

## SOUTH AMERICAN ROMANCE

### STAYING IN ONE OF ARGENTINA'S HISTORIC ESTANCIAS



*Text by Jonathan Kandell  
Photography by Tuca Reinés*

**W**AKING UP IN ACELAÍN, ARGUABLY Argentina's finest estancia, or rural estate, can be a dreamlike, disorienting experience. This is supposed to be the pampa, the fertile grasslands where steers roam without fences and grain fields stretch across a monotonously flat countryside. Yet, instead of the bellowing of cattle, the first sounds of dawn are the butting horns of stags competing for the affection of does. A sleepy-eyed view through the upper-story windows unveils what could be a Moorish landscape in southern Spain. Reflecting pools border the stone steps that lead down to expansive rolling lawns. Just beyond, thousands of stately palms, cypresses, pines and oaks hide the horizontal terrain. The famous grasslands then become visible. But in the far distance, the purplish Azul Mountains—among the most ancient geological formations on earth—lend a finishing touch to this most decidedly un-pampa tableau.

Acelaín (pronounced ah-ze-LAH-  
*continued on page 58*)

Acelaín, one of Argentina's great estancias, now accepts overnight guests. ABOVE: Author Enrique Larreta commissioned the Mozarabic-style house in 1924.

BELOW: Influences of 16th- and 17th-century Spain are evident in the main hall's art and heavy furniture. The lectern, in foreground, holds a book of poems by Larreta.



## SOUTH AMERICAN ROMANCE

*continued from page 56*

een) is the creation of Enrique Larreta, who died in 1961 at the age of eighty-eight. He was one of the wealthiest estancieros—cattle and grain barons—in the golden age of estancieros (1880–1930), when “rich as an Argentine” was a phrase that echoed in London, Paris and New York. Like hundreds of other estancieros, Larreta could afford to spend a good deal of his life in Europe’s high-society drawing rooms and nightclubs—in his case, almost fourteen years. And like them, he returned to Argentina determined to transform his share of the dull pampa into a romantic European landscape.

The Argentine countryside is dotted with replicas of English manors, French châteaux and Italian palazzi, surrounded by enormous private parks planted with trees brought over from Europe. But for all their sumptuousness, most of these estancia houses tend to have the aura of a Hollywood set: impressive façades with rather pedestrian architectural details. What makes Acelaín so unique is its embodiment of the founder’s peculiar tastes, passions and quirks. Its Mozarabic style—an imaginative blend of



**ABOVE RIGHT:** The dining room, which features a vaulted ceiling and a bold black-and-white marble floor, is furnished with a center oak table, monastery chairs and wrought iron chandeliers.

**RIGHT:** Volumes from Spain fill the library’s elaborate gilt bookcase. A pair of antique silver stirrups and a lectern with a photograph of Alfonso XIII, who was a friend of Larreta’s, rest on the 17th-century table.



Moorish and medieval Spanish elements—holds up in all the outer architecture, interior design and landscaping.

Acelaín was conceived during Larreta’s two-year honeymoon in Andalusia in the early 1900s (wealth could stretch out romance back then). There he discovered the delights of Granada’s Alhambra palace and Generalife Gardens, as well as the churches of Seville and Córdoba. A prolific author, he quickly penned his masterpiece, *The Glory of Don Ramiro*, a novel set in sixteenth-century Spain about the son of a Moorish father and a Spanish noblewoman, in which Larreta attempted to reconcile Spain’s Catholic and Muslim cultures. “There’s no question that my grandfather’s book became his inspiration for Acelaín,” says Santiago Zuberbühler, who, along with his brother and sister, is an heir to the estancia.

Larreta first searched for a setting that could plausibly evoke the Andalusian countryside. He found it in a thirty-thousand-acre spread, which was mostly the dowry of his wife, Josefina de

*continued on page 60*

## SOUTH AMERICAN ROMANCE



FAR LEFT: A silver votive lamp illuminates Larreta's bedroom, among 18 available to guests. LEFT: High stone walls enclose the Acequia garden, whose layout was inspired by Granada's Generalife Gardens.

BELOW: Acelaín sits on a promontory overlooking the woodlands. Larreta designed the perspective and the layout of the cypresses, oaks, palms and pines.

