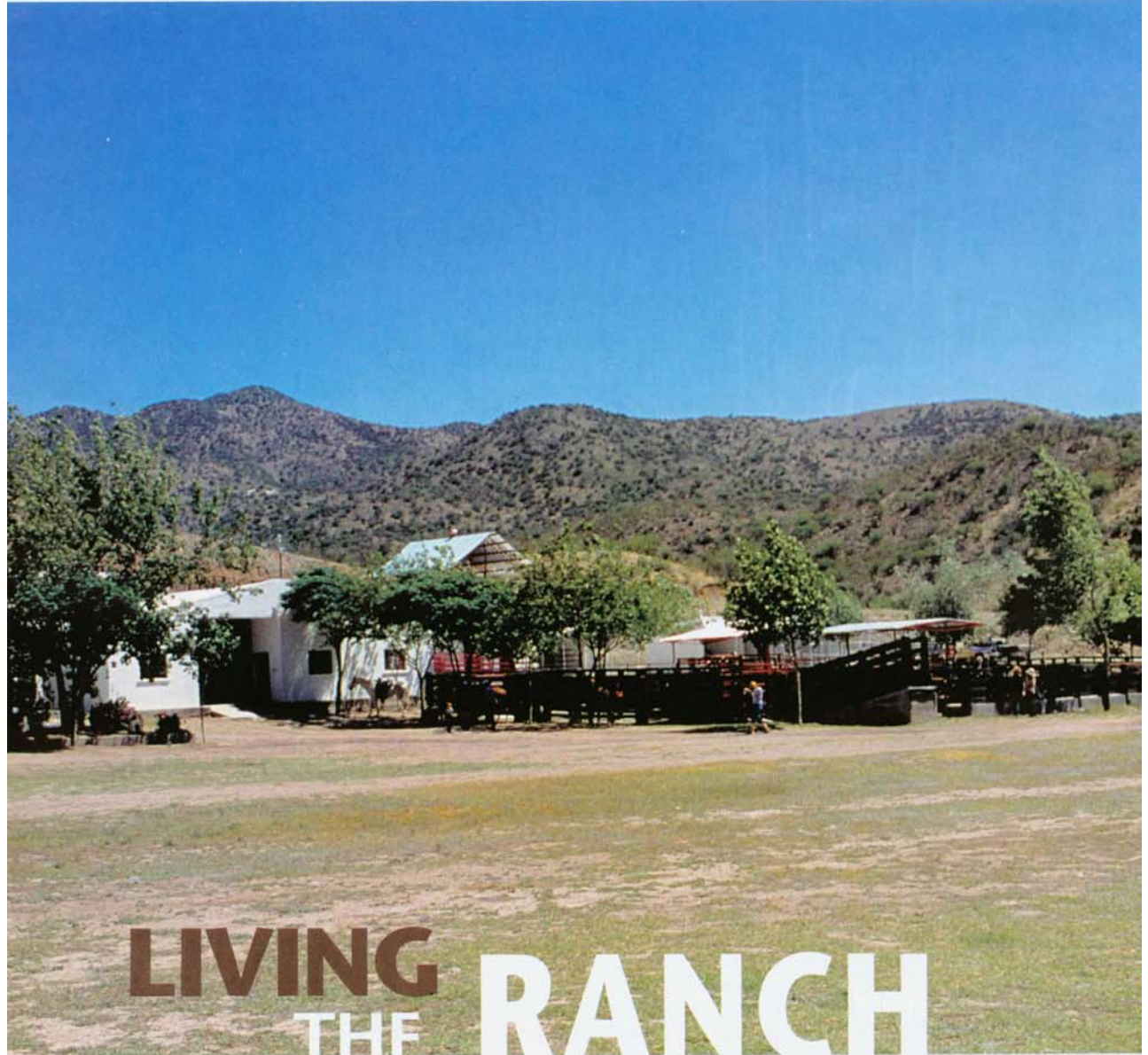


THE RANCH LIFE



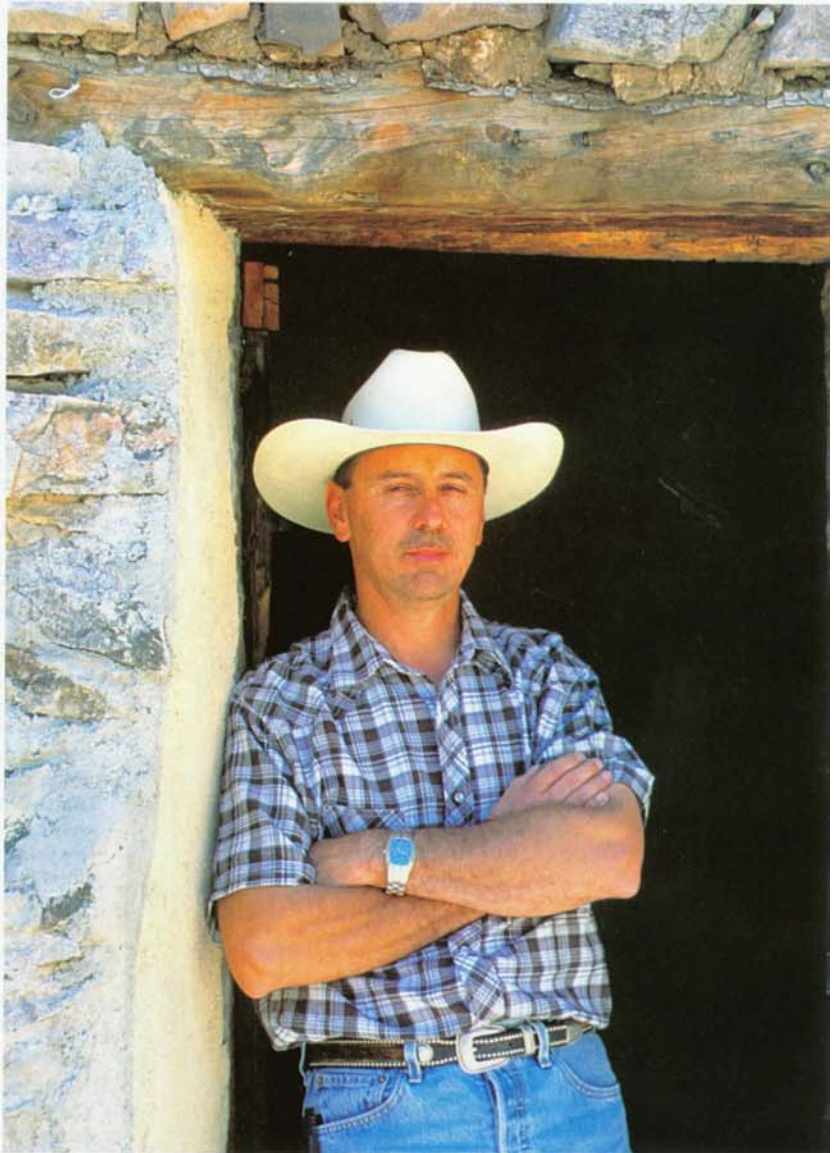
LIVING THE RANCH LIFE

Tucsonans relish a taste of the ranch life — pristine environment ...

LIFE

BELOW LEFT: The original buildings of Rancho Esmeralda are nestled in the Auispas Mountains of Frontera, Sonora. **BELOW RIGHT:** Tucsonan Rogo Rodriguez, one of the owners of Rancho Esmeralda, is promoting their nearly 30,000 acre property as a dude ranch combined with strong eco-tourism.

Produced by Claudia Franklin • Written by Judith Ratliff • Photography by Amy Haskell



flora and fauna ... and hot-off-the-griddle tortillas.

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When Tucson businessman Rogo Rodriguez sat down to plan a recent family reunion, he figured he'd have to sweeten the pot to get siblings — he's one of 10 — from as far away as North Carolina and Texas to attend. Rogo's a world-class good guy, loads of fun to be with and all, but 2,000 miles is 2,000 miles. Hmm... Ah-ha! Invite everyone to the ranch!

