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**W**E ALL KNOW that to follow and be involved in horseracing a true passion for the sport is needed, but it seems the people of Uruguay have taken their ardour to a different level.

After all, where in the world would you find a people that stubbornly continues to race its horses on a track that is officially closed and with absolutely no prize-money to be earned – and have been doing so not just for a couple of weeks, but for five years?

“What were we supposed to do with our horses?” came the astonished reply when asked what on earth had possessed them to carry on as if nothing had changed.

Luckily for the Uruguayan people, who share their country with horses to such an extent that in the Rough Guide to South America, riding in Uruguay is not listed as a sport but as a way of life, the beautiful racecourse in the capital of Montevideo where horses had raced since 1889 did not remain closed.

In fact, five years after its closure in December 1997, following the demise of the country’s Jockey Club, it was re-opened in 2003 by Maronas Entertainment, a private consortium.

Today, out of the ruins that were declared a national monument, Hipódromo Nacional de



**Gauchos: the outriders at Maroñas for the 1m4f Grade 1 Gran Premio José Pedro Ramirez**

Maroñas has risen to become one of the most modern and well-organised racecourses of South America.

Because of the favourable climate in Uruguay – very much like Europe but without the snow and the wet – there is a race meeting on every Saturday or Sunday of the year.

The biggest crowd comes to Maronas on January 6 when the Group 1 Gran Premio José Pedro Ramirez, the highlight of the

Uruguayan racing calendar, takes place. This year, nearly 18,000 people flocked through the gates to watch 17 races before the locally trained Imperrito, by Robin des Pins out of Jovem Rafaela, won the “Ramirez”.

And the day, or by that time the evening, was far from over, as another four races were on the card before the meeting finally came to an end at 11pm.

It takes some stamina to watch 22 races, let alone ride in them. South American

#### The silks room



#### Going to the races at the revamped Maronas



#### Jockeys at the start of the Ramirez





Many of the Uruguain-bred thoroughbreds are descendants from old English and Irish families

jockeys though are tough and, on closer inspection of the day's race card, it came as no surprise that two had actually ridden in 18 races.

Uruguay doesn't have a jockeys' school, but seeing that many of the jockeys learn to ride at an early age, they quickly understand what is expected of them on the track. And riding at Maronas couldn't be easier, as the left-handed, wide sweeping level sand track holds very few pitfalls.

The 23-year-old Uruguayan jockey Yair Pereira has ridden at Maronas for five years.

"It is a great track to ride on, as it is very fair," he confirms. As to participating in 18 races, he smiles and adds: "You get used to it. But actually, usually we have between 10 and 12 races a day. The Gran Premio José Pedro Ramirez is an exception. So it's not as hard as it seems."

Horses are trained mainly on the racecourse, although some of them are also trained in private training centres outside the capital. About 1,800 thoroughbreds run in Uruguay and since 2013 a handful of Purebred Arabians have joined them. One of the most famous horses ever to have run at Maronas was the Argentine-bred Invasor. He won three Grade 1 races at the track, and then a further five Grade 1 races after transferring to North America once in the ownership of

Sheikh Hamdan Al Maktoum, before he lifted the 2007 Dubai World Cup.

The story of Invasor, who was unbeaten at Maronas before he changed ownership and left for America still makes the rounds at the dinner tables in Uruguay. Everyone is incredible proud that such a famous horse started his career in a country that has only 3.3 million inhabitants who populate an area

of approximately 176,000 square kilometres, making it the second-smallest nation of South America.

But it is not the quantity of ground, but the quality that counts. Uruguay is mainly flat with some elevations in the north-east and because of the mild climate and very good soil, it is able to produce grassland that doesn't only favour its cattle, but also the thoroughbred industry.

Most of the horses that run in Uruguay today are descendants from South American stallions, while old English and Irish families can be found on many of the dams' pedigrees.

Juan Manuel Burgueno, a member of the board of Maronas, explains: "Today we are looking to improve the thoroughbred in Uruguay. In the past and more so today, we are importing stallions from the US, Europe and Argentina.

"For example, Smarty Jones, winner of the

“Gerard is always on the look out for buying opportunities and feels that it makes sense to spread the risk



The climate in Uruguay is perfect for rearing bloodstock

2004 Kentucky Derby, shuttles to Uruguay. We also have Awzaan, winner of the 2009 Shadwell Middle Park Stakes, who now stands at the Haras Cuadro Piedras, which is one of our most modern studs in Uruguay. In the future we also want to improve the broodmare band by importing some fresh blood.”

Horses in Uruguay are generally bred in the hope of producing the next “Ramirez” winner. The Grade 1 race, which is worth about £100,000 and run over 1m4f, is often won by Argentine-trained horses, which have travelled for the day to plunder Uruguay’s biggest prize.

This year, though, the big race was won by the three-year-old Imperrito, who was bred by Haras Don Alfredo, found a couple of hours’ drive from Montevideo in the department of San Jose.

The farm is steeped in history and its land has been graced by thoroughbreds for over 70 years. So it is not a big surprise that it is still quintessentially traditional.

The 250 mares and their foals roam over 700 hectares of prime land and are still reined in by gauchos, the original cowboys who continue to hold a symbolic role of independence, loyalty and courage to many fervent nationalists in Uruguay.

Stallions include Uruguay’s top producer Asidero, a son of Fadeyev out of Lady Aspasia, who stands at about £1,600.

The bloodstock industry seems very healthy at present and Marcello Graglia, the general manager of Haras Don Alfredo, confirms: “The breeding industry has gained in strength over the last few years. We have had some very bad times in the past. In fact, there was a time when only 800 foals were born in a year, but now there are about 1,800 foals born annually.

“I think that, thanks to global communication, strong stud books and the regulation of racing, the breeding industry is once again growing. Now everyone wants to win a race such as the Derby or the Ramirez and you need good horses for that.”

Graglia certainly knows what he is talking about, as Haras Don Alfredo has produced no less than four Ramirez winners. “Most of our races are over the 5f, 6f and 7f distance,” he says, “but of our three stallions only one of them is a speed specialist. We are working more and more towards even greater stamina in our bloodlines. However, it all takes time.”

The breeding sector in Uruguay is in rude



**Around 1,800 foals are bred annually in Uruguay**

health, just like the rest of the industry that directly or indirectly employs more than 60,000 people. Juan Manuel Burgueno concludes: “Our prize-money increased by 30 per cent in 2012.

But we don’t just want to attract the punters, but also families. That is why on a day like the Ramirez, we put up a whole show with concerts, fireworks and playgrounds for

the kids. You mustn’t forget that the youth of today is tomorrow’s owner, trainer or jockey.”

Uruguay seems to have racing’s financial affairs firmly in hand. There are no bookmakers and racing is mainly financed via the casino takings and the local tote.

Betting turnover for the Ramirez was over than \$1.5 million and while the racing industry wishes the government would be a little bit more generous with its handouts back into the sport, it is one of the healthiest industries on the South American continent.

Naturally not everything is perfect and there is always a need for better horses and more prize-money. But the passion in the truest sense of the word is what stays with you when you visit Maronas.

The enthusiasm of the Uruguayan people knows no bounds and even though cab drivers are only interested in finding out if you are from Manchester or Chelsea, in the vague hope that you might personally know Sir Alex Ferguson or Frank Lampard, the general public just loves its horses.

So for some real horseracing passion, forget Cheltenham, Royal Ascot or the Epsom Derby, but make your way to Uruguay where it is not just about horses during one meeting, but on every day of the year! ■

**At Haras Don Alfredo the 250 mares and followers are rounded up the gauchos on horse back**

