



Rancho Ala Blanca

A whitewing shooting experience in Mexico

Story by John Shtogren
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If you want get to heaven, take Highway 97 south out of McAllen, Texas...get to Whitewing Heaven, that is. Three hours south of the Rio Grande in eastern Old Mexico sits the small farming town of Abasolo. In the surrounding agriculturally rich area there are 25 million doves. Fewer than 6,000 hunters go after them each year. One gun, 4,000 doves—the odds can't get much better than that.

Whitewings are seldom seen north of the Rio Grande Valley. They are

the hefty cousins of the common mourning dove and may weigh half again as much. A whitewing is easy to identify in flight with its squared-off pigeon tail and white bands on the back of its wings. Mourning doves are known to dart, bob and weave when spooked; whitewings fly that way even when calm, cool and collected.

The Newest Rancho

Rancho Ala Blanca is the newest of the handful of hunting lodges in the Abasolo area catering to whitewing

hunters. RAB was built from the ground up three years ago on a bluff overlooking the Soto la Marina River. The design is in the 18th century Spanish hacienda style of architecture—adobe, archways, iron work, cool tile, dark wood and bright colors; but there is also satellite TV and high-speed internet service. The facility and guest services reflect the total quality commitment of RAB's two American owners, brothers David and Del Lee. From airport pickup to drop off, their guests are in very good hands.



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The Hunts

RAB tries to put hunters in four different shooting situations during their stay. Two *palameros*, or bird boys, accompany each hunter on each outing to mark and retrieve downed birds. For safety, hunters are spaced at least 70 yards apart.

1. In the *Field Hunt*, hunters ring a freshly

harvested maize or sorghum field and take the doves as they come in to feed.

2. The *Water Hole Hunt* sets hunters up for incoming shots along the routes doves take through the brush on their way to drink at the end of the day.

3. The *Road Hunt* lines hunters along a narrow brush-lined farm road and gives

them quick crossing shots.

4. The *Brush Hunt* is the most challenging. Hunters are placed in open spaces in the cactus and scrub, and the doves come from every direction. The hunters take snap shots and learn humility.

Every hunt involves a drive from the Rancho, but RAB locations are usually less than 30 minutes away, a real advantage over lodges that routinely drive their hunters an hour or more each way.

A Day in the Good Life

The predawn knock tells me hot coffee and cold juice are waiting outside my bungalow door, and the chef is taking breakfast orders for anything from *huevos rancheros* to eggs and bacon with fresh tortillas and pastries—or yogurt, fresh fruit and cereal for the more restrained.

The skies are just lightening when the truck drops me off in the field where Jose, my main *palamero*, has already set up my swivel stool full of soft drinks. He flashes me a million dollar *buenos dias* smile and hands me a freshly cleaned 12-gauge Bennelli automatic, one of the guns provided by RAB for every hunter. After dumping a box of shells in my shell bag, Jose is ready to mark and retrieve my birds. I sit, he hunkers...but not for long.

For the next two hours the shooting is constant, my own and all the other hunters in my group. I choose my shots, passing on the high flyers and big flocks, and only try for the doubles and lonesome doves. I shoot seven boxes of ammo, and Jose brings back 50 birds. I could shoot a lot more and knock down a lot more if I shot at the flocks of 10-15 whitewings, but my old man taught me that “spray and pray” is not the right way to hunt.

By 10 a.m., the doves all head off for a siesta in the brush, and we all head back to the Rancho.

RAB has a strict policy of “soft drinks only” in the field for everyone’s safety and peace of mind. But back at the

A shooting party relaxes after a gourmet lunch.



Rancho a frozen margarita is offered to me by one of the starched and pressed wait staff before my feet have hit the gravel drive. Also, I am tempted by trays of hot ham and cheese quesadillas and mesquite-grilled dove tapas. I pass on the margaritas in favor of a long pull on an icy cold Modelo Especial. I try not to eat too much—a three-course lunch is coming, featuring perhaps gourmet tacos, or a mixed grill of dove, shrimp and sweet peppers, or marinated dove breasts stuffed with a sliver of fresh jalapeno and wrapped in meaty bacon.

And then a lazy afternoon reading an easy book in a rocking chair overlooking the river, or relaxing in the hot tub, or cooling off at the in-pool bar, or just getting in-country and taking a siesta.

