

THE PERUVIAN HORSE

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Introduction

Horses are a gift from the Gods. They symbolise the beauty of life, serving as a reminder of its preciousness. Horses are a true masterpiece, embodying art, poetry in motion and natural beauty. But beyond their physical beauty lies their unconditional friendship and loyalty to those who care for and ride them.

Perol Chico has specialised in luxury horseback riding vacations in Peru since 1996. Our dedication to providing exceptional and enriching travel experiences has taken us across breathtaking landscapes, covering thousands of miles, and showing our guests the beautiful world we live in. I hope this book serves as a tribute to Peru's national horse and the poetry of riding. Through its pages, I aim to inspire others to ride, explore, and discover. Eduard



The Peruvian Paso Horse



Because of its isolation for almost 500 years, the Peruvian Paso horse has evolved as one of the purest breeds in the world and as a unique entity in the horse kingdom. The existence of this breed has been called "the greatest triumph of genetic selection ever achieved by a group of breeders." Thanks to its unique, inborn, four-beat lateral gait, the Peruvian Paso horse is undoubtedly the smoothest riding horse in the world.

Origin

The modern Peruvian horse descends from horses introduced into Peru by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. The Spanish Conquistadors brought with them both hacks (amblers) and chargers (trotters) of the same breed to the New World, and as recorded in the Archives of the Indies, the Spanish horse — the "classic" Andalusian — was a breed consisting of Galician (Celtic) horses of the north, the Sorraia, and the Barb (or Berber horse) of the area known today as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.

The Barb was one of Islam's greatest legacies to Christian Spain. In the spring of 711, the armies of Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the Strait of Gibraltar atop this agile animal, defeating King Roderick and conquering a large part of the Iberian Peninsula, where they would remain for the next eight centuries. Musa ibn Nusayr, governor of North Africa under the Caliph of the period, was the one who had ordered Tariq to make the initial incursion into Spain. The Moorish occupation of Spain ended with the Islamic ruler Boabdil — whose real name was Abu Abdallah — defeated at the final siege of Granada by the armies of King Fernando and Isabel, the "Catholic Kings," on January 2, 1492.

The blend of the two cultures gave rise to a flourishing civilisation, which had a wide-ranging impact on Spanish culture. The Muslim rule of medieval Iberia (modern-day Spain) heavily influenced Spain's language, intellectual culture, and architecture. This blend of cultures can also be seen in the crossbreeding of the Barb from North Africa with the Iberian horse. The result was the classic Andalusian, refined in the grasslands around Córdoba to become one of the most beautiful horses of all time.

"The Arab contribution to human progress — astronomy, mathematics, cosmology, the variety and magnificent wealth of architectural form — is a remarkable legacy of a people who entered the land as

conquerors and became peaceful masters. From the establishment of the first mosque in Cordova in 785 until the time of their expulsion by the Catholic Kings in 1492, the Moors dominated the intellectual life of the area and had a profound impact on European civilisation, which assimilated many of their ideas."
(Titus Burckhardt, Moorish Culture in Spain)

Experts agree that the first major shipment of horses to the New World was in 1493, on Columbus's second voyage. Francisco Pizarro and his 168 men, who captured the Inca Atahualpa, brought 62 horses with them. To these were added the 84 animals brought by Diego de Almagro after the imprisonment of Atahualpa, and the horses belonging to the armies of Sebastián de Belalcázar and Hernando de Soto. These horses were the original ancestors of the Peruvian horse.

It is interesting to note that during the last 500 years of Spanish history, successive Royal Edicts for its breeding brought about substantial differences between the present-day Andalusian horse and the one that accompanied the Spanish Conquistadors. Particularly during the reign of Phillip II, the Spanish horses were crossbred with German and Danish horses, resulting in significant changes in their basic characteristics.

In Peru, the "original" Andalusian horse brought by the Spaniards has kept most of the characteristics that made the Andalusian so valuable during the conquest of South America. No outside blood has been introduced into the Peruvian breed, as there was no need to cross with other breeds to produce taller, heavier or faster horses, as was the case in other countries such as Mexico, Argentina or the United States.

The Peruvian horse is a "hot blood" — a purebred Spanish horse selectively bred for the amble after reaching the shores of Peru. It was mainly developed to satisfy the need for a smooth and comfortable ride when overseeing plantations and travelling from one settlement to another. It was the only method of transportation that linked the valleys, provinces and villages of the coast as well as those of the sierra, which explains virtues such as its stamina and endurance. Selective breeding, coupled with such factors as climate and forage, served to modify succeeding generations and create a new breed, which possesses characteristics different from those of any other horse in the world.

Peruvian Paso horses come in all basic solid colours as well as greys and roans. The average height of the Peruvian is between 14 and 15.3 hands (1.42–1.54 m) and the weight is commonly between 900 and 1,100 pounds — about the same as Morgans and Arabians.

The Paso Llano

The trademark of this breed is a special, inherited, and completely natural four-beat lateral gait called "Paso Llano" (a contraction of Paso Castellano). The two basic gaits found in horses are the trot and the amble. The trot entails a diagonal movement in which the front and back legs on opposite sides move together, in a two-beat gait. This is the type of gait used by the majority of horses dedicated to sports, recreation and ranching. The amble, on the other hand, is a lateral movement, where the legs on the same side move together in a two-beat movement. The amble is the origin of the Paso Llano of Peruvian horses. The Paso Llano is a four-beat gait because, instead of moving its legs at the same time, the horse moves its hind leg first and then the front leg. In this manner the amble is broken into two parts. The Paso Llano is therefore a broken gait, consisting of permanent, harmonic, and rhythmic steps with which the animal makes a gentle and pleasant alternating movement. It is a quick advance in which the horse's centre of gravity stays almost immobile, producing a very smooth ride.

The Paso Llano is executed with a distinctive action in the front legs, called "termino": a graceful, flowing movement in which the forelegs roll towards the outside as the horse strides forward, much like the arm motion of a swimmer. Termino is a spectacular and beautiful natural action. It is not a wing or a paddle, and it originates in the shoulder, giving the horse the ability to swing the leg forward with minimal loss of forward drive. Both the gait and the flashy leg action are naturally passed on to the offspring.

Until the seventeenth century, the majority of the world's horses were naturally gaited. Nearly all travelling was done on horseback, and horses with natural gaits were considerably more comfortable to ride than trotters, which were called "boneshakers." Trotters were better suited to pulling carts and carriages over long distances, and to horse racing. As these uses for horses eclipsed travel riding, the number of trotters grew. The Peruvian Paso remains one of the very few breeds that not only retained its natural gait, but was also celebrated for it.

Peru's National Pride



A major principle among Peruvian breeders is that great Peruvian horses are born, not trained. Training is designed to bring out the animal's inherent ability, not to modify it artificially. To help ensure the retention of completely natural action and gait, no horse is allowed in the show ring with shoes or with hooves longer than 4 inches. All Peruvian breeders use basically the same training methods and equipment, so that no advantage is gained through artificial devices or aids.

Today's Peruvian Paso horse is the result of 400-plus years of highly selective breeding. The breed is said to combine qualities that may be considered "contradictory": very high-spirited, though easy to handle, while loose and relaxed in movement; sparkling, brilliant action in the forelegs, yet extremely smooth and sure-footed; a refined appearance, yet very powerful. This has been accomplished through the intelligence, love, and devotion of innumerable breeders, many of them anonymous. Their arduous and silent work has made the Peruvian Paso horse one of the country's greatest treasures and a unifying source of pride for its people.

Since its founding in 1947, the National Association of Peruvian Paso Horse Breeders and Owners has organised competitions to reward and stimulate the reproduction of the horse and to maintain its special characteristics. In this manner it protects and defends the continuity of the breed, as required of it by its statutes and the Peruvian government. The national competition, held in Mamacona, is without doubt one of the most exciting annual events for Paso horse lovers.

Peruvian Paso vs Paso Fino

Because of the shared word *paso*, a close relationship between the Peruvian Paso and the Paso Fino breed is often incorrectly assumed, and many people confuse the two. Although they both have common ancestors among Old World breeds, they came to the New World with different groups of settlers and were bred in entirely separate environments for different purposes. "Paso" simply means "step" in Spanish, and does not imply a common breed or origin.

The Paso Fino breed was developed in and around the Caribbean and Central and South America, while the Peruvian horse was born entirely within the borders of the country after which it was named. The Peruvian horse is somewhat larger, and deeper and wider in the body.

Both breeds have high head carriage and front-leg lift, are smooth to ride, and exhibit the same basic four-beat lateral footfall, but this is executed differently in each breed.