Actually, this one was a no-brainer. Rogo, owner of Rogo's Finishing Touch flooring contractors, and his cousin John Ochoa, a local developer and general contractor, together

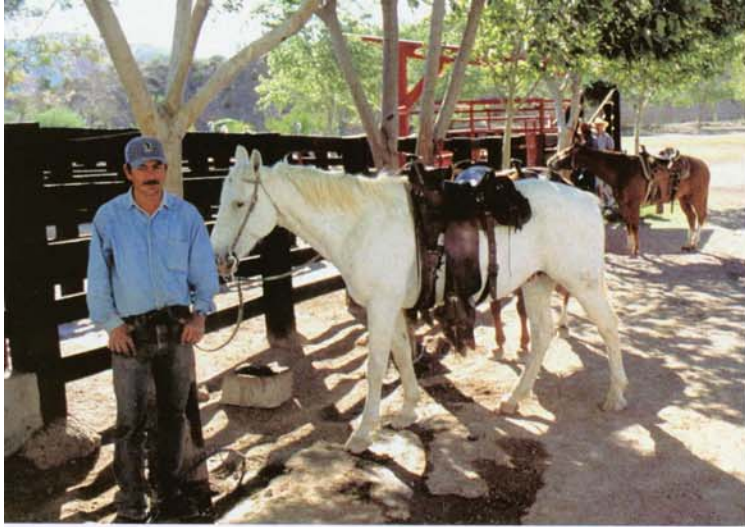
own a 3,500-acre cattle ranch in Frontera, Sonora, about 15 miles southwest of Nogales. For several years, the two, along with their friend Roberto Corella, who owns the neighboring 15,000-acre ranch, have been preparing their combined spreads to debut as a dude ranch with a strong eco-tourism element. With the addition of access to acreage owned by several of Roberto's adjacent relatives, Rancho Esmeralda, as the enterprise is known, encompasses nearly 30,000 acres; according to John, much of it is pristine. Although each separate ranch still runs cattle, the animals are carefully rotated through designated pastures. These clear-eyed entrepreneurs fully realize that the health and beauty of their land is the strongest selling point for their budding side venture.

