

## ICU Riding and Polo Club

# Polo Tour Report

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**2<sup>nd</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> January 2009**

*Text by R. Smithells and A. B. Savell. Photo-editing by S. M. N. Furse*

### **Names (and SUPA classifications of player) of those who attended:**

Eleonore “Buffy” Buffet (Novice; ICU Polo Secretary)  
Trish Haylock-Vize (Novice)  
Niklas Jahn (Novice; ICU Polo cap elect)  
Carlotta Ridolfi (Novice; ICU Polo Secretary elect)  
Alex “Fluffy” Savell (Novice; ICU Riding and Polo treasurer)  
Megan Smith (Beginner)  
Rosie “8 falls” Smithells (Novice; ICU polo cap)  
Jon Matthews (Novice/ IC Staff)  
Aurianne de Piepape (Beginner/Non-IC)

### **Getting to Argentina**

The main Group flew from Gatwick on 2<sup>nd</sup> January via Madrid on Aerolineas Argentinas. At the time of purchase the group booking for this set of tickets represented the least expensive option for flights and thus, in our opinion the best value for our members. The luggage was lost on both outward and return flight. We gather that this is not an isolated occurrence, and strongly advise that the Union does not use these operators in the future. It is worth noting that all luggage was returned within 48 hours of arrival in Buenos Aires and inside of a week of return in the UK, however some of this had been badly handled with some of the straps broken etc.

Exams group – flew from Heathrow on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January (returned a day and a half earlier) via New York on Delta Airlines. No major problems. This second group took separate flights due to having exams early during the week of our return. Though the flights were more expensive the Delta Airlines route seemed more reliable, luggage was handled carefully and there were no problems with the transfer at New York JFK.

The tours subsidy awarded was primarily spent on these flights, with a very small amount proportionally reserved for trains/tubes to and from the airports. As stated above it is our belief that the Delta Airlines flights represented far greater value for money. However, both groups did arrive in Buenos Aires in reasonable time, the first group with a slight delay.



## Summary of Daily Activity

Each day was structured in a similar way, as follows.

### Breakfast (prepared by Maria the cook).

Begin to leave the house at around nine and wander down to the polo field to be mounted by ten; this did vary slightly day to day but was always between 10 and 11.

**Stick and Ball for two hours.** Timings were dependent on the intensity of practice and the weather as heat made it impossible to play during the hottest hours of the day for our own safety and particularly the welfare of the horses. This was generally a time where players worked on aspects of their play such as swing, hitting style, consistency, riding style etc. Our instructors were mounted and on hand to provide practical advice and support (such as hitting the ball up the field when missed by the player, allowing them to get more efficient practise hitting while giving advice at the same time).

There were, in general, 2 or 3 instructors to the 9 people playing; this ratio made it possible for a significant amount of 1-to-1 tuition that just isn't available in the UK at a similar price (For comparison an hour's individual tuition would cost somewhere between £80 and £300). This pairs work is very common as a tuition aid, it allows an inexperienced player to work on gaining and keeping the flow of play without needing to stop after every miss or miss hit. The exercise also means that (usually!) confidence in hitting at the canter is gained and the instructor is still in a position to comment on the player's seat and swing helping to keep this more constant and flowing too.



While not working with an instructor we worked either individually or often in pairs looking to improve on hooking and riding off; two important parts of the defensive game involving hooking the opposing players stick or riding into them and pushing them off the ball. This is another thing that is very difficult to practice in the UK, the open space possible in outdoor polo means that you can practice this without fear of running into other horses doing the same, or stick and balling, every few seconds. It is also massively important as you cannot win a match without being able to defend and steal the ball, and being able to respond to such defensive plays when they are used against you.



what aids produce what results and how to vary these for different horses.

For those of us working at a slightly higher level it also became interesting to begin to understand the differences between the styles of play in England and Argentina. Everything from the fact that Argentinean players tend to get up out of the saddle further allowing them slightly greater mobility and more reach, to the fact that the game play itself is more open and 'organic'.