The gait of the Paso Fino resembles the action of a sewing machine, due to the rapid up-and-down leg movement that produces comparatively little forward motion. By contrast, the rear legs drive the Peruvian Paso's movement, with great reach under the body as well as reach in front. This action results in long strides with relatively little effort — an essential attribute for long-distance travel. In addition, the Peruvian Paso is bred for its distinctive *termino*, as discussed earlier. This action is sometimes mistaken by those unfamiliar with the breed for "paddling" or "winging" — a sign of a conformation fault. However, this is not the case, as the Paso's hooves return squarely to the ground rather than toeing in or out. The sideways circular movement of the front legs allows the horse to overstep with its hind legs, and prolongs the time the foreleg stays off the ground, resulting in more uniform (isochronal) timing and equal (isometric) strides, without vertical impact.

In summary, Peruvian Paso and Paso Fino horses have entirely different conformation and movement, and compete in separate shows with different tack. They are essentially two totally different breeds, and never the twain shall meet! Within the Peruvian horse world there are more and more voices suggesting a change from the name "Peruvian Paso horse" to simply "Peruvian horse," in order to avoid confusion with the Paso Fino.

Conformation, Brio and Pisos

Form follows function. This simple phrase may sound like a cliché, but it helps in understanding the conformation of the Peruvian Paso horse. Essentially it means that the exterior design (form) should reflect the horse's most important activities (function). Before discussing the "design," one must understand what the most important function or purpose is, and why.

Let me start by distinguishing the equestrian and cultural preferences of Peruvian horsemen. Their national horse is a reflection of Peruvian culture, and this is not always understood by equestrians from Western countries. One needs to think "outside the box" and with an open mind — to try to see through the eyes of a Peruvian horseman in order to understand and appreciate the Peruvian Paso.

Peruvians in general have a different concept of "time," meaning nobody is in a hurry, and consequently speed is not the most important characteristic sought in the Peruvian Paso. A brisk and lively horse is appreciated, but of more importance is a smooth and comfortable riding experience over long distances. Like any other horse breed, the Peruvian Paso loves a fast gallop, but it is not specifically bred for speed, nor was it intended to compete with other breeds in particular disciplines of sport or cattle-ranch work.

Peru is a country where agricultural activity has always prevailed, and covering long distances over varied terrain was a necessity. Like the Arab, the Peruvian Paso was bred as a light saddle horse for travelling. Peruvian horsemen see horses more through the eyes of an artist, appreciating refined elegance, smoothness, harmonic and fluent movement ("poetry in motion"), and athletic skill. The mystical, internal beauty of our horses, which we call brio, is also highly prized. Brio comes from the heart and can be translated as "the willingness to please," which is different from excitement or nervous behaviour. One could say that the Peruvian horse is an artistic expression of our equestrian soul — a masterpiece, and a reflection of our cultural and equestrian preferences.

I remember riding a Peruvian Paso horse for the very first time. It was many years ago, but it is still fresh in my mind. She was a small breeding mare named Ullujaya, and she showed me her attributes and what she was all about. I could not believe the amazing ride she gave me — the power in every stride, her arrogance, her brio. I refused to dismount at the end of the ride because I wanted to carry on. They had to take me off the horse almost by force!

The main function of the Peruvian horse is called pisos, comprising its harmonic, fluent and almost stylistic movements, and its ability to execute the perfect four-beat lateral gait. The idea is for the horse to cover as much ground as possible in the most effective, economical way — with the fewest possible steps, and minimal effort and vertical impact for horse and rider. To achieve this, the horse must be able to take long strides and deliver strong impulsion, or driving force, from its hind legs and hindquarters (the "motor"). It is because of its natural four-beat lateral gait and conformation that the Peruvian Paso is able to take those long strides and reach far under its body mass. A trotting horse, or a horse that moves in diagonals, is unable to do this, because its front leg on one side is in the way. Even at a normal walk, our horses are faster and use fewer steps than most other breeds, because of their long strides.

When our horse moves in its lateral gait, the driving force comes more from the "pull" than the "push." The hind legs reach far under the body mass, and the horse essentially pulls itself forward. Sometimes a horse needs more "push" power, which explains why the Peruvian Paso reverts to diagonal movement when it needs to climb energetically up a steep mountain trail. On the flat, however, it prefers to move in its natural lateral gait. Once in their lateral gait, most horses will start to collect themselves: they control their speed, maintain their energy level, and their movements become smoother and smoother. Those are the moments Peruvian horsemen enjoy the most — when the horse is naturally doing its own "thing," without any interference from the rider.

Pisos is the essence of our breed and the core purpose of all breeding programs in Peru. It is this extra, exquisite gait and smooth movement — the Paso Llano — that makes our horse stand out from all others.

Now that I have explained what Peruvians look for in a horse, and what the main function of our breed is, I will briefly discuss the "design" of the Peruvian Paso. Our horses are not very big, and there is a good reason for that. Some Westerners might find them small in comparison to other breeds, but they are certainly not the size of a pony (although I have found that the English call all horses ponies)! With an average height of somewhere between 14 and 15.2 hands, our horses may look small at first glance, but once you mount them they are transformed by their arrogance and presence, seeming bigger and more impressive. Peruvians prefer the size of their national horse, because bigger horses are less smooth: the centre of gravity of the horse should be low to the ground in order to deliver a smooth ride (imagine standing on top of the mast of a ship, where you will most certainly get seasick from the motion).

The smaller size also makes the Peruvian Paso more agile and better suited to handling difficult obstacles on rough terrain. Smaller horses carry less weight, and their smaller hooves make them very sure-footed on rocky, mountainous terrain. When discussing horse size, I always emphasise to our clients that bigger horses are not, by definition, "better." Unfortunately, humans are getting taller and heavier (or should I say, bigger...), and we might have to think about breeding our horse half a size up in the future!

Conformation refers to the shape and proportionate dimensions of an animal. For the Peruvian Paso, it is the correct shape and proportions established by generations of breeders and horse experts over almost 500 years — proportions that allow and help the horse to perform its main function at its best. Form should always follow function, at least in theory. In practice, however, humans make mistakes, and the "technical design" we have in mind is sometimes at odds with the goals we want to achieve, or simply runs against the laws of nature. Striving for perfection in any part of life is a recipe for failure, as perfection can never be attained. The best we can achieve is excellence.

There are many examples of breeders and so-called "experts" taking the wrong path. One only has to look at some dog breeds that now have serious health problems because of flawed breeding decisions to witness this. Most mistakes are made when breeding decisions are based on aesthetics, fashionable trends or pure commercial motivation, which of course have nothing to do with the principles of good, ethical breeding. It is therefore important to keep this conversation going, and to stay open-minded regarding the opinions and suggestions of fellow horsemen, without losing oneself in the clouds of vanity or other ego issues.

In any event, the present consensus regarding good conformation for our breed can be described as follows (quoted, with permission, from an article by my friend Raul Risso, a longtime breeder and well-respected judge of Peruvian Paso horses):

"We need horses that are able to stand plumb and decisively under their body mass. They must have a rather short muscular loin area, a long inclined croup and proper correlative ANGULATIONS beginning at the stifle, to the hock (slightly sickled), continuing at the pastern (medium to short and not too flexible or squishy), with the hoof following the axis of the angle of the pastern (not coon-footed).

When viewed from the rear or the front, the horse's limbs should be perpendicular to the ground. Whether standing or in movement, the hooves in the rear should touch the ground closer together than the hooves in the front, with the footprints forming the figure of a trapezoid. This last quality provides our breed with more IMPULSION from behind. PPH (Peruvian Paso Horse) that are rectangular in their footfall have less power and, when in motion, "waddle like a duck." Such horses, generally speaking, reach far under their body mass while in gait but lack the DRIVE that the rear end described above provides.

When viewed from the side, a horse's profile must show a front end with rather sloped shoulder blades (allowing looseness) with legs that are VERTICAL to the ground. Individuals that stay "close to the ground" with deep bodies that provide a lower center of gravity give our breed of horse the ability to move in a GLIDING MODE.

Long, lean, arched at the top and bottom, elevated, firm necks (avoiding fallen crests) with correct insertion of the head and neck into the withers permit NATURAL COLLECTION. This last trait makes training much easier, as the horse requires little assistance from tack devices or the rider's skill in order to travel elegantly with the head up. Proper angulations, deep bodies, and elevated necks as described above are conformation traits that allow the Peruvian Paso Horse to propel itself elegantly in a natural manner.

The basic requirements of a good Peruvian Horse, along with CONFORMATION (the main subject I wanted to deal with at this time), are PISOS and BRIO with GENTLE DISPOSITION. As with other traits, brio is inheritable. An unruly horse does not have brio, is not a desirable individual, and CULLING should be considered out of kindness to the animal as well as the human. Not all people are kind people. It is no different with horses, and dangerous individuals should be eliminated.

