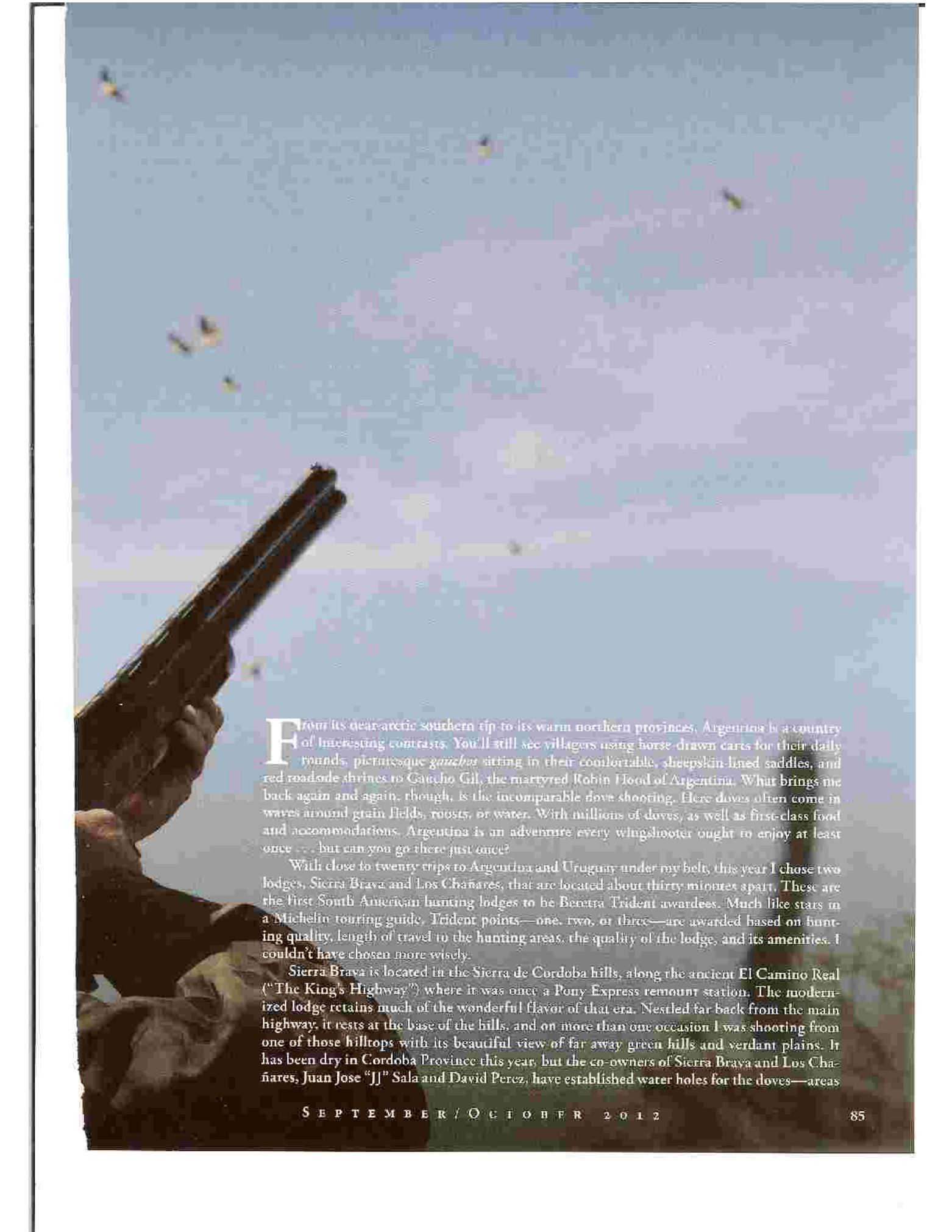


A man with a mustache, wearing a green baseball cap with 'sportsfield.com' on the back and a dark jacket, is shown from the chest up, looking out over a vast, hazy landscape. The background is a clear blue sky with some bare tree branches in the upper left corner.

# VIVA ARGENTINA!

A VISIT TO TWO HIGH-END  
LODGES IN THE DOVE PARADISE  
OF CORDOBA.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN M. TAYLOR



**F**rom its near-arctic southern tip to its warm northern provinces, Argentina is a country of interesting contrasts. You'll still see villagers using horse-drawn carts for their daily rounds, picturesque *gauchos* sitting in their comfortable, sheepskin-lined saddles, and red roadside shrines to Gaucho Gil, the martyred Robin Hood of Argentina. What brings me back again and again, though, is the incomparable dove shooting. Here doves often come in waves around grain fields, roosts, or water. With millions of doves, as well as first-class food and accommodations, Argentina is an adventure every wingshooter ought to enjoy at least once . . . but can you go there just once?

