

The ITALIAN COWBOYS *of Tuscany*



Jessica Morton goes cattle herding in Tuscany with the iconic butteri

IMAGES BY JESSICA MORTON



FROM BELOW LEFT
The long-horned cattle are symbolic of the Maremma region, and are traditionally tended by the butteri. The Italian 'cowboys' ride with one hand on the reins, and use a tool called an uncino for many different tasks, including opening gates and directing the cattle



A wild land

Famed Italian poet Dante described the Maremma as a place where "the brute Harpies make their nest".

In Dante's time, the Maremma was an inhospitable marsh, rife with malaria. Ottoman pirates raided from the coast, while feudal lords tore the land apart from the inside.

Virtually deserted during the Middle Ages, for a long time the land did little more than endure.

The Ombrone river flooded the marshes and malaria became an endemic killer. In fact, the word malaria comes from the Italian words mal and aria, or 'bad air'. It was originally thought that the disease came from vapours in the Maremma swamps.

The only people that managed to survive in this hostile land were those with nothing to lose. Brigands, poachers and ex-mercenaries drifted to the area, using their horsemanship skills to earn their keep. They were soon known as butteri, a term that comes from the Ancient Greek term 'botér', meaning 'herdsman'.

To Dante, the Maremma was a crude and desolate landscape. Today, things are very different.

During the fascist regime, Mussolini successfully drained the swamps of the Maremma and eradicated over 2000 years of malaria.

Unfortunately, the re-population and land reclamation act put the local cattle at risk of extinction by taking away their natural habitat. Without cattle to herd, the butteri lifestyle was also threatened.

Today, only a handful of butteri are left in the Maremma. Many are utilising

tourism and sustainable farming to ensure that their culture and traditions do not die out forever.

With Italy leading the worldwide trend for traceable meat and slow food, the Maremmata cattle are no longer in danger of extinction. Supporters maintain that their beef comes from happier, healthier cattle than commercially-farmed alternatives.

Riding Maremmano horses with the butteri is a wonderful way to discover Tuscan ranching traditions here in the wild Maremma, whilst sustaining them at the same time.

The butteri today

The Azienda Agricola di Alberese is a state-owned property located in the Maremma national park. Protected by the Tuscan Regional Government, the last teams of Italian cowboys raise horses and long-horned cattle over 5000 hectares of wild countryside.

We arrive at the parking lot of the Azienda as the sun begins to rise. Four

butteri are preparing the horses for the morning work.

The butteri use two types of saddle: the treeless Bardella, and the Italian military saddle known as the Scafarda, which became popular after World War II. It is heavy, weighing around 18kg, and has large panels stuffed with horsehair to distribute the rider's weight evenly on the horse's back. It's also comfortable and well-padded, with rolls in front of the leg to hold the rider in a firm position when chasing down cattle.

Stefano Pavi has soft blue eyes and a kind smile. He has the weathered hands of a real cowboy and has worked as a buttero for over 30 years. He walks me over to meet Nobile, a compact 15hh Maremmano horse that was raised here on the property. He tells me that I should always hold the reins with one hand and keep a loose contact.

The butteri ride their horses with one hand, and in the other hand carry a long thin wooden stick with a hook on one end and fork on the other, called an

uncino. This ancient tool is utilized for many different tasks such as opening and closing gates, directing cattle and training young horses.

We set off through the stockyards, meeting the first herd of long-horned cattle that are to be moved to a different pasture. The butteri position us on the road to stop any cattle escaping and slowly drive the herd from behind, whistling and yelling.

"We need to cover a huge area of land here. Cattle are roaming big areas and some of them are very rough. We need horses to get into those areas to find the cattle. You couldn't get in there any other way," Stefano says.

Challenges of cattle farming

Two wild boars shoot out in front of us and run off through the thicket. The horses are undisturbed.

The Maremma is famous for its wildlife. Typical fauna includes deer, badgers, hares and foxes. Bigger animals such as boars and wolves are also present. Even more dangerous are the wolf-hybrids roaming the woodlands. "This winter we lost three steers," Stefano says.

Our next task is to find a herd of cattle hiding somewhere in an enormous pasture next to the Ombrone river mouth. Laurel, myrtle and juniper scrub create a strange orange-tinted underbrush.

We spread out in a line to cover as much ground as possible. Stefano waits with his horse by the gate, ready to open it for the cattle once we find them.

"The horse can hear and see so much better than us," fellow buttero Alessio explains. "When we're trying to find



Two animals are symbolic of the Maremma region of Tuscany, Italy: long-horned bulls and powerful bay horses.

Unlike the rest of Tuscany, this wild region remains a land full of legends. Local herdsmen, known as butteri, have tended the cattle on these marshes since ancient Etruscan times. The cattle roam free on the wide-open ranges, rocky slopes and orange-coloured swamps.