As far as gait is concerned, there is one rule of thumb that I learned from the old master breeder Jorge Juan Pinillos. He used to say, and repeat: "Pisos mas Pisos = Pisos." This is very true, as Pisos is recessive to Paso, a Paso is recessive to an Ambler, and an Ambler is recessive to a Trotter. I have written before, sustaining that "Pisos" is the most important characteristic in the breeding of the PPH. I have not changed that a bit, because Pisos identify our breed and make a Peruvian different from any other gaited breed, be it the ancestrally related Paso Fino, Mangalarga Marchador, Tennessee Walking Horse, Icelandic, or others.

Conformation, brio and pisos all complement each other. I am quoting from an article I wrote back in 1984: 'No horse has an excellent gait if it is not strong enough, or lacks the temperament or character to sustain the paso llano over a lengthy distance.'

— Raul Risso Raul's article is, of course, only one representation of the theory of correct conformation and good breeding guidelines. There are many other fine details that could be added, and even interesting contradictions and differing points of view among the experts about what correct conformation really is — but for now I will leave that up to others to discuss!

Peruvian Tack

Peruvian riding tack, like that used by horsemen throughout the American continent, has its origin in fifteenth-century Europe. Equestrian portraits by European classical painters such as Velázquez, Titian and Van Dyck show saddles bearing a close resemblance to the modern Peruvian saddle.

When the Spanish Conquistadors arrived in America, they brought their European riding equipment with them. This was modified over the years to suit the uses to which the horses were put, and the availability of certain materials. In Mexico, for example, horses were used extensively in ranching operations, and the use of the lasso resulted in the development of a saddle with a horn on the pommel.

In Peru, the need was to preserve the features of a comfortable and secure saddle, as horses were mainly used for transportation. This gave rise to the "montura de cajón," or box saddle, so named because the rider sits "boxed in" between the pommel and cantle. Peruvian tack consists of the saddle, its accessories (cinch, stirrups, crupper and breeching) and braided headgear.

Saddle



The saddle consists of a wooden frame (saddle tree) with a moderately high pommel and cantle. The tree is covered with tight-fitting pieces of rawhide, with the cinch, stirrups, crupper, and breeching buckles and straps attached to the frame. To make the saddle more comfortable and to protect the rider's legs from rubbing against the buckles and straps, leather skirts are usually placed over the saddle tree and around the pommel and cantle. These skirts are often embossed with the beautiful designs for which Peruvian leather artisans have become famous. Work saddles without skirts use a leather pad ("pellonera") as a seat cushion; the pellonera can also be used for added comfort over saddles that do have skirts. To give saddles a better appearance, the pommel and cantle are sometimes covered with fine leather. More ornate saddles have rivets of nickel or silver along the borders of the pommel and cantle and along the edges of the skirts.

The "carona" is a thick leather pad that goes under the saddle and over the blanket, decorated with the same motifs as the saddle skirt. Besides enhancing the saddle's appearance, it protects the horse's back from the weight of the rider and shields the saddle from the horse's sweat.



To complement Peruvian show tack, and as a sign of wealth and good taste, a "pellón Sampedrano" is sometimes used. The pellón Sampedrano is a type of tapestry used as a pad over the saddle, described by Verne R. Albright in *The Peruvian Paso and His Classic Equitation* as "composed of thousands of hand-tied split braids made from black-dyed wool and inserted into a rug-type backing. The underside is lined with fine kid leather and usually contains pockets." The pockets were used to keep valuables safe in bygone times, when horses were the principal method of transportation; the pellón itself could also be used as bedding when long journeys required the rider to dismount and rest.

One of the peculiarities of Peruvian tack is the breeching known as the "guarnición." Much has been written about its origin and purpose, but it most likely derived from a harness first used to prevent the saddle from slipping forward when riding over rough terrain. Over time, this utilitarian purpose gave way to an ornamental one, and the guarnición became a traditional part of Peruvian tack. It consists of long leather straps ("retrancas") that encircle the rear of the horse and attach to buckles on each side of the saddle, further secured by two lateral straps ("caídas") attached to the base of the tail cover.

The "florón," or tail cover, is an elongated piece of leather fixed to the back of the saddle by a large, ornate buckle. The term florón, meaning "big flower" in Spanish, is probably derived from the round shape of the middle section of the tailpiece, traditionally embossed with floral designs. More recently, however, the creativity of leather artisans has given rise to a variety of designs, including linear motifs, horses, coats of arms and other fanciful leatherwork. As a general rule, the guarnición should carry the same embossed patterns as the rest of the tack.

Finally, a crupper is always used in conjunction with the Peruvian saddle. The crupper attaches to the same buckle that holds the tail cover, and both crupper and tailpiece are held together by a short leather strap called a "cruzeta."

Stirrups



The Peruvian stirrup has also undergone changes over time. The stirrups introduced by the Conquistadors were of two types: conventional triangular shapes, and those shaped like slippers, originally made of iron or copper. Because of the ready availability of silver and gold in Peru, these valuable metals were often used in place of iron and copper. Later, stirrups were made of wood, adorned with intricate carvings and ornamental nickel or silver pieces.

The typical Peruvian stirrup of today has the shape of a truncated pyramid, with a toe hole in one face. At the upper end, the stirrup has a metal cover shaped like a bell ("campana") and a ring to which the stirrup strap is attached. The corners of the stirrup are usually covered with metal pieces ("punteras"). Rare, exotic and native hardwoods are sometimes used in the crafting of stirrups, but the woods most commonly used are olive and "algarrobo" (a variety of mesquite abundant in the coastal area of Peru).

Headgear



In Peru the headgear is called "jato" and consists of three pieces: the halter with its shank, the headstall and reins, and the eye cover and strap. The jato is crafted according to its purpose: working headgear is very plain and usually has no metal decoration, whereas show headgear is finely made and adorned with metal pieces to give it a formal, elegant appearance.

The headgear is made of braided strands of goat, deer or calf rawhide. The more strands used in the braiding, the finer the end product; fine headgear is braided from twenty or more strands of leather per inch, each strand a twentieth of an inch (or less) wide. The braiding style depends on the skill of the artisan, and the number of metal pieces (rings and hardware) can vary from very few to a hundred or more. Of the three pieces of the jato, it is perhaps the eye cover ("tapajos") that calls for the most attention. This is a very typical element of Peruvian headgear, mainly used in the first stages of training. It serves the same purpose as conventional blinders, and can easily be moved down to cover the horse's eyes, allowing one to saddle or mount a nervous horse with great ease. It can also be used to keep a horse in place without having to tether it.

Complementing the headgear, a "bozalillo" (small bosal) is often used during bit training, because it keeps the horse's mouth closed when pressure is applied via the bit. The bosal is a very important piece of tack during the breaking-in and early training of the Peruvian horse. It consists of a noseband held in place by the headstall, with the reins attached to the top of the noseband. The bosal is also made of braided rawhide, but is not as finely crafted or adorned as the headstall.

The Peruvian bosal differs from the Mexican bosal, or hackamore, in that pressure is applied to the nose rather than to the chin. When properly used, it trains a horse to respond to the slightest pressure from the reins, making it possible to use a mild bit. The Peruvian bit ("freno" or "bocado") is well known for its "soft touch," with a straight bar and a short curb or spade. Originally, Peruvian bits were made of forged and burnished steel, handsomely inlaid with silver decoration, but modern bits are now made of non-rusting materials such as nickel or stainless steel.

The making of Peruvian tack is an art form passed from generation to generation within a family. This tradition has fortunately been kept alive for centuries, but only a small number of artisans remain dedicated to the profession today.

Peruvian Classical Equitation



There are two ways to ride a horse: as a passenger, or as a rider. Every beginner in the art of riding starts as a passenger. He or she holds on to the saddle, clamps their legs around the horse, and prays they will not fall off. For a horse, this feels like carrying a heavy sack of potatoes on its back. An easy-going horse without much fire will allow this "dead weight" on its back and do its job, but usually without a spark of happiness.

And then there is the rider. A good rider is an extension of their horse: they can communicate with their mount using very subtle body aids. Their hands are soft, their hips flexible, and their straight, balanced seat is secure but relaxed. They can read the messages sent by the horse and interpret its signs of excitement, discomfort or boredom. They know how and when to encourage their horse, and when to slow down or rest, because the horse's wellbeing is always on their mind. A good rider is not a burden to their horse, but a partner and a friend.

Only when a passenger becomes a rider will they discover the poetry of riding.

