which he did.

But as Dr Siti Hasmah noted in her journal: "Even PM was scared and nervous going to the edge of the mountain and (riding) down the side to the valley."

Nacho obviously knew his horses and all 40 riders made it down that mountain side safely.

"All of us, even the hardest riders, were silent," grins Mazhar.

They had passed the test. After that, no mountain was insurmountable. But every day, says Mazhar, would bring surprises.

Like in the Pampas, rides commenced early in the morning but the riders would be out the whole day, returning only at dinner. They packed their lunches with them, which often consisted of barbecued wild mountain goat and fruits.

"After we reached a peak, there would always be another ahead, some

snow-covered," says Mazhar. This was not surprising as they were riding at 3,000m above sea level in the Valle Hermoso, where their ponchos came in handy.

Meanwhile, Dr Siti Hasmah stayed at Las Lenas, went sight-seeing and visited Malargue. On the last day, at Dr Mahathir's request, she joined the riders for lunch.

"They were able to take me by a 4x4 vehicle to the point where they would break for lunch. I saw them coming down from the mountain and they were mere specks heading for a lake at the foot. I thought they would fall into it!

"It took them one-and-a-half hours to reach the lake. Everything was so gigantic that you lose your perspective," muses Dr Siti Hasmah.

The terrain was harsh and dry ~ the riders had to cover their faces from the dust churned up by the horses ~ but it was also immensely beautiful.

Recalls Mazhar: "As you descend, the colours around you would change. Sometimes the sunlight would reflect against a mountain, breaking out different shades of colour."

Continues Dr Siti Hasmah: "It was another wonderland of God's creation. There were flowers everywhere ~ yellow, red, blue, purple. From afar, the mountains seemed covered by grass but, close up, you see it growing in tufts.

"The air was so clean you could feel the difference. The skies were a deep blue. There were thermal springs, lakes and because of the snow in the mountains, there were lots of streams."

The water, says Mazhar, was so clean they could drink it. "It was like

drinking mineral water which was naturally cold," he adds.

Mazhar is full of praises for their gauchos who were completely professional in their care of their visitors.

"In the mountains, we would go in single file and the gauchos were interspersed among the Malaysians. They were constantly checking our saddles and making sure we were all right. They didn't speak English but that didn't pose a problem as we had a translator."

Dr Siti Hasmah remembers the gauchos as very friendly and kind who even sang songs to entertain their visitors.

Through it all, Dr Mahathir never once complained of the hardship nor of aches and pains, which is quite amazing considering his age (he will be 77 in July).

Like his determination to brave the Antarctica, Dr Mahathir showed that if he could do it, so can others, even at some risk to himself.

But it was a risk our adventurous and intrepid PM perhaps felt he had to take. Fortunately, "Allah was very kind and gave the protection . . . needed," as his wife wrote in her journal.

"He enjoyed it and at his age, you don't know when he can go up and do it again," says Dr Siti Hasmah. What's more, she notes, Dr Mahathir came home "completely recharged with bouncing energy". And obviously ready to take back the reins of the more mundane and sedate task of governing the country!

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