In general, everyone took a lot out of these sessions. Several beginners progressed quickly, building their confidence in their seat such that they were comfortable and safe in canter and even gallop. Also their confidence in hitting the ball moved up very quickly until most were consistently connecting with the ball in canter, though not necessarily able to play multiple shots at speed. The more advanced players were able to practice both the basics and more advanced techniques. For instance, turning the ball is an essential skill and we were able to practice this in an open space at the canter, which is often too enclosed to learn in an arena since the fine control needed to turn the ball in a smaller and smaller circle takes time to master.



**Lunch** (cooked by Maria)

After the midday heat had passed, generally at around 5-6 o'clock, we were ready to play again.

**In the evenings we played Chukkas (matches 7.5mins long).** Dividing into 3 teams, each team consisting of 3 of us plus one professional (pro), we then played 2 chukkas each (one against each opposing team). These chukkas generally lasted much longer than the 7.5 minutes, primarily due to stopping for fouls and explanations not being included in this time, but also because everyone wanted to play for longer than this and matches probably lasted a minimum of 15 minutes each as a result giving everyone at least half an hour's play in the evenings.



For the first half of the week we played on the half-size pitch used for stick and balling in the mornings, for the second half we were taken down the road to a full sized pitch, our game had improved to the point that we could play reasonable polo on a larger pitch. Each team played each other in the tournament and the teams were changed each day to give everybody the chance to play everybody else.

Experience of competitive play is as important as learning the basic shots for several reasons. Working as an individual or pair does not allow you to gain an understanding of the rules. Many of these involve an element of the umpires discretion so gaining an understanding of this cannot just be learnt from reading them. Even those that seem simple when read look very different when mounted on a horse and



playing at speed. It is also in this situation that we began to understand the tactics of the game, supporting your team mates and not playing down the centre of the pitch, but instead to the sides where you can protect the ball more easily.

Playing on teams with professionals also allowed us another unique opportunity. They were able to open up the play meaning we could keep the ball moving rather than regularly getting bogged down in scrappy plays with no one able to hit the ball cleanly without being obstructed. This was a distinct advantage for us; it meant we could all play a more flowing game. It also meant that you could reasonably

go forward for a pass and expect to receive it, a more realistic situation than play among ourselves where our inconsistencies mean that supporting your teammates is much more important.

The other advantage of having such mixed teams was that everyone was presented with challenging opponents.

Competing for the ball against someone much more experienced gives a good opportunity to really put oneself to the test, particularly those advanced players that may not be presented as often with opponents with better ball, stick and horse control. We learnt a lot about how the professional players will respond to defensive plays; varying their speed and direction to try to force an opponent to come past them or countering an attempted hook by beating the opposing stick out of the way before hitting the ball unimpeded. Again, everyone got a lot out of these chukkas; they were incredibly fun and high in adrenaline as well as being invaluable experience of match play.



**Dinner** was spent back at the house most nights.

This, along with other meals often involved us chatting about the days play, about questions and queried over the rules between ourselves and with our instructors. Several evenings saw a number of people, instructors/professionals and others





associated with the sport coming to visit (including pro's from England and Italy as well as our Argentine hosts) that provided an excellent opportunity to talk further to them and understand some of the wider culture of polo which is another big part of the sport and something that cannot only be experienced in London.

**Other Stuff --** We visited Buenos Aries for a night out on the Wednesday night. We also made several trips to the La Dophina shop (the polo clothing brand owned by Adolfo Cambiaso, the top polo player in the world at present) and the associated bar opposite primarily for use of the free Wi-fi there and to relax after Chukkas at the nearby La Martina pitch.

We had a few tactical talks with our host Ollie Brown (1 goal player from Brett Polo, the people we play with in the UK) and also Tarquin (5 goal player from Ascot Park). The main group also had a few lessons with Tarquin after the 'exams group' left a day early to get back in time for exams.



We also made extensive use of the swimming pool at the Estancia. This was essential for keeping cool particularly after stick and balling in the mornings and was also a very good way of ensuring aches and pains were kept to a minimum allowing us to continue progressing throughout the entire week rather than needing time off to rest sore muscles.

### **Finance stuff**

Total £1,739.37pp. Flights average total £939.98pp, subsidy £220.06pp. We would like to express grateful thanks to the Clubs and Societies Board for supporting our tour.