

Bus, plane... and horseback: How the Foreign Office helped a British traveller return home

- Nineteen year old traveller from Eastbourne headed for home on horseback after being stranded on a Patagonian ranch the size of the Isle of Wight after a lockdown was introduced.
- Foreign Office meticulously planned her epic journey using all means of transport available.

A British tourist found herself at the centre of an epic journey home by bus, plane, taxi and horseback after being stranded in an isolated ranch in Patagonia, a half day's horseback ride from the nearest road.

Annabel Symes, 19, from Eastbourne, was fulfilling the dream of a lifetime, working as a volunteer hosting tourists at the 100,000 acre Estancia Ranquilco.

The isolated horse and cattle ranch in Argentine Patagonia is located in the foothills of the Andes more than 1,000 miles from Buenos Aires.

Annabel was due to return home at the end of the summer season in early April but her flight home was cancelled when Argentina introduced swingeing travel restrictions to contain the spread of coronavirus.

Having received a call for help from Annabel, the Foreign Office organised a rescue plan involving a half-day's horseback ride to the nearest road, a nine-hour taxi journey to the nearest town and finally a 17-hour bus ride to Buenos Aires airport.

It was here that Annabel joined 200 other British travellers from every corner of Argentina on a flight home. British Embassy staff also had to negotiate travel permits with local authorities from the different regions so they could organise bus travel, book taxis and facilitate cross-country travelling.

Before undertaking her unusual journey, Annabel was growing increasingly anxious about her situation as winter began setting in.

In a region where temperatures plunge below zero, heavy snowfall would have made leaving the ranch impossible. To make matters worse, Annabel had only packed clothing for summer.

"Once I realised I was stranded, I registered with the British Embassy. Communication was made challenging as the estancia only had patchy internet

access via satellite which meant lots of cold WhatsApp conversations sitting on a tree stump in the middle of a field,” said Annabel.

Annabel and her partner, an American citizen, had to ride off the estancia to reach an outpost by the road in the dark, with mules carrying their bags – finding their way thanks to a full moon. From there, she took a taxi which was sprayed with disinfectant at each checkpoint along the way, where temperature checks were also in place.

Annabel finally arrived at Gatwick Airport on 8th May – five weeks and a national lockdown later than she had planned – where she was reunited with her parents, two sisters and border terrier dog Sidney.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said:

“We are delighted to have been able to help Annabel get back home.

“Since the start of the Coronavirus outbreak, the Foreign Office has been working with airlines and governments to keep vital routes open, helping more than 1.3 million travellers return to the UK on commercial flights.

“We also made £75 million available for special return flights, so far bringing home more than 33,000 people from countries without commercial options.”

One of more than 33,000 stranded British tourists brought home on 159 Foreign Office special return flights, Annabel has secured a place to study Natural Horsemanship at the University of Montana Western from September.

“Carolina and Beatriz at the Embassy really looked after me. They were so organised – coordinating hundreds of British nationals from all over Argentina’s provinces in really extreme circumstances,” Annabel added.

British Ambassador to Argentina, Mark Kent, said:

“The Foreign Office organised two special flights that allowed over 400 British travellers and their direct dependents to return home from Argentina. All domestic flights, buses and trains are suspended, so the Embassy had to arrange 8 special buses to pick up people from 31 cities and towns throughout the country, which is the 8th biggest in the world. The buses covered a total of over 7,000 miles.

“There were some epic journeys for people to get to Buenos Aires to make their flights. Annabel’s was a particularly long and arduous trip from an extremely remote part of Patagonia, and I pay tribute to her resilience and patience. I’m glad we were able to help her get back home safely.”

Further information