*continued from page 58*

Anchorena, near the town of Tandil, some two hundred and thirty miles south of Buenos Aires. Larreta chose a rocky promontory, unusual for the flat pampa, on which to build the estancia house and named it Acelaín, which means "rock on the plain" in the Basque language of his ancestors. The four-story mansion was designed by Martin Noel, a leading Argentine architect, and completed in 1924. Its whitewashed façade has mainly large, iron-grilled windows on the lower two floors, while arched windows predominate on the top levels. But the residence can also be approached from two angles at the rear. On one side, in a Moorish flavor, there is a green-tiled, domed tower, with walls of brick and inlaid mosaics. Another rear view displays stone arches and flying buttresses that recall medieval Christian architecture. Terracotta tiles cover the roof, which is lined with heavy oak eaves. The adjoining chapel, spacious enough to pass for a parish church, combines a Catholic belfry with narrow, Islamic-style window slits.

Bicultural themes imbue the interior design as well. Acelaín's main reception rooms are decorated in the austere manner typical of Spain in the 1500s: coats of arms and portraits of nobility on the

*continued on page 62*



## SOUTH AMERICAN ROMANCE

*continued from page 60*

walls; religious sculptures of polychrome wood; and stiff oak pieces aptly dubbed "monk's chairs." But the connection salon exudes a Middle Eastern sensuality, with a Turkish-style pillowed sofa in an alcove and Spanish carpets on a red tile floor inlaid with blue mosaic. In a corner, a secret staircase descends into a cellar, where Larreta built an Ali Baba cave for his grandchildren: A life-size papier-mâché-and-cloth figure of a Moor wielding a scimitar guards several urns filled with fake gold coins and jewelry.

His grandfather's cave was scary fun, recalls the sixty-seven-year-old Zuberbühler, who spent his childhood weekends and vacations at Acelaín. But the mansion's real treasures—a collection of Spanish furniture and art from the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries—could be even more intimidating for a youngster. "I could hardly wait to run outside to play," he says.

The outdoor pleasures of Acelaín offer irresistible attraction for anybody, child or adult. The woodlands originally planted under Larreta's direction extend over a thousand acres and are populated with hundreds of fallow deer imported from Europe decades ago. More than one

probably account for the total absence of native tree species. In 1984 and again in 1990, gales blew down large portions of Acelaín's forest and destroyed much of its gardens. It was Zuberbühler's wife, Carmen Mendez de Zuberbühler, an accomplished horticulturist, who, after both catastrophes, planted irises, begonias, peonies, roses and dahlias around the reflecting pools and in outlying plots.

Over the last two years Acelaín has welcomed paying guests to help defray the enormous cost of its maintenance. Up to thirty-four visitors can be accommodated in the eighteen bedrooms. Some are deer hunters or polo players, who are taken in tow by Gonzalo Llambí, Larreta's great-grandson. But most guests prefer leisurely walks, time alone perusing the artworks, or meals prepared by the resident Argentine chef and served in the sunlit dining room overlooking the woods, lake, pampa and mountains.

Long before paying visitors began to arrive, Acelaín hosted state guests from abroad. Henry Kissinger and his wife, Nancy, stayed there during the seventies, when Argentina was coping with terrorism. "We dressed a hundred security guards as gauchos," says Zuberbühler.

## Larreta returned to Argentina determined to transform his share of the dull pampa into a romantic European landscape.

hundred and twenty winged species make the private park a birder's delight. An artificial one-hundred-and-seventy-acre lake, fed by a wide stream and springs, invites swimmers and *pegerrey* anglers. There are two polo fields, one for practice, the other for matches. Horse trails lead through the woods and the fifteen thousand acres of grain fields and cattle-grazing lands. In a clearing near the lake, there is a replica of a village—with buildings in several rural Spanish architectural styles from past centuries—where estancia employees live and carry out repair work.

Landscape maintenance is especially costly on the pampa, where the strong winds sweeping up from Antarctica

"But it didn't fool Kissinger." A decade earlier the crown prince Akihito, now emperor of Japan, and his wife, Michiko, spent several days at Acelaín with their entourage. Akihito, an avid botanist, would wander through the gardens shortly before dawn, forcing Carmen Mendez to quickly dress and rush down to answer his question on flower species. "His English was quite good," she recalls. "But we spoke mainly in Latin"—still the international language of horticulture. □

*For more information, contact Carmen Mendez de Zuberbühler, Estancia Acelaín, Tandil, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Telephone and fax number is 54-293-91125.*