With close to twenty trips to Argentina and Uruguay under my belt, this year I chose two lodges, Sierra Brava and Los Chañares, that are located about thirty minutes apart. These are the first South American hunting lodges to be Benetta Trident awardees. Much like stars in a Michelin touring guide, Trident points—one, two, or three—are awarded based on hunting quality, length of travel to the hunting areas, the quality of the lodge, and its amenities. I couldn't have chosen more wisely.

Sierra Brava is located in the Sierra de Córdoba hills, along the ancient El Camino Real ("The King's Highway") where it was once a Pony Express remount station. The modernized lodge retains much of the wonderful flavor of that era. Nestled far back from the main highway, it rests at the base of the hills, and on more than one occasion I was shooting from one of those hilltops with its beautiful view of far away green hills and verdant plains. It has been dry in Córdoba Province this year, but the co-owners of Sierra Brava and Los Chañares, Juan Jose "JJ" Sala and David Perez, have established water holes for the doves—areas

that are not shot or disturbed. Because of the management of the birds and abundant nesting cover, it is estimated that more than 30 million doves roost and nest in the immediate area of the two lodges.

The eared dove, indigenous to Cordoba Province, very closely resembles our mourning dove. You almost need to have one of each in hand to differentiate the two species. Like their northern cousins, they provide all the challenging shooting one can imagine. Eared doves begin reproducing at three months of age, and they nest between two to four times a year; do the math, and there is little mystery as to why there are always mobs of doves in Cordoba. Due to the preponderance of good nesting and roosting cover in the great Macha Roost, Sierra Brava and Los Chañares share an immense concentration of birds.

Crucial to the doves' prolific nesting success are the massive tangles of acacia-thorn trees in the region. Called wait-a-bit thorns in Africa, they are also indigenous to many parts of Texas. Covered with thorns measuring over an inch in length with a hooked barb at the end, it's no wonder that predators have great difficulty in raiding nests and ambushing mature birds. How the doves flit in and out of these thorn thickets is truly amazing. Add to this the abundant farm fields—recently harvested of their bounty of corn or maize, soybeans, milo, and other crops—and one need not be a Rhodes Scholar to

understand why doves love it there. It's the "perfect storm" of dove breeding, feeding, roosting, and shooting.

I arrived in Cordoba on the afternoon flight, but without my shotgun, which remained in Santiago, Chile, where I had changed from American Airlines to the local airline, Lan Chile, for the short hop over the Andes. New regulations require that a Chilean army or police official check your shotguns against your U.S. Customs form 4457. If the serial numbers match, all is well. However, Lan Chile personnel waited until my Cordoba-bound flight had boarded to take me for the firearm inspection, and my guns were left on the tarmac. It's too bad that one must use Lan Chile airlines, as this was simply indifference on the part of this airline since I had been on the ground in Santiago for more than five hours. Hence I missed a half-day's shooting, as I had to return to the airport the following morning to retrieve my gun.

The van chugged up the hill, first dropping off three fellows from Texas who had come in on the morning flight with my shotgun. I followed Eduardo Sartoreli, Sierra Brava's chief guide, who led me up a cartle trail through the thorn-trees until we crested a ridge. Before me was a deep valley, and on my right and left were vast plains with mountains rising in the far distance. Even though the sun had not crested the hill, doves were already zipping by.

It was chilly—cold by Argentine standards—that morning; so cold that the water pipes that ran across the lodge's



*The father-and-son team of Howard and Bret Johnson on their second afternoon of dove shooting at Los Chañares.*

roof to my room were frozen. The sun made short work of thawing them, but the early morning was still nippy. However, once the sun crested the hills, it was shirt-sleeve weather, despite the fact that my field assistant George and Eduardo looked slightly chilled in their fully zipped down vests. Every time I have been in Argentina, the weather has always been mild. Even on chilly, rainy days, the doves fly.

