



a new life

A SHARED LOVE OF PHOTOGRAPHY — AND
LATIN AMERICA — BROUGHT ONE COUPLE
TOGETHER TO WEAVE SOMETHING MAGICAL.

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BYRON BAY NSW PEOPLE

Vicky Aguirre and Carl Wilson with their labrador, Poncho, near their home in Bangalow in the Byron Bay Hinterland. **FACING PAGE** Vicky loves taking photographs of horses from her family's farm in La Pampa, in central Argentina.



ARGENTINIAN PHOTOJOURNALIST Vicky Aguirre fell in love with Carl Wilson when on assignment in the Atacama Desert in Chile in April 2011. She was there to cover a story about two Argentinians surfing their way from California to Chile along the Pacific Ocean coast. Carl, a surfer and air-conditioner mechanic from the Gold Coast, had met the surfing duo and was travelling with them.

He didn't speak much Spanish and, after almost a year on the road, was preparing to go home. "I'd been travelling for 10 months by that time," he says. "I was in Latin America because I wanted to disconnect with life and start a new chapter."

"We were camping in the middle of nowhere and, at first, I didn't want to have to make the effort to speak English," adds Vicky. "But, in the end, we were laughing. We bonded over the landscape — Carl had fallen in love with Latin America big time — and our shared love of photography."

Vicky, who'd studied photography in Buenos Aires and New York, focused on familiar subjects: horses and the landscape on her family's farm in the province of La Pampa, seven hours away from Buenos Aires. While Carl had no formal training, he'd spent the time in Latin America exploring creative photography.

In the following weeks, the couple travelled together, taking photographs all the while, before Carl returned home. By then, they knew Vicky would follow. "When I arrived, I had US\$300 in my pocket and knew one person," she says.

"I didn't know much about Australia. But I was in love and wanted to give it a go. We were living on the

Gold Coast, right on the beach. I wasn't working and hit with such a frustration of being so far away from everything I knew and I wasn't expecting that. I had to reconcile with the idea that I might stay here."

Walking around Brisbane one day and seeing a store that sold Bolivian rugs galvanised her. Vicky declared then and there that's what she and Carl would do. They returned to Argentina in 2013 to explore the back roads and see what they could find. Despite Carl never having used a computer — "Vicky taught me" — and neither having any business experience, the couple's new venture, Pampa, was born from the sale of the 20 handwoven Argentinian rugs they bought on that trip.

"Pampa has always been in me," admits Vicky. "It's my homeland, my grandparents' farm, horses, textiles, my photography. I always felt that I had to do something connected to all the things I loved."

At the time, the couple envisaged the trade in rugs as a side project, but soon found themselves with an intricate web of contacts all over Argentina and scrambling to build an online store. "We just jumped in and did what we needed to do to keep our heads above water," says Carl.

Bringing a small piece of Argentina to Australia is more than a commercial transaction for the pair. In these remote communities, weaving — both labour intensive and time consuming — is a way of life as well as a means of survival, and a skill that's handed down from generation to generation.

Vicky and Carl have observed the process, from locals shearing the sheep to hand-spinning and dyeing the yarn — using plants, vegetables and >



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Vicky Aguirre and Carl Wilson's shop Pampa in Byron Bay stocks everything from rugs to ceramics; Vicky's photography is also available for purchase; Pampa means 'plain between the mountains'; Vicky finding a moment of inspiration; Labrador Poncho in front of a selection of handcrafted rugs from Argentina. FACING PAGE Touches of Latin America dot the Pampa store.



PEOPLE BYRON BAY NSW

The couple love to explore nature around their home in Bangalow with Poncho.

even insects and smoke — and weaving it on looms, sometimes in the shade of a tree while watching over their children. This has given the couple a deep respect for the people.

But these artisanal skills are in danger of being lost as young people leave to find jobs in the city. Providing work and paying a fair price leads to a more certain future for the weavers — one that Vicky and Carl are proud to be involved with.

Pampa is now a bricks-and-mortar store in Byron Bay, NSW, a large whitewashed warehouse in the vicinity of Byron Bay's Arts and Industry Estate. The textured rugs that have become Pampa's signature hang from the walls, as do large fine-art prints of Vicky's horse series and a commissioned images documenting the resident Highland cows at The Farm Byron Bay.

But there's plenty more to tempt instore: leather butterfly chairs — originally designed by an Argentinian architectural trio in 1938 — are

covered in throws, ponchos and cushions. Hammocks swing from hooks, and there are displays of bags, jewellery, baskets and dolls.

The couple's lifestyle revolves around work — "I didn't have a grey hair on my head until after I got an ABN," Carl says — and their much-loved chocolate labrador, Poncho, who's as happy at Carl's feet in the Pampa office as running along Belongil Beach with Vicky after work. "I love the access to nature here, the walks around our home in Bangalow and the beaches and surf," she says.

The couple return to Argentina several times a year to visit weavers and loved ones — Vicky's brother Manuel manages production and logistics for them — and to take photos. A dream has become reality for Vicky. "Pampa has allowed me to travel, to see inside people's homes and remain connected to my culture. I'm proud to bring it here." *CS*
Visit Pampa at 1/12 Centennial Circuit, Byron Bay, NSW. (02) 6694 3152; pampa.com.au