The art of riding horses is also called equitation. Horse riding is, by definition, not natural to the horse — it is something humans invented. To make this unnatural task easier for the horse, we have to use effective methods to stay in balance with it and to ride it in the best bio-mechanical way possible. We need to train the horse in the most constructive way to become stronger, refine its balance, and improve its suppleness. The result is a better-moving, happier horse that is easier and nicer to ride. These are the principles of equitation. When Charles Darwin visited South America in the mid-nineteenth century, during his voyage of scientific exploration on HMS Beagle, he observed the Peruvian horse-trainers, or "chalanés," as follows: "(There) a horse is not considered perfectly broken till he can be brought up standing in the midst of his full speed on any particular spot: for instance on a cloak thrown on the ground: or until he will charge a wall, and rearing scrape the surface with his hoofs. I have seen an animal bounding with spirit, yet reined merely by a forefinger and thumb; then taken at full gallop across a courtyard, and then made to wheel around the post of a veranda with great speed, but at so short a distance that the rider with outstretched arm all the while, kept one finger rubbing the post; then making a demi-volte in the air, with the other arm outstretched in a like manner, he wheeled around with astonishing force in the opposite direction."

This ancient practice — the old Spanish school of riding — is embodied today in a Peruvian demonstration called the "enfrenadura," in which turns and figures must still be ridden within the confines of a small circle inscribed on the ground.

Classical Peruvian equitation is a Peruvian interpretation of classical horsemanship, adapted to the specific characteristics of the Peruvian Paso — such as its four-beat lateral gait — and to Peruvian cultural riding preferences, such as valuing a smooth, comfortable ride over competitive riding at racing speed. In classical horsemanship the horse is considered a partner rather than a subordinate, and training is based on kindness, reward and the fine use of aids.

These principles trace back to Xenophon (c. 430–354 BC), a Greek general and student of Socrates, generally considered the first of the classical masters. Xenophon recommended that riders sit on a horse not as they would sit in a chair, but as though standing with their legs apart, and that horses be schooled in open country rather than confined to a riding arena. He set his philosophy down in *On Horsemanship*, written specifically for the training of the military horse, and left behind a maxim that still holds today: "anything forced cannot be beautiful." For a long time afterwards, little was added to Xenophon's ideas — few people could read or write, and there was little call for it. A handful of manuscripts survive from Italian riding masters of the thirteenth century, along with a remarkable treatise from around 1434 by Dom Duarte, King of Portugal, offering tips on riding and training for the nobleman. It was only from the mid-1500s that equestrianism experienced a true resurgence, driven partly by the need for a more intelligent use of the horse in battle now that riders carried firearms. Xenophon's book was rediscovered, and with it came the Spanish Riding School, and the "classical" style of riding as we know it today — developed further by riding masters such as Federico Grisone (1507–1570), Cesare Fiaschi (1523–1558) and Antoine de Pluvinet (1555–1620). What did not become established was discarded; what did was recognised, passed on, and developed further.

Classical equestrianism has been defined as "the ability, by means of good exercises, logically structured and based on the natural laws of balance and harmony, to train the horse so that it subordinates itself to the rider's will contentedly and with self-confidence, without any detriment

whatsoever to its own natural sequence of movement." The classical rider minimises their aids as soon as the horse begins to respond; in this way, they keep the horse attentive, and encourage impulsion and self-carriage.

The classical style of riding, and the principles of the Spanish Riding School, were introduced to Peru after the Conquest, together with the Spanish horse itself. This is why Peruvian equitation is, at its root, a classical form of equitation — one later adapted, over centuries, to a horse and a landscape neither Xenophon nor the Spanish Riding School ever imagined.

The goal of classical riding is for the horse to carry the rider without losing its natural movement. To do this, the horse needs to carry itself in a healthy posture, or frame — meaning a neutral back (not dropped) that is relaxed and flexible. In classical riding, the horse is encouraged to move and engage impulsion from "back (the haunches) to front (soft contact in the hand)," in order to improve efficiency and performance.

Gentle training of young horses, combined with patience, is typical of Peruvian equitation. Patience in particular is one of the strongest virtues of Peruvian horsemen. Most Peruvian horses will never see a bit before they reach the age of three or four, as time is taken to do it right. Even today, no artificial training methods are used in Peru, and a horse that is not naturally well-gaited, or that lacks the desired breed characteristics and conformation, is simply not used for breeding.

The training of the Peruvian Paso horse may differ from the training methods used with other breeds, but the seat does not differ from the classic principles of effective riding on the flat. This is commonly known as riding with a "deep, straight and balanced seat."

Collection

Collection is a critical element of classical Peruvian equitation. Through collection one can obtain a better, more fluent execution of the four-beat lateral gait, as a result of increased impulsion from the hind legs and improved balance.

To understand what collection is all about, and why we bother to collect a horse, we first need to understand the mechanics of the horse's movement and body structure. This is a complicated, technical subject, but I will try to keep it simple.

Horse riding is unnatural to the horse. A horse intended as a mount must first be trained to carry the rider's weight properly. Before a "green" horse can carry a rider's weight, it first needs to grow up and become physically able to carry weight on its back — for the Peruvian Paso, usually at three years or older. The weight of a rider puts considerable pressure on the spine of a young horse.



The horse's back is an emotional filter. An upset, tense, angry or frightened horse tends to tense its back muscles and hollow its back. The first time a young horse feels weight on its back, it will also be tense, and will feel a certain discomfort that it will try to avoid as best it can by hollowing its back.

Another reason — some would say the most important one — that a horse becomes tense and "hollow" is that its balance is upset. So before anything else, the horse must learn not to fear having a saddle and rider on its back. This allows it to relax and release its back muscles, which need to be relaxed in order to counteract the sagging of the spine caused by the rider's weight. The horse learns to round its back to support the weight, since it is much easier for a horse to carry weight when its back is round and arched instead of hollow.

If one looks at the weight distribution of a horse standing relaxed and naturally, one can observe that it carries more weight on its forehand (the front half of its body) than on its hind legs. Simple laws of physics teach us that if the horse were to lower its neck, this would increase the weight on its forehand; if the neck is held higher, more weight is distributed to the hind legs. This is important to understand: a horse lying down that wants to stand will first lift its neck, to shift weight to the hind legs.



The laws of physics show that an object is most stable and balanced when its centre of gravity sits at its centre, and when its weight is equally divided among its individual supports — in this case, the horse's legs. The horse's body is supported by four legs forming a rectangle, but the centre of gravity of a horse standing relaxed and naturally is not at the centre of that rectangle: it sits further forward, approximately where the horse's heart is.

The idea of classical equitation and collection is to shift that centre of gravity further towards the rear — from in front of the rider's leg to just behind it. We want to bring the horse into an "artificial balance," because that helps it gain more stability. The horse becomes more manoeuvrable, better able to balance the rider on its back, and at the same time distributes its weight more evenly across all four legs, preventing the premature overuse — and injury — of the front legs.

Another important advantage of moving the horse's centre of gravity towards the rear is that it lets us think of the horse's "motor" as being at the back: its hindquarters provide the impulsion — the energy that moves the horse forward — rather than the forelegs. With weight distributed more evenly across all four legs, that "motor" works far more efficiently. So how does one shift the horse's centre of gravity backwards? In classical equitation, this is achieved by bringing the horse's neck up through intelligent training and horsemanship. While that may sound simple in theory, the reality is not so easy: collection is much more than merely raising the horse's neck, and it depends on the horse's physical and mental relaxation, and on the absence of force.

The concept of collecting a horse is to bring together "both ends of the horse," in order to lighten the forehand and achieve optimal impulsion from the hindquarters. Collection also means storing the energy needed for the task ahead, giving the horse the power it needs to generate impulsion when it counts. It is like energy stored in a battery: it is there, but the output is restrained to a maximum level so that it lasts longer.

Collection lets the horse perform tasks with greater ease and beauty. It "loads" the hind legs, as if the horse were running uphill — like a speedboat lifting its bow when the motor at the back provides power.

To achieve collection and good impulsion, one must first have energy: without it — if the horse is tired, lazy or simply bored — true collection is out of reach. Some people confuse a relaxed walk, with the neck stretched downwards, for collection, but that is only a necessary early stage, in which the horse relaxes, loosens its muscles and rounds its back, before reaching the next and most important stage: true collection, with more controlled energy, more impulsion, and better weight distribution.

