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THE TRADITIONAL VAQUERA SADDLE

Sometimes called a Vaquero saddle

History

The silla vaquera, or vaquera saddle is the everyday saddle used today and for past centuries by the Spanish Vaquero, probably the original cowboy, working in the fields and mountains of Spain. Vaquera saddles are also used for vaquero competition – or Doma Vaquera (translated as vaquero horse training, or dressage) - as well as when testing the fighting bulls and cows (*Acoso y Derribo*) and in the Ferias of Spain and of course for every day country riding. The vaquera or vaquero saddle is both comfortable for the rider and the horse, designed for many hours use every day and it has a large comfortable contact area over the horse's back - a much greater contact area than the modern general purpose, dressage or jumping saddle.

Traditionally vaquera saddles are covered in a sheepskin which is held in place by leather thongs, which may also be used for tying equipment to the saddle, or for emergency tack repairs when working out on the range.

Illustrated is an everyday plain [Vaquera Lisa](#) saddle.

The traditional vaquera or vaquero saddle tended to be heavy (and would be used with the relatively heavy steel 'bucket' stirrup) and were traditionally stuffed with rye straw and the panels filled with animal hair. Over time these could mould to the shape of the horse's back. This design is still available today.



Saddle development

Utilising modern technology and development some manufacturers in Spain now produce vaquera saddles made to the traditional design and style but incorporating modern high-tech materials. Choices include lightweight carbon fibre flexible trees, special non- water/sweat absorbing filling materials, 'bucket' stirrups in lightweight polymers or alloys, yet retaining the traditional look and style of the original vaquera saddle. The best of these saddles are still hand made by traditional craftsmen taking pride in their work despite the use of high-tech materials and modern components.

Today quality and prices can vary greatly, but the best European manufacturers produce vaquera or vaquero saddles that are technically very different and superior to the many cheaper copies beginning to flood the market.

The different traditional styles

For competition/Doma Vaquera, it is generally preferred that the saddle is a plain type, called a Vaquera Lisa (pictured above) and should be black.

In Spanish Doma Vaquera it is also preferred that the plain vaquera Lisa style saddle is used if the rider is wearing full chaps, called zahones. Doma Vaquera regulations state the saddle must be traditional in form and dimensions.

However the saddle may have tooled 'buttons', which are called 'moteada' and again for doma vaquera the saddle must be black, although it can have the traditional tan leather inside the cantle/back-piece.

Other colours or Repujada styles are not permitted in Doma Vaquera – competition.

Pictured is a Vaquera saddle Moteada, i.e. with the tooled 'buttons'



For riding in the Feria the Vaquera or Vaquero saddle may have a 'tooled' leather cantle and pommel and this is sometimes called 'Campera' style.

Popular for the Feria or showing is the vaquera saddle with white ornamentation, where the leather is tooled to show a white background. These are sillas Vaquera Repujada, i.e. in Repujada style and can be made in black, tan or brown leather.



Silla Vaquera Repujada



Vaquera stirrups (estribos)

The traditional Spanish Vaquera stirrup is made in steel and coloured black. For the working vaquero they need to be strong for protection from any angry bull that gets close enough. They are by design a 'safety stirrup' as the foot can be extracted quickly in an emergency and is impossible to slip through.

Good quality stirrups are fitted with soft leather protection covering the top bar, to protect the rider's boot.



Silver coloured or chromed versions are not allowed in competition/Doma Vaquera.

Lightweight vaquera stirrups are now available, in polymers or alloys and still look traditional. Shortened, or cut-off versions may be used for training or by inexperienced riders but are not allowed in competition/Doma Vaquera and do not fit the true traditional look if used in the Feria.

Crupper (baticola)

The vaquera saddle should be fitted with a traditional crupper, coloured to match the saddle. It must be black for competition (Doma vaquera).

The baticola helps to stabilise the saddle, an important function for the vaquero when working in the country or competing in Doma Vaquera or acoso y derribo.

Note there are different styles to suit varying methods of fixing to the saddle.