All too soon, my watch registered noon and we headed down the hill to the truck. Zigzagging down the hilly road, we soon rendezvoused with my new Texas friends, three college buddies who were enjoying their first Argentine hunt. Spread among a grove of trees was a dining fly, several hammocks, and a cooking fire being attended by Sierra Brava's chef, Daniel Zeballos. French trained and wooed from a five-star restaurant in Cordoba, he provided excellent cuisine for my entire stay. But right now, it was excellent Argentine beef and sausage, pork roast, delicately dressed salad of fresh greens and tomatoes, and of course an irresistible dessert. Following the feast the hammocks beckoned, and soon my nap was interrupted with the call for more shooting.

I like to see my birds coming toward me, and when I mentioned this to Eduardo, he set me up on one side of a shallow valley that opened broadly onto the plains and distant hills. As soon as I began shooting, the dinner bell rang for the eagles, which began circling and landing. At one point I had twenty eagles perched around my location.

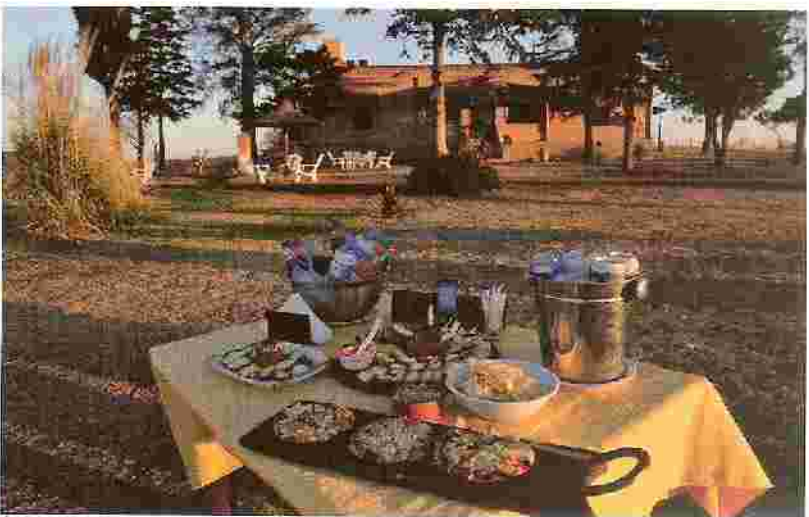
Doves came from every point on the compass, providing the very best shooting school in the world. I took turns shooting ten on the right, ten overhead, and ten on the left. I was shooting my Blaser F3 fitted with an EZ-Coil recoil-reducing stock and my 32-inch 20-gauge barrels. I thought they might be a little long for prolonged shooting, especially with their extended Briley choke tubes, but the combination served me very well. The F3 is a highly reliable and ruggedly built shotgun; this was its second trip south with thousands of rounds in between, and it gave new-from-the-box performance. My new friends from Texas were com-



*The palatial grounds of Los Chañares. At this lodge, great dove shooting is possible only a few yards from the inviting pool!*



*The pool and main lodge at Sierra Brava. The lodge was originally a remount station for the Argentine Pony Express; it has been updated and modernized.*



*Delicious hors d'oeuvres were served in front of the lodge following a day in the field.*



The author stands with several doves and a scenic vista of agricultural plains in the background.

menting on their bruised shoulders, but with Ney's stock, it was as if I hadn't fired a shot.

Thirty minutes from Sierra Brava lies the classic Los Chañares lodge and its vast roost. With dove roosts covering 11,000 acres right around the lodge, Los Chañares boasts the shortest drives to shooting of just about any Argentine lodge. I've ridden nearly an hour and a half to get to the birds at other operations, but if you choose, you can walk out the front door of Los Chañares and have a great shoot. As a well-managed wildlife operation, the lodge maintains 3,000 of the 11,000 acres as a nesting sanctuary that is never disturbed by shooting, and whenever possible not even entered with vehicles.

Alex Mitri runs the operation, and following lunch one noon he gave me a tour of the area. Because of the combination of hilly terrain and flat agricultural fields, hunters at Los Chañares can request almost any kind of bird presentation they wish. Mitri pointed out an area that resembled a bit of the English countryside and said, "Here's where some of our British customers like to shoot . . . it's very much like their driven pheasant shooting at home."

Mitri came to Los Chañares from a dove operation in Paraguay and his own family's hunting operation in Bolivia. As we headed to another section of the property, Mitri said, "We have many, many places to shoot; those for high birds, low birds, high-volume opportunities, we can accommodate about any hunter's wish."

As we neared the lodge, Mitri pulled alongside a shaggy-barked tree. "That's a Chañares tree, for which the *estancia* was

## Trip Planner

**Travel:** Be sure your passport is up to date and not due to expire for six months beyond your return. I worked my travel through Brigitte Caston (800/826-9826, ext. 231), who went to extra lengths to ensure I had good seats, and that everything went smoothly. She even emailed me during my trip to relay minor schedule changes . . . that's real service.