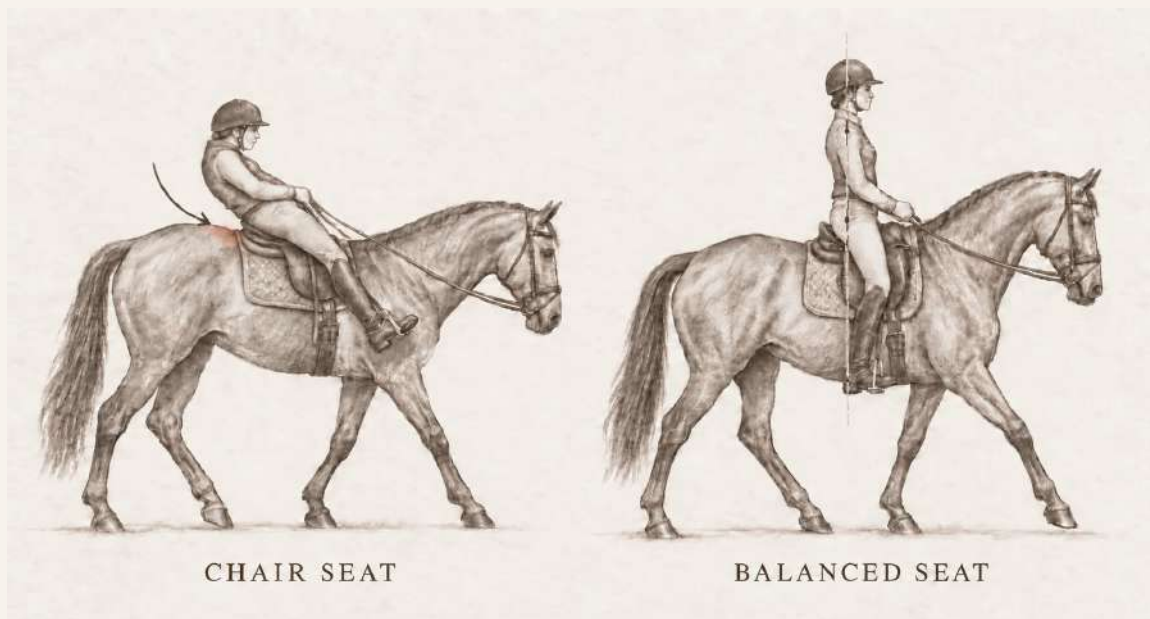
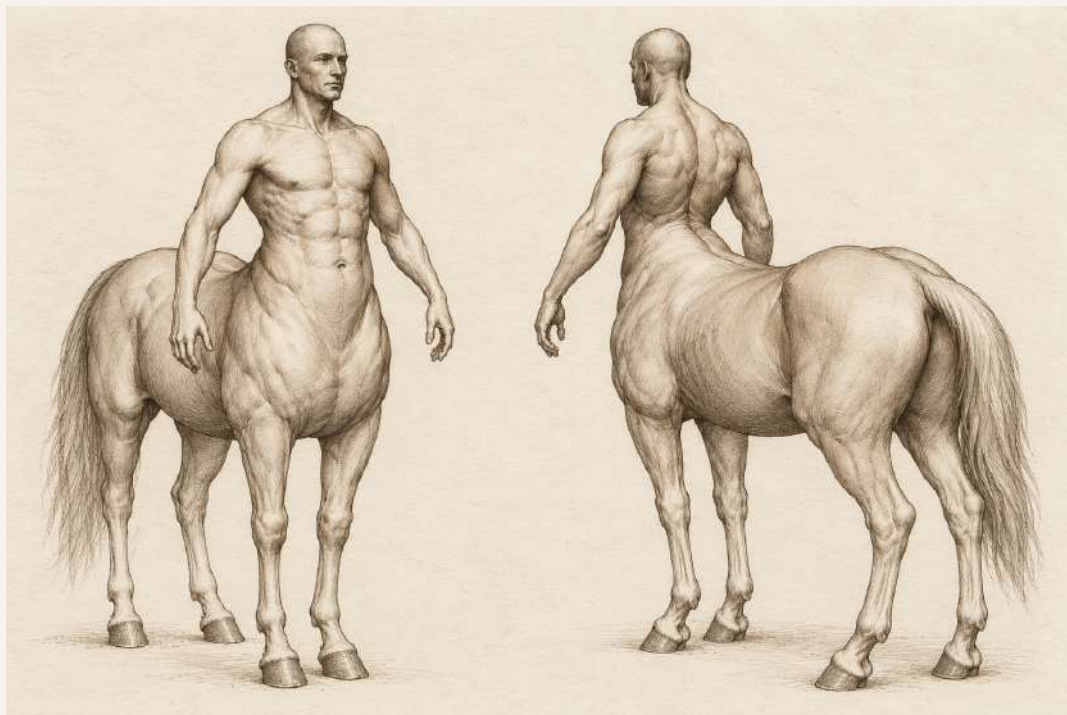
True collection is a complicated concept, hard to describe in a few words, especially to those unfamiliar with classical riding principles. On our rides we have had Western-style riders used to riding their Quarter Horses with loose reins and a low neck set at all times. One of them once tried to convince me that this was a more "natural" way of riding. With respect, horse riding is not natural to the horse in any case, and the Quarter Horse was originally bred for a completely different function, with an entirely different conformation in mind, than the Peruvian Paso. Working cattle close to the ground, or racing over quarter-mile courses, is an entirely different game from covering long distances in the most effective way, with minimum effort.

Riding the Peruvian Paso Horse

Outside Peruvian horse circles, there is little written about the Peruvian Paso breed, its training, equipment and conformation — the knowledge is mostly an oral tradition, passed down through generations of horsemen. Even less has been written about how to actually ride these horses.

In this chapter I want to explain not only how we ride our horses, but why — the balanced and non-balanced seat, body and riding aids, and how collection comes into play in each of the Peruvian Paso's paces. None of this is offered as the only way to ride a horse, but it is the way best suited to this particular gaited breed, and it forms part of Peru's rich equestrian heritage and tradition. I would encourage anyone new to the Peruvian Paso to read this chapter before setting out on one of our rides.

The Seat



Every style of riding is built on balance. Depending on a horse's breed, build and training, it typically supports something like 55% of its weight on the forehand and 45% over the hindquarters while standing still — though there is nothing fixed about this equilibrium. A horse standing half-asleep, resting one hind leg, may carry as much as 75% of its weight on the forehand; within seconds, spinning around to flee, it can shift 70–80% onto its hindquarters, and rearing, it can momentarily carry all its weight on its hind legs alone. As a horse moves, turns and changes gait, these ratios of weight-bearing shift constantly.

The classical way of riding on the flat is commonly known as riding with a deep, straight seat. A deep seat is one in which the rider's seat never leaves the saddle — classical dressage, for instance, is ridden entirely from a deep seat. A straight seat means the rider takes up the same position as if standing rather than sitting: hips in the same position relative to the ground as they would be standing, a slight forward curve in the lower back, chest lifted, with an imaginary line running from head through shoulder and hip to heel.

To picture what it means to become part of the horse in this way, think of the centaur of Greek mythology — two species blended into one. The important thing about the image is that both halves are standing.

A correct seat is achieved when the rider sits tall, straight and almost vertical in the saddle, as though standing rather than sitting.

A vertical rider is a balanced rider: there is no tendency to tip forward or back. Gravity alone keeps them in the deepest part of the saddle, without leaning on the cantle or bracing against the stirrups, and without needing to counterbalance by leaning back with the legs out in front. This seat requires no muscle tension to stay on the horse, so the contact stays natural: the legs can give small, subtle aids because the horse hasn't been desensitised by gripping legs, and the mouth hasn't been numbed by a rider hanging onto the reins for balance. Because the rider doesn't need to move to give an aid, the horse learns to trust that the rider won't tip it off balance.

Sitting correctly, you should feel your knees resting lightly against the horse, without squeezing; your legs should hang down by their own weight — never pulled up at the toes or knees — vertically from the hip, or very slightly turned in, and never used to help keep you in the saddle. The heels stay naturally horizontal, as though you were standing.

Combined with a well-designed saddle placed correctly on the horse's back, this position puts the rider's weight just behind the withers, at the strongest part of the horse's back — the place where it can carry weight with the least effort — and aligns the rider's centre of gravity with the horse's own, so the two move as one unit. Sitting close against the withers stabilises the seat, and is often what decides whether a rider stays on the horse through an unpredictable movement — a spook, a sudden stop, a moment out of control. When you take responsibility for your own weight, and carry your body in what I like to call the "equitation sweet spot," you influence the horse's carriage and can change the way it uses its back — which matters a great deal in helping the horse find its best possible gait. It takes time to develop a body suited to a deep, straight seat: the whole lower body, from the hips down, needs a certain amount of rearranging. The deep seat has to be practised until it becomes second nature — something a rider does without having to think about it.

The Non-Balanced Seat

The chair seat. The lazy "chair seat" throws most of the rider's weight onto the weakest part of the horse's back — the loin. Under that weight the horse's back sags, which can compress and grind the vertebrae of the spine together. This is not only painful for the horse; it also puts it off balance, and can easily lead to lameness.

To transfer impulsion from the hind legs to the front, a horse relies on a complex network of back muscles. A rider who blocks the movement of those muscles works directly against the horse's own efforts to create impulsion.

The position of a rider's legs dictates the position of their pelvis in the saddle. An incorrect pelvis position pushes the legs out in front, which in turn pushes them against the stirrups — and that push shoves the seat back in the saddle, pressing down on the rear of the saddle tree. This shrinks the saddle's weight-bearing area and pushes it exactly where the horse's back is most vulnerable: the loins. Riders with a non-balanced seat also tend to grip with their knees to stay on, which pushes them back against the cantle still further; gripping knees disturb and confuse a sensitive, well-schooled horse, which isn't used to that kind of pressure.

