

Argentina—A Paradise of Natural Beauty

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From the sub-tropical jungles in the North, to the frozen continent of Antarctica in the South; from the snowy peaks of the Andes in the West, across high plains, Pampas and Patagonia to the Atlantic coast, Argentina is a land of great geographical diversity.

It is also a land of superlatives. The highest mountain in the Western Hemisphere, Aconcagua (22,834 feet) rises 4,000 feet above its neighboring peaks. Ushuaia on the Beagle Channel in Tierra del Fuego is the world's southernmost city. The Continental Ice Cap spreads over 8,400 square miles in southern Patagonia, descending into glaciers that crash in gigantic chunks from 150 foot walls into the lakes and streams of Los Glaciers National Park.

In the North, on the border with Brazil and Paraguay, Iguazú Falls spill over a horseshoe shaped ledge into an explosion of 275 waterfalls, varying in height from 140 to 300 feet -- creating one of the world's largest waterfalls in sheer volume, and for its configuration, one of the world's most beautiful.

World renowned Argentine beef is raised in The Pampas which cover hundreds of miles of monotonously flat grasslands in the heart of the country. The top-soil of this alluvial plain is said to be six feet deep, producing grass year-around that is so rich cattle don't need to be corn fed before slaughter, making Argentine steaks low in fat and high in flavor.

The population of Argentina (more than 32 million) is small relative to its size. One third of the people live in Buenos Aires, and the rest are scattered about in urban cities, ranches and mountain villages. Argentines are just recently beginning to explore their own country, and to discover that they live in a natural paradise.

Rare and fascinating plants, trees and wildlife have remained undisturbed in their natural habitat for centuries. Thousands of trout-filled mountain lakes, rivers and streams lie concealed in the Andes along the western border with Chile. Wildflowers cover the alpine meadows, and bushes of wild berries line country lanes, later to be consumed in homemade jams in the cozy tea houses and country inns of Andean villages.

Along the south Atlantic coast on the Peninsula Valdés, in the Patagonia region, countless species of marine life cavort on land and in the sea. Sea lions breed there, as do killer whales, elephant seals and hundreds of sperm whales. From September to March in the world's largest penguin rookery at Punta Tamba, thousands of dignified little Magellanic penguins waddle back and forth on "penguin highways" from the sea to land.

Because Argentina's seasons are reversed, North Americans can ski from June to September and enjoy summer activities December through March. There are three major ski areas in Argentina: Las Leñas, Bariloche and Chapelco. Each offers alpine and cross-country skiing and snow boarding.. International Ski Schools attract expert instructors from the United States and Europe. Mostly above tree-line, an average skier can leave the groomed slopes and ski freely over ridges into untracked bowls and gullies. Each resort offers a totally different skiing experience, making it worthwhile to visit all three. August and September are less crowded, less expensive and have more dependable weather and snow conditions.

Las Leñas, 600 miles west of Buenos Aires by air plus two hours by road from Malargue, is the biggest, the most isolated and the highest. From 11,250 feet at the top, a treeless lunar landscape of lonely white peaks extends forever into the blue sky. Long runs (the longest is five miles) drop 4,000 feet over 10,000 acres of skiable terrain. There are steep and scary chutes 2,000 feet long for the

experts, machine-packed superhighways for beginners and plenty of intermediate terrain in-between. With only nine lodges, and a lift capacity of 9,200 skiers per hour on 11 lifts, lift-lines are short. Hotels in Las Leñas include Pisces, the most deluxe, which has an indoor/outdoor pool, two restaurants and a casino. Aries is a little farther from the center of activities but compensates by being closer to the slopes. It has two restaurants, a bar and shops. Scorpio is situated behind the popular après-ski hangout Innsbruck. Acuario, Scorpio and Geminis have family style dining and offer a variety of prices and services. The most economical accommodations are the "apart-hotels" with their own kitchens, living area and multiple bedrooms. Las Leñas also has a few small ski shops, a market and only three restaurants; as most people eat in their hotels.