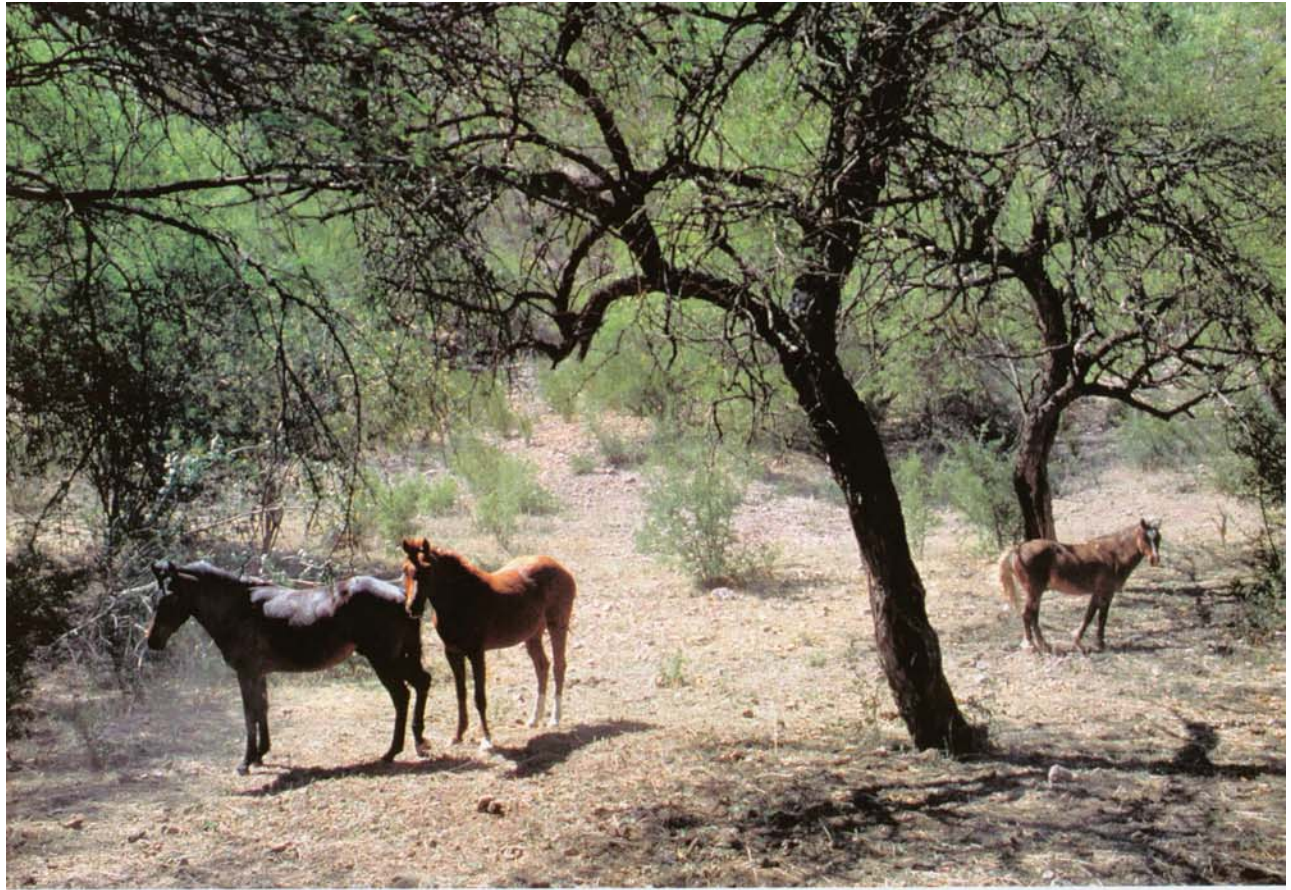
Although Rancho Esmeralda has been open for business for a while on a working-out-the-kinks basis to small groups, the reunion seemed a perfect opportunity for its owners to experience exactly how well the enterprise was operating. Rogo made the 90-minute trip down to the ranch on a Thursday to begin welcoming guests, who would continue to dribble in all day Friday. On Sunday, trips back home had to commence, but in the meantime, the extended Rodriguez family planned to take advantage of an option detailed in the Rancho Esmeralda brochure — namely to party like they owned the place. It seemed like a gathering was too good an opportunity to pass up.

Friday afternoon, when I showed up with John Ochoa and his family, lured by tales of gorgeous land and to-die-for menudo, teenagers (and several adults, who shall remain nameless) were busy propelling spuds onto a nearby hillside using a potato launcher while assembled elders, including Rogo's mother Gilda, told stories and reminisced in the shade of the large central *palapa* (outdoor pavilion). There was activity down at the horse corral, excursions into the nearby Las Planchas de Plata Canyon to the waterfalls were being planned, and the extent of available birding was being discussed. A handful

LEFT: Roberto and Dora Elda Corella, owners of the neighboring spread to Rancho Esmeralda. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Guests at Rancho Esmeralda can take advantage of horseback rides, either with or without guides, into the surrounding mountains and streams; mantilija poppies and other wildflowers cover the hillsides in warm weather; the ranch road leads through stands of oak and nut trees; ostrich are part of the extensive ranch live stock; hot tortillas off the grill are prepared for the guests at the ranch during a lunch break.







OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: The 30,000-acre spread includes mesquite bosques, as well as ocotillo forests. **OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM:** The property is crisscrossed by streams, many of which are unnamed. **BELOW:** A hand-carved fireplace graces the Great Room where panoramic windows take in mountain views.

of family members, with siestas in mind, were ambling up the staircase to the "bunkhouse" on the hillside above the primary gathering area with its ranch buildings and cluster of *palapas* — the talk and the dancing had lasted late into the previous night.

