



Reading Guide

Riding Into the Heart of Patagonia

by Nancy Pfeiffer

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Beside a rain-swollen river in Patagonia, a man approached on a horse. His mount, a rusty red beauty, sported the short-trimmed mane and neatly squared-off tail of a well-kept horse. The man wore goatskin chaps, a woolen poncho, and the jaunty black beret typical of the region. This pair belonged to this place in a way I could only dream of. The man stared at us. We were up to our knees in mud and dwarfed by huge backpacks. It was apparent we had money, but we had no horses. "Por qué no tienes caballos?" he asked as he rode into the river.

At that moment I knew. I wanted to travel this country like the people who lived there. I wanted to know this place as only one on horseback could.

As a novice horsewoman, Nancy Pfeiffer took off across Patagonia alone on horseback. Over the next two decades and three thousand kilometers of rugged horse trail, the hospitable people who live there took her in, and

Patagonia slipped silently into her soul. As if watching a beloved child grow up, Nancy bore witness to the subtle, yet disturbing, changes barreling down on Patagonia.

From the author

There are moments—often unrecognized—that life pivots around. As I watched a man on horseback step into the Pedigroso river, I knew, I wanted to travel this country like the people who lived here. I wanted to know this place as only one on horseback could. Ten years later, standing in the plaza of the capital city with 120 pioneers and their magnificent horses, I realized I had slipped into this place in an irrevocable way. These people were now my friends, their problems were my problems, and a long, hard fight still loomed ahead. At that moment I knew. I would tell this story. I would begin this new journey the same way I had taken off across Patagonia, with no idea what I was up against, no formal training, and no clear-cut picture of what was ahead.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you watched the lands around your hometown change? Have you ever taken action to forestall the development of wild or rural lands near where you live?
2. Over the course of the book the author watched Patagonia go from a horse culture to an automobile culture, as well as witnessing the introduction of the HF radio, television, and cell phones. What do you see as the cost and benefits of modernization?
3. How do you feel about foreigners buying land in Patagonia? Is it part of the problem, part of the solution, or just inevitable change? After all . . . it is getting harder and harder to make a living selling sheep.
4. Nancy was often received in rural Patagonia as if she were a neighbor. She spent a lot of time sipping mate and talking about the cows. She sees part of this experience as being because she arrived, like the neighbors, on horseback. What actions do you see as helping to bridge cultural gaps and create friendships between diverse groups?



5. One of the biggest changes coming to Patagonia is people's attitude around private property. Do you know of other cultures where a person can hike or camp on anyone's land? What would that kind of culture look like to you?
6. Could you imagine inviting a stranger in for tea?
7. From being hailed as valiente, to being dubbed sin pegamento, (without glue) to being called puro loco, Nancy got differing reactions to her travels. Why do you think people's visions of her adventure differed. Did her reception vary with the age of the people she encountered, or between men and women?
8. The author talks about "Patagonia time" being different than "gringo time." Have you observed people's sense of time changing over either place or situation in life?
9. The author talks about genuine wilderness being a place where people are searching each other out. She also talks about the arrival of roads as being one way in which wilderness is being lost in Patagonia. What other ways does she see wilderness being lost? In what ways is wild country being lost near where you live?
10. In chapter three the author writes, "The road into the Rio Tranquillo Valley was cutting the wilderness I loved into smaller and smaller chunks, but I kept my viewpoint to myself. While my strong feelings about wilderness were deeply ingrained, I also held firmly to my conviction that as a visitor here, it was not my place to decide." At some point she obviously decided she would participate in a decision about a place that was not her home, and march in the Cabalgata. What do you think made her change her mind?

About the author

As a lifelong adventurer and outdoor educator, Nancy Pfeiffer has traveled from Antarctica to the Arctic Ocean. Life as a mountaineering guide has given her the opportunity to experience the world's highest summits, yet it is the landscapes and cultures encountered along the way that intrigue her most. Her published works range from poetry to scientific research, and explore subjects from the joys and frustrations of building a house as a single woman to mountaineering for paraplegics. Since graduating from Colorado Mountain College in 1979, Nancy has energetically pursued life without picking a major. Nancy now lives with her husband Fredrik in a cabin outside Palmer, Alaska, where she enjoys hauling water, chopping wood, and high-speed Internet.