There are two ways to get to Córdoba: through Santiago, Chile, or through Buenos Aires, Argentina. Neither is easy. If you fly to Buenos Aires, you must transfer between airports that are on the opposite sides of town and be prepared to pay for excess baggage on the domestic airlines.

Time was when it was best to fly through Santiago, as it is a short flight from there to Córdoba. However, Chile has now instituted a regulation that all firearms must be checked in and out of the country by an official before they can be transferred to incoming and outgoing flights. At that point it is essential you have your U.S. Customs form 4457 or a copy of it in hand, so they can check the serial numbers. Without that document, there's no telling what would happen: Be prepared!

**Licenses and Permits:** License and gun permit fees are included in the overall trip price. I was charged \$75 to bring my shotgun into Argentina; the dollar amount varies depending on the exchange rate. Note: If you bring an extra barrel of a different gauge, they charge it the same as another shotgun. Lodges typically charge \$65 per day to rent guns.

**Guns for Argentina:** A 20-gauge is perfect; take a 28 if you don't mind paying a couple of dollars extra per box for shells. On this trip I took only my 20-gauge Blaser F3 with an EZ Coil stock installed by Bruce Ney's The Stock Market (302/242-3402). I shot Argentine manufactured ammunition throughout the trip—No. 7 and No. 8 shot—and found the ammunition on a par with U.S.-loaded shells. Briley improved-light modified (.015), improved modified (.025), and full (.030) chokes were my choice for the long birds. Currently, outfitters in Argentina charge \$14 a box for 12- and 20-gauge shells. Twenty-eight-gauge and .410 shells are \$16 a box. It is illegal to bring your own ammunition.

**Clothing:** Córdoba's winter climate, with few exceptions, is mild during hunting season. Temperatures run from the low 50s to mid-60s. L.I. Bean's Tactical Upland Boots were perfect; camo trousers or jeans and shirts, a Beretta Wind Barrier Long Zip sweater, a hat or cap, and a rain suit just in case, was all I needed. A pair of high-quality gloves such as Beretta's Trident Competition are essential. Sierra Brava and Los Chañares have daily laundry service, so don't overpack.


**Tipping:** Guides work very hard to ensure your hunt is a success, and a tip of \$50 a day is both appreciated and expected. In addition, it is customary to tip the household staff \$50 a day, as well as any others who made your trip special. —J.M.T.

named. It continually loses its bark. These trees grow all over the property."

I was joined at Los Chañares by Howard Johnson, a retired engineer and surveyor, and his son, Bret, a Wyoming deputy sheriff. I chose to shoot high birds, and the Johnsons were out for high-volume shooting: a thousand or more birds a day. Although we were positioned only about 100 yards apart, the shooting was tailor-made for our wishes. I had an open area in front and to both sides where I could shoot birds coming from the right, left, and overhead. The Johnsons were set up on a cattle trail with a slight berm in front of them. Their birds streaked in front of them at close range, offering mostly right-to-left chances. The father and son needed each other about their misses in the true tradition of shooting and hunting, and had the time of their lives.

The Johnsons chose to rent the lodge's Beretta 20-gauge 391s—not a bad idea, considering my gun-import problem with Lan Chile. Because they wanted to shoot a large number of birds, they also chose to use two guns each so that one was being loaded as they gleefully emptied the other at passing doves. Their loaders took five rounds in their hands and transferred them to each chamber and magazine with amazing speed. Of course, the guide keeps your shotgun or shell pouch loaded at all times, as the ammunition bill represents a good portion of the outfitter's profit.

This trip was particularly enjoyable because of the charm of the two lodges. Los Chañares had once fallen on hard times, but David Percz has put good management in place that will ensure fine hospitality and stellar shooting opportunities well into the future.

Equally, Juan José "JJ" Salas created a gem from a dilapidated pony express station when he established Sierra Brava. Good accommodations are synonymous with hunting in Argentina, and it is not difficult to understand how these two lodges have earned Beretta Tridents for their service and excellent hunting. 

For information on this hunt, contact Los Chañares at [www.loschanares.com](http://www.loschanares.com) or 800/281-2717; Sierra Brava lodge at [www.sierrabrava.com](http://www.sierrabrava.com) or 888/627-4541; or [www.berettaident.com](http://www.berettaident.com).

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