The history of this land is linked to an indisputable spirit of survival, and the butteri are representative of this struggle.

Wearing white shirts, vests, moleskin trousers and distinctive felt hats, these iconic horsemen step out of the realm of legend into real life on the last working ranches of the Maremma. Intrepid equestrians can spend a morning rounding up cattle and discovering their intimate and little-known traditions.

THE MAREMMA CATTLE

The long-horned cattle of the Maremma are one of the oldest breeds in the world. Archeological digs around Vetulonia and Caere prove that they are descendants of cattle brought to Italy from Turkey by the Etruscans. They are robust, rustic cattle that cannot be kept in any stockyard. Resistant to the harshest of climates and geography, they have always

thrived in the Maremma.

Unlike the way beef cattle are raised and kept in many countries around the world today, the Maremma cattle roam the grasslands free in herds, with very little stress and a completely natural diet.

As we ride past, I admire their glossy, healthy coats and the spark they have in their eyes. These are happy cattle.





ABOVE AND RIGHT The butteri's saddles are well-padded and heavy, but are comfortable for both horse and rider. FAR RIGHT The author and her mount Nobile



AN ANCIENT HORSE

Maremmano horses trained and raised by the butteri are still held in very high esteem, both around Italy and internationally. Some of the yearlings we see grazing on the property will be sold to private buyers. Others will go on to become work horses.

The Maremmano horse is relatively rare, with less than 3000 individuals registered in Italy. Descendants of Eurasian horses that the Etruscans brought to Italy from the Asiatic steppes, horses bred from this region have been sought-after since the first chariot horses won against the ancient Greeks. The small-headed and fine-boned horses were later mixed with Spanish, Neapolitan and Arabian bloodlines to produce the hardy workhorses we see today.

cattle, it's usually the horse's ears that point at something in the bush, and we look to see where he's looking."

We ride quietly, noticing any movement or shadows that may indicate the missing herd. Alessio's horse notices movement in the distance, and he and another buttero, Luca, ride their horses in the direction of what turns out to be the elusive group.

For an instant, everything seems too easy. The cattle stand and appear to be taking their cue to move in the direction

steers have taken to the undergrowth. He urges his horse into the scrub to find them. We hear yelling, cursing. A grunt followed by a crash, and a bewildered steer emerges.

"Over here", yells Luca. He indicates where I should position my horse with his hand. Then we wait...

Eventually, the other cattle are chased out of the bushes and run back to the rest of the herd. Alessio emerges from the undergrowth and we start driving the group towards Stefano.

"The horses' intuition keeps us from getting hurt. They know when to worry."

of the gate. Unexpectedly one stops, pauses, then makes a break to the right and begins to run. The rest of the herd follow.

The butteri charge forward towards the bolting cattle, yelling at us to move FAST!

Nobile and I are on the far end of the line. Up until now, he has been steady as a rock. As soon as the cows run, he flicks into cowpony mode. Although the terrain is full of ditches and thick scrub, he doesn't break his stride once.

We manage to get behind the cattle and Alessio calls to us to stay still. Three

Once the cattle are moved out of the field, we drive them past the estuary to another pasture. Due to the narrow trail on top of a steep bank, we are required to ride in a line. Occasionally, one of the cattle will try and run down to the river mouth, requiring one of us to duck out of line, ride down, round up the rebellious individual and get back up on the bank. One repeat bovine offender is enjoying the game a little too much. Horses are patient and relaxed about having cattle so close behind them. "The horses' intuition keeps us from getting hurt. They know

ADDITIONAL IMAGES: ALAMY



when to worry, and when to relax," Stefano says.

When we arrive at the paddock, the cattle are split and sent into separate fields. The butteri are excellent horsemen and efficient cow handlers. The agile and quick-thinking Maremmano horses show as much cow-sense as any quarter horse. In fact, one story goes that in 1890 when US showman Buffalo Bill took his Wild West company to Italy, the butteri were unimpressed. They challenged his team of

cowboys to a contest of skill and allegedly beat the Buffalo Bill troupe in a horsemanship challenge in front of more than 20,000 spectators.

Back at the stockyards, we untack the horses. The butteri don't lead them out to pasture. They simply open the gate over the road and let the horses take themselves out.

These horses seem to genuinely enjoy what they do, and it is a pleasure to watch them as they roll in the grass. ■



RIDE DETAILS

If you would like to ride a Maremmano horse with the butteri in Tuscany, contact Azienda Regionale Agricola di Alberese at www.alberese.com.

Only experienced riders are permitted to take part, and good fitness is important as the ride lasts around four hours.





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