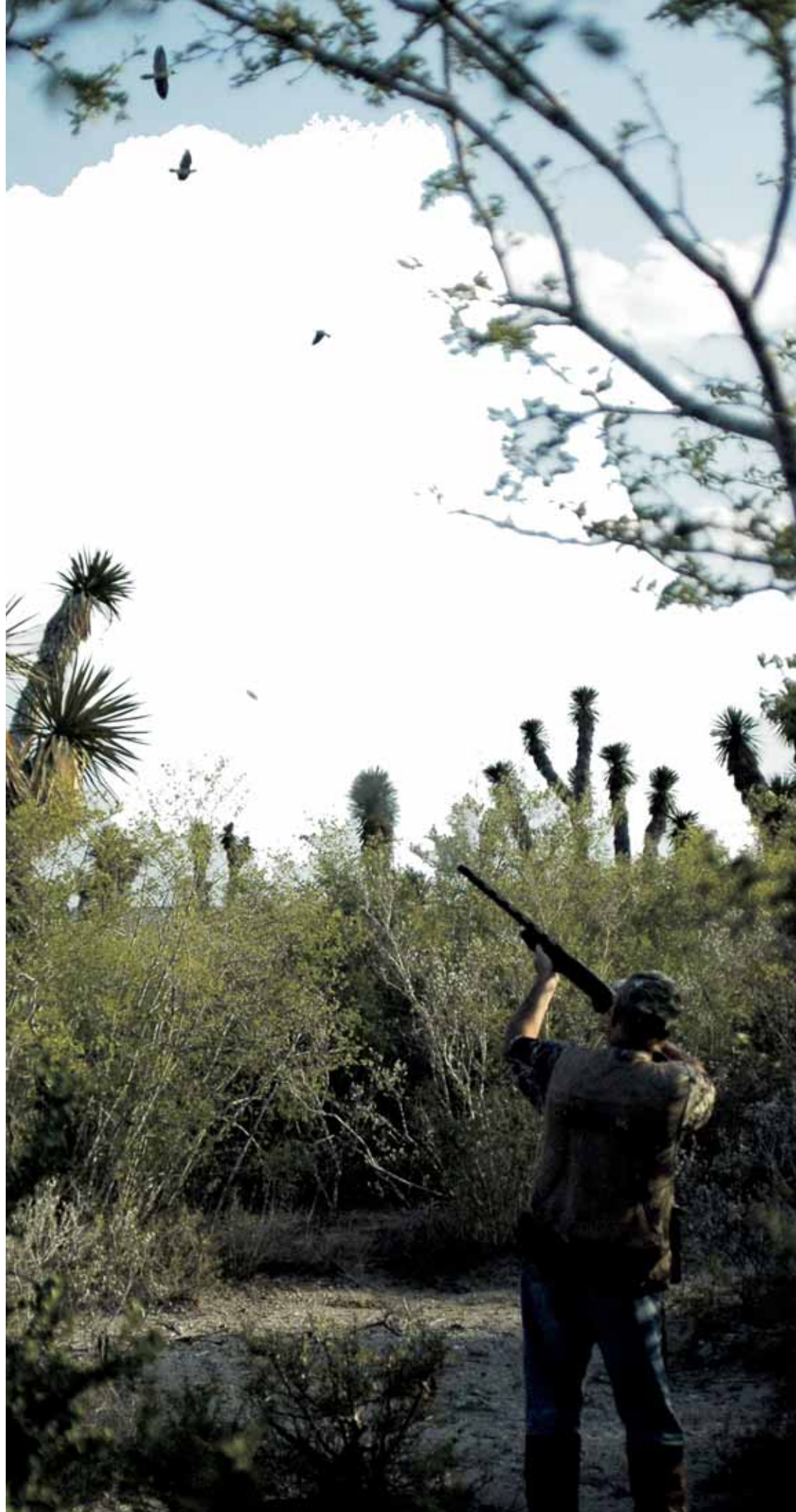
At four in the afternoon we head out again for more shooting, more shouts of “Nice shot!” and “How’d I miss that?” and just plain fun. Back at the Rancho at dusk, the staff is waiting in the drive with fresh margaritas and new appetizers, and our own mariachi band is playing to help it all go down easy.

After a shower followed by drinks and stories of the day in the dark paneled library, a four-course dinner is served with a choice of fine wines. Maybe steaks cooked to order, or a creamy rich dove picatta, or something else just as heavenly. And after dinner maybe a small-batch tequila nightcap back in the library, perhaps with a very legal Cuban cigar.

Yes, life is good in Old Mexico.

Checked Bags and Carry-on Memories

Leaving McAllen I checked my luggage but, taking no chances, I carried on my RAB freezer bag packed with 100 cleaned and frozen whitewings, the legal amount you can bring back into the US. As we taxied away, I smiled remembering my last dove shot the afternoon before.





Left: Filling the ammo bag at the Water Hole Hunt



Right: Palamero Jose sets up the afternoon hunt.



Left: RAB Huntmaster Frank Barron inspects the armory.



Right: Whitewings are heftier than mourning doves.

Below: A Field Hunt over harvested sorghum



I chanced a single shot at a lonesome whitewing coming in high on a tailwind. It towered, faltered, and slowly helicoptered down. Jose dashed off through the low brush, dodging cactus like an NFL tight end, and snatched the whitewing out of the air while it was still six feet up. He was laughing in Spanish as he trotted back. I was laughing in English as I racked the shells out of the Bennelli and handed him the empty gun. "Si, si, Senor, terminado, terminado!" Jose nodded and grinned, even though there were still mucho whitewings in the air. We both knew it's time to say *adios* when it just can't get no better.

Check out the Rancho Ala Blanca website for complete details on all it offers (www.ranchoalablanca.com). In addition to whitewing hunts, you will find opportunities for quail, ducks, Rio Grande turkeys and fishing on mammoth Lake Guerrero.

The author is an outdoorsman, farmer and international management consultant whose travels often take him to the far edges and borderlands. He welcomes comments at jshtogren@cs.com.