On the way to Mexico, we rode through the beautiful Santa Cruz River Valley. As we slowly gained altitude (ranch elevations are from 4,500 to 8,000 feet), John talked about the family's long history on both sides of the border. "My dad Hector says, 'We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us.' We were a ranching family. Tucson was

the nearest to-market town. It was the destination of the cattle drives. My great aunt Jesusita Suarez married Esteban Carrillo, the first mayor of Tucson. When she died, her sister married the mayor. For us, buying a ranch was returning to our roots, but we also did it for fun, as a getaway."

"We call the ranch 'the land that time forgot' because it's so beautiful," John's wife Gretchen interjects.

"It's true," John continues. "The ranch gets about 30 inches of rain a year. It's in the rain shadow of the mountains inland from the Gulf of California. We're only about 100 miles from the coast here. It's usually about 12 to 15 degrees cooler than Tucson and we get about half a dozen snows of maybe four to five inches every winter. It makes for a diverse population of plants and animals."

Because of the elevation differences, the combined ranches of the Esmeralda are home to many distinct environments. Driving in, visitors find themselves in thick ocotillo forests on hillsides, only to descend into riparian corridors of sycamores and black walnut trees. At a different river crossing, four or five species of oak are visible, while on nearby mountains pine forests rise. This area of the country forms the headwaters of the Arizona River, which flows down to Lake Cuauhtemoc and the lush valley where Father Kino established a mission at Tubutama. Early settlers who were



headed from the coast to Nogales originally blazed the trail up through Planchas de Plata, and Indian ruins can be found in other canyons.

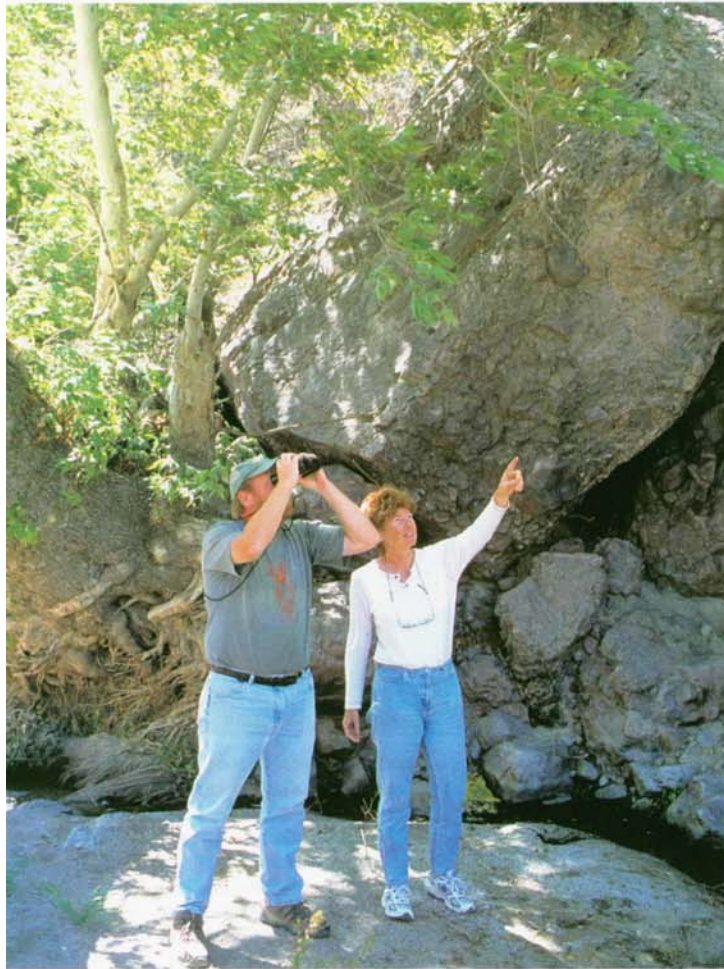
Wildlife that's been seen by ranch hands and visitors includes jaguars, pumas, bears, ocelots, coati and any number of bat species. Birding parties already have shown interest in trips to the ranch, spotting elegant trogons, eared trogons, rose-throated becard, at least three varieties of quail, vermilion flycatchers, indigo buntings and gray hawks, among others.