Breastplate (pechopetral)

A breastplate is often used to further stabilise the saddle and the colour should match the saddle.

For competition/Doma Vaquera the breastplate must be of traditional Spanish type, in black and with black 'oiled' buckles, with 3 straps joining to a round ring in the centre and one to the girth, the other 2 to the saddle (as shown in the picture). No other types are permitted in competition.



Martingale (gamarra)

These do not constitute traditional Spanish tack and all types (standing or running) are prohibited for use in competition/Doma Vaquera and would rarely be seen in the Feria.

Manta Estribera (saddle drape)

The manta estribera is a striped woollen or cotton blanket worn over the front of the saddle. It is mandatory in Vaquera competition.

These are held together and tied to the saddle by thin strips of leather and ideally and traditionally should be long enough to touch the stirrups either side.

The fabric is traditionally made of a coarse woven untreated cotton material in black/white or brown/white stripes, finished off with fringing. The manta estribera is also available in soft wool and it is acceptable to use this type in competition.

Traditionally the Manta Estribera could be worn over the vaquero's shoulders in cold weather. They would also be used to carry their lunch (often bread with jamon or cheese, maybe some wine), wrapped securely inside the manta and held shut with thin leather strips.

For the Feria the manta may carry a stud brand, or initials, but this is not allowed in competition.

A modern manta estribera with pockets is now popular but is not technically 'correct' in Spanish dress classes or allowed in competition (Doma Vaquera).



Manta estribera without & with pocket.

Wool

Traditional woven Without & with pocket



Rarely seen now but equally correct, the traditional Vaquera outer jacket the Marsellés jacket - with a red lining may be turned inside out and used in place of the Manta Estribera. This is sometimes seen in competition – Doma Vaquera.

Agarrador

This is a plaited leather ball-ended strap traditionally fitted to the Vaquera saddle to aid the rider when mounting.



Saddles for Doma Vaquera (competition)

1. There are classes for young horses (caballos iniciados) in competition/Doma Vaquera and only in these competitions can a different saddle be used instead of the traditional vaquera or vaquero type. The Española, or Clásica saddle, fitted with a sheepskin cover and with the correct 'Vaquera' stirrup, in black may be used. Competitions for young Vaquera horses include work at trot and the Española is more suitable for this.
2. There is no trot work included in higher level Doma Vaquera competition and the vaquera saddle is used for this.
3. The Vaquera saddle should not really be used for ridden showing classes as it is not traditionally used at trot.

The Silla Amazona/Vaquera side saddle/Spanish side saddle



The *Vaquera Amazona* is made in a similar traditional design to the normal vaquera or vaquero saddle but includes the pommel and leaping head for side saddle riding and is fitted with a single stirrup.

The Spanish side saddle is popular for ladies riding in the country or in the Feria and can also sometimes be seen in Doma Vaquera.

The Vaquera Mixta saddle



The silla vaquera mixta saddle is basically a vaquera or vaquero saddle with a raised section, called a 'borren', just behind the pommel. This is included for added rider security and comfort.

This is not a true 'traditional' Spanish saddle, but is becoming a popular choice with riders as a general purpose or country riding saddle and can now be seen in the Spanish Feria.

The vaquera mixta saddle is not allowed in Doma Vaquera competition.

Vaquera saddle or Vaquero saddle, what's the difference?

In Spanish, silla, meaning saddle, is 'feminine' hence the correct spelling for the saddle is vaquera rather than vaquero. Perhaps because it is used by the vaquero (cowboy) the masculine spelling is sometimes used - although there are female riders - vaqueras.

In 'correct Spanish' it is the silla vaquera.

Personal note

We are situated in the heart of Spain in traditional horse riding territory and each year we take our own horses out into the fields and mountains to bring in the fighting bulls and are involved in doma vaquera, la garrocha, endurance and leading trail rides. For years we have used vaquera saddles and some have seen more than twenty years of service, yet we find the latest high-tech models much lighter, with better flex and kinder to our horses.

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