Why do people ride this way? Because it's easy — most novice riders naturally sit like this, and anyone with tight leg muscles, stiff hips or poor overall condition will find the chair seat far more comfortable to hold. It's hard to believe, but there are still riding instructors who teach it: "sit back and put your heels down," repeated without explanation. Some modern Western saddles are even designed to put the rider's legs out in front of the hips, feet almost on an imaginary dashboard, as though sitting in a chair.

There is a simple way to break the habit of the unbalanced chair seat: ride bareback, without holding the reins for balance. Sit back and lean too far behind the horse's centre of gravity, and you will almost certainly slide off over its hindquarters. If you truly love horses and want to ride them well, learning an independent, balanced seat is essential.

Body and Riding Aids

The legs. It is the legs that create the forward movement needed for all riding — even backing up. The first thing a horse is taught, once it has recovered from the shock of carrying someone on its back, is to move forward from the leg.

For most horses this is not a problem: the leg aid triggers two natural reflexes. The first is the instinct to flee — when a horse feels the rider's legs close around its sides, its instinct is to think "I'd better get moving," and it steps forward. The second is that a horse will crunch its side and pull the near hind leg forward, exactly as a standing person defends themselves against a poke in the ribs by folding toward that side and lifting the leg. These natural reflexes are reinforced with reward: in a horse's first two years of training, every leg aid is followed by a release of the rein — an open door for the horse to move through, and a reward for the right response. For this to work, the leg has to be applied in the right place, which means the rider needs a balanced seat and a relaxed leg. Once a rider has that, they can start thinking about everything else. The thigh. The upper leg is, first and foremost, the stabilising part of the seat. Held correctly, it brings security to the seat and close contact with the horse's back. It also plays an important role in the sideways-moving leg aid: pressing the right thigh against the horse while shifting weight onto the left seat bone will move the horse to the left almost instantly. Do as an instructor typically advises — look in the new direction — and you'll notice not only the increased weight on the inside seat bone, but how the outside thigh presses against the horse automatically. Applied consciously, this becomes a very discreet aid.

The knee. The knee doesn't have a good reputation as an aid — a gripping, stiff knee is generally seen as an active, and therefore unwanted, one. Used deliberately, though, it can be effective: on a lively horse, a slight "gripping with the knees" can be a useful restraining aid, since — unlike rein pressure — it doesn't risk the opposite effect of speeding a hot horse up. Strictly speaking, it isn't the knee doing the work but the inner thigh muscles pulling the knee inward; the rider simply feels it in the knee.

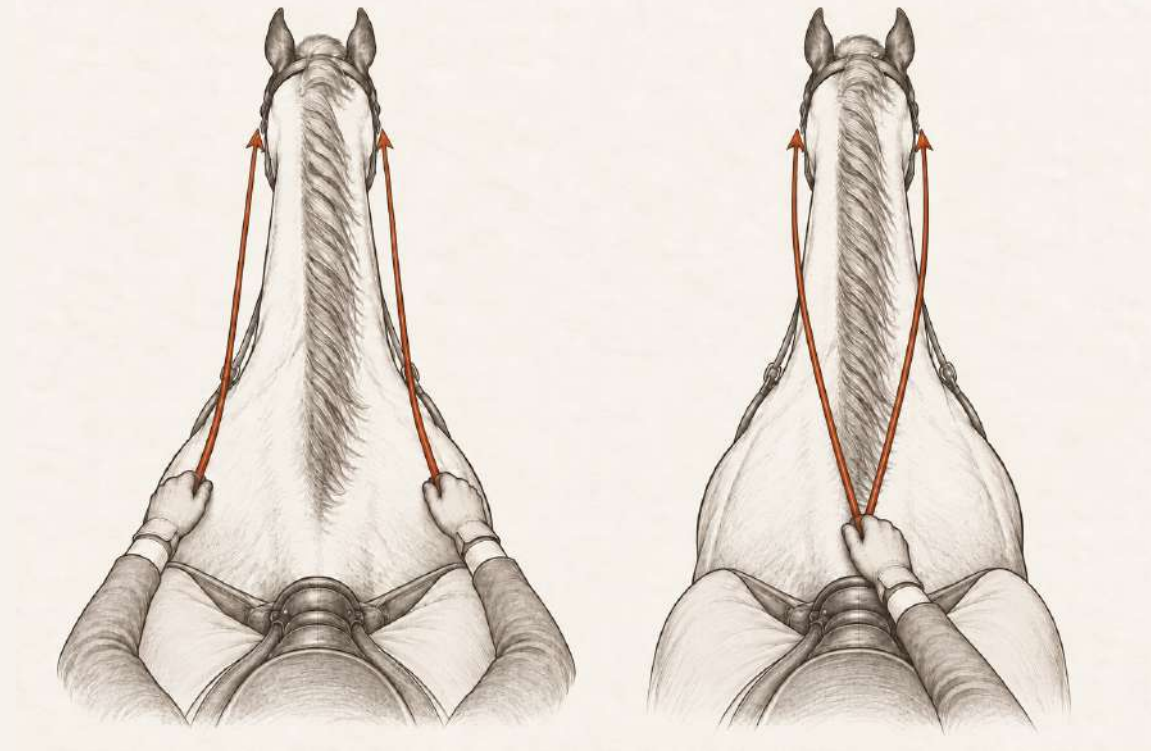
The calf. This is the most used, and most efficient, part of the leg. Its movements usually don't disturb the horse's balance or the rider's contact, and it touches a spot on the horse's side that says, unambiguously, "vamos — go!"

There are two ways to apply the lower leg, and it isn't that one is good and the other bad. You can tap, or you can squeeze — and neither means quite what it sounds like: a tap is not a kick, and a squeeze is not like wringing out a lemon. A tap is a quick, firm nudge: the leg touches the horse's side and bounces straight back to neutral. A squeeze is slower, held against the horse's side for half a second to a second — any longer and it turns into clamping, which a horse will eventually learn to ignore. Why two different

aids? The quick tap suits horses ranging from lazy to average energy, which can take an aid applied at exactly the moment it's meant to work — for instance, to tease a lifted hind leg further forward, which has to happen while that leg is actually in the air. Apply it earlier, while the leg is still pushing off, and it only pushes the horse further onto the forehand. On a more spirited horse, the same quick aid will likely only worry it, producing several strides of unwanted forward reaction and a quicker, less desirable landing of the hoof — a hot horse is already tense or overambitious, and tends to overreact. For this type of horse, it's far better to first apply the leg with full, steady contact, and only then add a short squeeze.

It's a myth that the leg needs to stay in contact with the horse's side at all times. Except in the situations above — which usually last only a few minutes — the leg should hang naturally relaxed and draped over the horse, never wrapped around it.

The heels and spurs. Riding in a good, balanced — that is, straight — seat, the heels sit naturally horizontal. With the stirrups at the right length, there is only very light pressure on them; the rider's weight is never distributed into the stirrups, nor are the stirrups used for balance, except when riding up or down a slope. In Peruvian equitation we do not use the heels or spurs as everyday aids. Spurs are reserved, on rare occasions, for training — a subject beyond the scope of this chapter — though wearing them is traditionally mandatory in the show ring.



The hands. The hands should never be discussed separately from the seat, because they are part of it. A solid seat is what makes good hands possible: no seat, no hands. Even a rider who manages to keep their hands soft and still despite a bobbing, unbalanced seat will never have hands that work in coordination with the seat and legs — and good hands alone do not make a rider.

Instructors often describe correct hand position as "a straight line from elbow to bit" — true enough, but only when seen from the side. Seen from above, the picture is quite different. In classical Peruvian equitation the hands are held less than a hand's width apart, and about a hand's width from the rider's body, roughly at navel height (bearing in mind the horse's conformation and head/neck carriage during collection), so as to form a straight line as seen from the side. Seen from above, though, this places the hands inside the straight line running from elbow to bit, with the elbow relaxed and held close to the hip.

If the arms were held in a true straight line to the bit as seen from above, the hands would end up four to six hands'-widths apart — and that's for someone slight, with narrow hips. That "wide hands" position is

highly undesirable in Peruvian riding: it fails to frame the horse's neck with the reins, and lets the reins act directly on the horse's mouth instead of being softened by contact with the neck. Reins held close together, by contrast, let the horse find and stay inside the frame they create for the neck, keeping it straight and free of kinks, and staying in tune with the rider's own body movements.

An important principle of Peruvian training is to work with relatively thick reins, especially with a young horse worked in the bosal. The pressure of the outside rein against the neck, combined with the correct leg aid, guides the horse in the desired direction and minimises — ideally eliminates — the need for the horse to lean on the bit.