"Rancho Esmeralda is a group event place. Our idea is that visitors will choose from a menu of what's available," John says. "Whether you're a birding, hiking or corporate retreat group, you can have a guide or not. You can pick how strenuous your hikes will be. You could choose to do some horseback riding. We provide group meals — our cooks are from a Nogales restaurant — and happy hour appetizers with an open bar, if that's what you want."

Later, on a tour of the overnight facilities, Rogo opens the control room that operates the completely solar energy system, designed and installed by Roberto, who among various business interests sells and installs such equipment throughout Sonora.

"We're just so far off the energy grid, this was the only way," Rogo says. Solar energy also will heat the large pool,

BELOW: Larry Liese, a board member of the Tucson Audubon Society, and Pinau Merlin, author of *Guide to Southern Arizona Bird Nests and Eggs* and other natural history books, scout out birds at the ranch. Visitors have seen gray hawks, indigo buntings, elegant trogons and eared trogons, among others. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** The stream through Las Planchas de Plata Canyon runs year-round. Pioneers traveling from the Gulf of California to Nogales traversed this area.



he laughs, gesturing to a hole in the ground. "There's still work to do."

The newly constructed hotel building was designed like a European hostel, or one of a growing number of adventure camps becoming popular throughout the United States, according to Rogo. The facility is divided into male and female wings, each featuring 20 queen-size beds arranged like upper and lower berths on a passenger train. There are curtains to close off every berth and each bed has its own overhead lamp. The well-appointed group bathrooms feature individual shower stalls, with attached private dressing rooms.

Joining the two wings of the building is a large gathering space, part of which can be used as a dining room. There are wonderful views of the Avispas Mountains. A surrounding

outdoor deck wraps the building. Decorated by Roberto's wife Dora Elda Corella, the friendly spaces are colorful and filled with murals and custom woodwork. The Great Room features a carved-on-site stone fireplace, and hand-wrought metal touches. All the construction was handled by four Nogales multi-discipline artisans.

"I believe that when people really get away from their everyday lives, they loosen up a little bit," Rogo says. "You get a chance to get to know the people in your group from a different perspective."

But the call's gone out that menudo is being served at the outdoor dining *palapa* and we really must go downstairs. An enormous pot is brought over from the separate kitchen building. John, who ordered up this snack for those of us who had missed lunch, was right to take no one who said they weren't hungry at their word. Pretty soon the tables are filled, beers are handed out, steaming bowls are served, and along with the usual plates of chopped green onion, cilantro and oregano, small bowls of whole chiles tepins are passed. From them, diners select the number of chiles they want, place them between fingers covered by a napkin and crush them into their soup, getting the freshest taste while avoiding the transfer of the chiles' volatile oils to their fingers. Nice trick to know.

Next come the toasted, buttered *bolillos* (oblong rolls), preferred by this family over the tortillas usually served in restaurants with menudo. It's the only way, explains Hector, they soak up the delicious broth so much better. Here, the fresh-off-the-grill tortillas are served after the soup, wrapped around fresh Mexican white cheese, first sprinkled lightly with salt. These burritos are eaten with no other adornment at all. This was obviously the right way to eat menudo.

But my afternoon at the ranch can't last forever. For some reason that no longer makes much sense to me, I've told people I'll be back in Tucson by tonight. But there is time to take the trip up the canyon, which proves to be great fun. The falls are beautiful and not the only ones on the property. We take a different route back that deposits us on the top of the hill above the hotel for a truly grand view of mountains behind mountains off to the west. As hawks ride the breezes overhead, a vehicle pulls into the main auto court of Rancho Esmeralda. Shouts and whistles break out all around me. The Dallas contingent — the final stragglers — have finally arrived. The party is about to get serious. **TEAM**