A well-trained, well-collected Peruvian Paso horse can easily be ridden and guided with both reins in one hand, provided the rider uses the seat and legs correctly. Soft hands are essential to our riding style. The relatively thick reins we use may feel a little unfamiliar at first, but it is never the reins that let a rider feel the horse's mouth — it is the rider's own soft, experienced hands.

The Different Paces

The Peruvian Paso horse is ridden in four different paces: the walk, the Paso Llano, the canter, and the gallop. Each pace calls for a different energy level, or mindset, from the horse, and the Paso Llano is best executed with a certain degree of collection.

Clear communication between horse and rider is essential. There is no such thing as riding "in between" the different paces — the transitions from one to the next should be well defined and clear. This calls for an active rider rather than a passive one: it is the rider, not the horse, who decides the pace. Once a horse learns to respect its rider's leadership, it becomes more willing to follow instructions, down to the lightest body aid, or even a whisper. Clear, fair messages from the rider build the horse's confidence, and a confident horse will do anything to please its rider. Good horsemanship isn't only about riding skill — it also calls for a proactive attitude and honest, determined leadership: an active, effective rider.

The walk. The walk is ridden much as it would be in any other breed. Both horse and rider adopt a relaxed mindset and body language. During a relaxed walk, the horse's head and neck sit lower than the withers — an acceptable position for the walk, though it is not collection, since the horse's weight rests mainly on the forehand and its centre of gravity sits somewhere in front of the saddle girth, near the heart. The horse's head should never come behind the vertical during the walk.

Exercising a horse in this position — whether warming up or cooling down — relaxes it, loosens it up, and rounds its back; a relaxed horse moves more easily than a tense one, and brings its hind legs further under its body. Signs of relaxation include chewing the bit, licking, stretching the neck, and moving the ears. When riding at the walk, the seat stays relaxed and the reins are held loose, so the horse is free to stretch its neck and relax further.

The Paso Llano. The Paso Llano is the preferred gait among Peruvian horsemen, and the trademark of the breed. The name comes from *paso* (step) and *castellano* (Castilian, after Castile, the historical region of Spain) — a four-beat lateral gait, at roughly the speed of a trot, that delivers incomparable smoothness and harmony of movement along with the utmost ground-covering ability. A certain degree of collection is needed to execute a true Paso Llano.

Moving from a walk into the Paso Llano means changing the horse's mindset from relaxed to energetic — the two paces call for quite different levels of energy. Peruvian horses have the temperament to make this transition easy: a simple verbal cue, or a light squeeze of the calf, is usually enough. What matters is making the transition clear and deliberate — from relaxed to energetic, from walk to Paso Llano — rather than drifting from one into the other. By asking the horse for more energy, its neck rises automatically into the position needed for collection and the Paso Llano, since the flow of energy through its body and muscular system runs from back to front, and upward. Skip that clean transition, and horse and rider fall into what I call the "grey area" — an uncomfortable pace somewhere between a walk and a true Paso Llano, resembling a diagonal trot. The forehand becomes overloaded and can't cope with the pace and

the longer strides coming from behind. This in-between pace is never what we want when riding a Peruvian horse: it should always be either a relaxed walk, or an energetic Paso Llano with a raised neck. Everything in between is the grey area, and it is one we try to avoid at all times.

Controlled energy and collection. The Paso Llano asks for a long stride from the hind legs, real engagement of the hindquarters, and a controlled output of energy — like a battery that stores energy and releases just enough of it for the task at hand; too much output, and the device blows. A fresh, spirited horse will sometimes generate more energy than it needs, and that energy has to be controlled to maintain collection — left unchecked, the horse may start to "race" into a canter or gallop. To keep the horse's speed and neck position where we want them, we ride with a light contact in the mouth; how much contact is a delicate judgment. Too much pressure, and the horse slows down and loses energy; too little, and it speeds up too much to stay collected. The Paso Llano was never about getting the horse to race — it's about collection, in service of a smooth ride. Once a horse has learned to control its own energy and collect itself, there's no need to keep maintaining contact in its mouth, and the reins can be loosened — though they stay reasonably short, even without active contact.

The Paso Llano is a lateral gait in which the horse takes long strides with its hind legs, covering ground with a minimum of steps; the hoofprint of the hind leg can reach as far as, or beyond, the hoofprint of the foreleg on the same side. By reaching so far under its own body mass, the horse essentially pulls itself forward — the movement comes more from the "pull" than from the "push." It is a wonderful, supremely comfortable gait on the flat, but it lacks the "push" needed to climb, or to speed up, on a steep mountain trail. When the Peruvian horse needs more push — on a quick climb, say — it will automatically shift out of the Paso Llano into a diagonal gait, such as the trot or canter; on a longer climb, an intelligent horse will simply walk, to save its energy.

Conditioning the Paso Llano. If I always ask for the Paso Llano by shortening the reins and applying light contact, and always loosen the reins for the walk, the horse learns to associate each cue with each pace — which makes the transition from walk to Paso Llano far easier over time. This conditioning may not be obvious to someone unfamiliar with the idea of collection, but it works: loosening the reins invites the Peruvian Paso horse into a relaxed, slower pace, and shortening them invites a more active, faster one — the Paso Llano.

The same holds for the rider's own body language. A very relaxed seat asks for a walk; a more upright, active, energetic seat asks for the Paso Llano. Horses are remarkably quick to notice, and respond to, even the subtlest of these cues. Good horsemanship demands an active rider, in constant communication with the horse, never a passive one.

The canter and gallop. The Peruvian Paso horse can canter and gallop like any other breed — it is a complete myth that Peruvian horses should never be galloped, for fear of ruining their Paso Llano. Cantering or galloping now and then is good for any horse: it releases tension and improves suppleness. There is no question that other breeds are faster at the gallop, but speed has never been the point of our breed. We are proud to ride the Rolls-Royce of horses: smooth, luxurious, and endlessly comfortable.

I hope this chapter adds to your understanding of the Peruvian Paso horse, and to your enjoyment of riding in Peru.

The Land of the Incas

It is not only our excellent horses that make our rides high in the Peruvian Andes stand out — it is the overall experience, and the special moments along the way. Equestrian travel is not about the destination, nor the distance covered; it is about the journey itself. Few animals have shaped the course of human civilisation as profoundly as the horse — in trade, in exploration, in the rise and fall of empires. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Spanish conquest of the Americas, where a handful of horses, animals the peoples of this hemisphere had never before set eyes on, tipped the balance of an encounter between two civilisations that had never met, and helped decide the fate of a continent.

Cusco and the Sacred Valley were once the cradle of the most advanced and sophisticated civilisation, and the largest empire, in pre-Columbian America. In the early sixteenth century it was possibly one of the largest empires in the world.

From 1438 until 1533, the Inca Empire encompassed a large part of western South America, centred on the Andean Mountains. At its largest, the territory took in Peru, large parts of modern-day Ecuador, western and south-central Bolivia, northwest Argentina, north and central Chile, and a small part of southwest Colombia. Among the Empire's most notable achievements were its monumental architecture (especially stonework), the extensive road network known as the Qhapaq Ñan, finely woven textiles, the use of knotted strings (quipu) for record-keeping and communication, and agricultural innovation in difficult environments.

The Inca Empire eventually fell in 1532, after it was already wracked by civil war between Atahualpa and his half-brother Huáscar. For five years, the two had fought for control of the empire following the death, in 1527, of their father Huayna Capac, whose heir they both claimed to be — Atahualpa dominant in the north, where he had been involved in military expansion, Huáscar more powerful in the south. The War of the Two Brothers broke out in earnest in 1529 and ended in 1532 with Atahualpa's victory, just before his fateful encounter with Francisco Pizarro.

The horses that carried Pizarro's men into that encounter had themselves travelled a long road. The first horses reached the New World only in 1493, on Columbus's second voyage, and it was on Hispaniola — later called "the mother of the horse in the New World" — that the Crown established the royal breeding farms that supplied every wave of conquest that followed. From there, horses and breeding stock were shipped onward to Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Cuba, each island in turn supplying the next expedition into the mainland, first Mexico, then Peru. It was this decades-long chain of colonial horse-breeding, four decades removed from Columbus's first landfall, that eventually put 62 mounted men at Cajamarca.

Pizarro's conquest of the Inca Empire is one of the most extraordinary achievements in military history. On the morning of November 16, 1532, 168 Spanish soldiers, including those 62 on horseback, faced off against the huge Inca army at Cajamarca, in western South America. Although vastly outnumbered, the Spaniards launched a surprise attack on the Inca emperor Atahualpa, who was surrounded by some 80,000 Inca soldiers.

The horse itself was one of the conquerors' sharpest weapons, and not only for its speed and power. The Andes, like the rest of the Americas, had no native animal remotely like it — nothing larger than the llama and the alpaca, neither of them capable of carrying a rider into battle — and the effect on people who had never seen a horse before was described again and again by the chroniclers of the time as something close to terror, the horse and rider together taken for a single fearsome creature. The Spanish leaned on that fear deliberately, on occasion hanging bells from their horses to add to the din and confusion. On meeting Atahualpa's forces that fateful day, Pizarro had prepared the ground well: he kept his men and horses hidden until the last moment to maximise the shock of their appearance, and used politics and the emperor's overconfidence to draw him into an ambush. The Spanish then charged into the crowd on horseback, equipped with weapons and steel armour far superior to those of the Incas. The massacre went on for hours, until some 7,000 Incas lay dead. Yet through it all, the Spaniards could not reach Atahualpa: he was held aloft on a litter by his subjects, and as they were killed, more rushed in to

replace them. Finally, the Spaniards toppled Atahualpa's litter with their horses, and the one-sided battle was over.

There are many versions of what actually happened that day. Early historical accounts were written by Spanish soldiers in their chronicles, since the Incas had no written language; more recent historical studies have revealed some interesting alternative theories. One Spanish chronicle mentions that Atahualpa and his servants arrived very late to meet the Spaniards at the plaza of Cajamarca, and that Atahualpa's eyes were very red — he had been celebrating with his army the victory over his brother, and in his arrogance gave little importance to the small group of bearded men and their strange animals. One newer theory suggests that Atahualpa, who had been celebrating for several days, might have been thoroughly intoxicated that fatal day. Once the Spaniards captured him, the enormous Inca army and its generals, camped outside the city, became confused and decided not to attack, unwilling to risk the death of their Inca god. We will probably never know the real story.

Pizarro and his troops were later joined by tribes who hoped the Spaniards would liberate them from the Incas — among them the Cañari, from what is today Ecuador. I highly recommend Kim MacQuarrie's book *The Last Days of the Incas*, a powerful account of the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire. Another good book is *History of the Conquest of Peru*, by W. H. Prescott. The Spanish presence during colonial times has left its footprint on today's Andean landscape and daily life — the innumerable churches, the colonial architecture, and the folklore and traditions still practised. Travelling on horseback through the Land of the Incas has the great advantage of visiting places off the beaten path, and immersing oneself in the local culture, its friendly people, and the rich history of Peru.

It is worth pausing on that reversal. The horse first entered this landscape as an instrument of conquest, an animal so unfamiliar it was mistaken for something supernatural. That it should now carry visitors through these same mountains in peace, at a gentle, sure-footed pace, to see the land the Incas built and the people who still live on it, feels like its own quiet kind of poetic justice.

High Altitude Rides



Regardless of their fitness level, many horses may not perform the same at high altitude as they would at sea level. According to studies, high altitude seems to affect horses somewhat less than it affects humans. Altitude begins to take its toll on horses above 5,000 feet (1,524 m), and its effects become pronounced above 7,000 feet (2,143 m). At high altitude the air pressure is lower, and fewer oxygen molecules are present in the air: for every 1,000 feet (305 m) of altitude gained, the amount of oxygen in the air decreases by approximately 3%. That means that at 7,000 feet there are 20% fewer oxygen molecules available per breath. The horse's body must therefore make adjustments to compensate.

The most obvious way for a horse to compensate is by increasing its respiration rate, taking more breaths per minute. As the respiration rate increases, so does the heart rate, in order to pump oxygenated blood throughout the body. The body also responds by generating more red blood cells and capillaries to assist with oxygen transport, a process that takes somewhere between four and seven days. After that "acclimation" period, a horse at high altitude may have up to 50% more red blood cells than one at sea level. To protect vital organs such as the brain and heart, the body also shifts blood flow: more flows to the brain, heart and lungs, and less to other organs, such as those of the digestive system. The drawbacks of this protective mechanism are headaches (caused by a sharp increase in blood flow through the cranial arteries) and digestive upset (caused by the decrease in blood supply to the digestive organs). Perhaps the largest concern for horses at altitude, though, is dehydration, due to the dry air and increased respiration rate — above 6,000 feet, the body exhales and sweats out nearly twice as much moisture as it would at sea level.

While our horses live year-round at high altitude (9,200 ft/2,800 m) and are well adjusted to these conditions, travelling to still higher altitudes can be stressful for them. On some of our multi-day rides — our 11-day Sacred Valley ride, for instance — we reach altitudes of 14,270 feet (4,300 m) and beyond. I have learned that on those rides we need to allow our horses two or three days to acclimatise before asking them to perform at their best. I have always been struck by how much fitter our horses seem in the final days of a long ride than in the first — which makes complete sense once you consider what it takes for a horse to climb those mountains. For our rides high in the Peruvian Andes, we select horses with stamina and a more excitable temperament than average. They perform better on long-distance rides at high altitude, as they give that little extra when the going gets tough. A less experienced rider should not start out on a high-tempered horse, however much they might appreciate a go-getter — safety comes first. For all our rides we require at least an intermediate riding skill level from participants.

As a riding leader, it is very important to match the right mount to each rider, and I always take my time doing so. Riding skill is not the only consideration; a rider's personality matters too, and needs to be compatible with the horse's, especially if the horse is a sensitive one. This is why some horses react differently under different riders.

Why We Should Ride More

Before 1969, the Peruvian Paso horse was a plantation workhorse and a traveller's horse, under constant selection pressure for reliability, strength, usefulness, and comfort. This unique selection environment struck a balance between athleticism, strength and a luxurious ride — a happy medium between reliability and comfort.

During the 1969 Agrarian Reform in Peru, instituted by the government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado, large agricultural plantations were confiscated at gunpoint. The seized land was distributed to landless individuals or agricultural cooperatives; major breeding operations were broken up, and breeding stock was lost. The reform destroyed not only large-scale horse-breeding operations, but also the Peruvian Paso's function as a working horse, along with its critical selection environment. Many major landowners and breeders had no alternative but to kill or free their horses, or give them to workers who could not care for them. It was almost the end of the Peruvian Paso horse — but thanks to the heroic efforts of some of those breeders and aficionados, the breed survived.

During and after the 1970s, horses in Peru were bred predominantly with the show ring in mind, favouring adornments such as collection, lift and termino. Even today, the show circuit remains the predominant breeding-selection environment, and "a smooth ride and a flashy presentation" are the primary criteria. Success there heavily influences which horses and bloodlines are favoured, selected, promoted, and bred; as a result, breeding has concentrated around only a segment of an already small genetic pool. On the other hand, considerable improvements have been made towards a more uniform genetic makeup and format for the breed.

The discussion within Peru about the future of the Peruvian Paso is, in my opinion, intrinsically connected to a much larger, global problem in the horse world. The days when extensive land travel was done on horseback, and the horse was first and foremost a working animal, are long gone. More and more people moved to urban areas, and soulless motorised vehicles replaced the horse. Our noble, loyal travel companion became redundant, and "equestrian romanticism" went out the window.

Put simply, for whatever reason, people don't ride horses as much as they did in the "old days." This new reality poses a serious danger to the continuity and preservation of any horse breed, as breeders lose sight of the fine, delicate line that should never be crossed — the line between illusion and reality, between what looks right and what actually works in practice. It is when breeders start to confuse muscle mass with obesity, temperament and resistance to fatigue with excitement and hysterical behaviour, refinement with fragility, self-carriage with forced collection, and ease of movement with over-bending at the joints, to name but a few examples. The eye can deceive those who do not ride.

As for the Peruvian horse, it remains, for me and many others, the best all-round trail horse par excellence, and it is our obligation to be all the more careful in preserving this God-given equine treasure. The Peruvian Paso remains a superb horse for travelling and covering long distances, unbeaten by any other breed in what is truly the "ultimate riding experience," with immense endurance and heart.

We should ride again to understand and appreciate the essence of our breed, and to see its real beauty — for all the rest is illusory.

Perol Chico cannot change the course of the world, but we can still dream, work hard, and recreate a more contemporary version of the "equestrian travel" experience, bringing with it a revival of equestrian romanticism.

Travelling on horseback is not only about romantic experiences. It also allows us to escape the mundane and see the world — and ourselves — from a broader perspective. It lets us visit beautiful places off the beaten path, and discover the true heart and soul of a country in a way no other form of travel allows. Moreover, having a horse as a travel companion adds something very special to a journey. The horse is a living symbol of friendship, loyalty, trust, honesty, nobility, vigour, beauty, and freedom. Horses teach

us courage, patience, persistence, empathy, and the excitement and vitality of life — and so much more. They can help us find our true, joyful nature, and with it, the key ingredient for a happy life.

In this complex, confusing and troubled world, the horse has a major role to play in helping us disconnect, relax, and rediscover the bond we have with nature — and what really matters. Eduard