Argentina is the fifth largest wine producer in the world, and most of its finest cellars are found in the nearby town of Mendoza, where in winter, the Andes rise in a wall of white peaks behind the city, and in summer, horse-back treks (cabalgatas) follow the tracks of San Martin over the Andes to Chile. In one long day, you can make a round-trip drive to the top of Uspallata Pass on the border with Chile. Aconcagua looms in a forbidding mass of stone, ice and blowing snow. A little farther up the road at 13,800 feet is the statue of Christ the Redeemer and a stunning view of the Andes.

Bariloche is as spectacular, but for completely different reasons. Headquarters for a two-million acre national park with world renowned fishing in 40 different lakes and countless streams, the town hugs the southeastern shore of Nahuel Huapi Lake -- a lake so blue and vast, with its shorelines disappearing into distant lagoons and misty inlets, that the mountains, covered with dense vegetation seem to rise right out of the water.

Developed as a recreation center in 1903, the first "tourists" arrived in 1924. Early immigrants from Alpine nations discovered this rugged paradise similar to their homeland in the late 1800s, and they skied on the nearby slopes of "Cerro Otto" until the ski area opened in 1938. The rope tows that hauled skiers up the mountain forty years ago have been replaced by 32 lifts capable of transporting 20,000 skiers an hour from the base at 3600 feet to the top at 6600 feet. The ski area, named Catedral for the gothic spires crowning the nearby peaks consists of two ski areas that share 4,500 acres of skiable terrain. "Ladobueno" ("the good side") has a vertical drop of 3,000 feet, mostly in the falline. "Robles" goes about 300 feet higher, and beginners and intermediates find better snow at the higher altitude.

From the top of the second Robles chair, a Poma-lift transports skiers to the weather station at 7,385 feet. Tucked into a tiny wind-sculpted snow pocket clinging to the boundaries of the ski area is a small restaurant (Refugio Lynch) and one of the best 360-degree views in the Andes. Condors soar on silent wings in the deep canyon below, and jagged white peaks pierce the sky as far as an eye can see. The tallest mountain on the horizon is Mt. Tronador (11,722 feet). An extinct volcano, its white glaciers glisten on three peaks straddling the border with Chile. To the west, the intense blue of Nahuel Huapi lake meanders around islands into invisible bays until it disappears beneath the mountains and volcanoes 100 miles away.

Soaring out over the ski area in a hang-glider, with the lake below on one side and the mountains behind you, is a thrilling way to "experience" the extraordinary scenery. You can also fly with the condors in a paraplane (parapente).

At the base of the ski area are rental shops, small restaurants, private ski clubs, a skating rink and even a disco. The Hotel Catedral sits on a hillside above and beyond the crowded base facilities. The large window in the spacious dining room frames a panoramic view of the lake, making this a pleasant alternative for lunch or afternoon tea. The 76 rooms and 64 apartments are booked well in advance by Argentines and Brazilians who prefer to stay at the mountain.

Many people, however, stay in town and commute the 20 miles by bus, taxi or rental car. With 17,000 beds in Bariloche, and more in the surrounding countryside, accommodations range from small family-run "Residenciales" to super-luxurious hotels with spectacular views, fine restaurants

and a tradition of hospitality and service that typifies the Argentine friendliness. In one of the world's most magnificent settings, Hotel Llao Llao sits on a grassy knoll surrounded by three different lakes with a backdrop of sheer rock cliffs and snow-covered mountains. Every room looks out on a lake, forest and mountains. Shuttle service to the ski area or town, an indoor pool and gym, tennis, an 18 hole golf course, a conference room with views guaranteed to distract you, and access to all the recreational possibilities of the area, make this is a unique resort hotel for all seasons.

Alejandro Bustillo, the same architect who designed the Hotel Llao Llao, also designed the Civic Center and other buildings in Bariloche. The spacious square surrounded by the rustic grey stone and wood buildings is a good place to begin a walking tour of the town. But before you tear yourself from the wide-angle view of lake and mountains, be sure and visit the Patagonian Museum on your left before the arch. Indian and gaucho artifacts and displays of regional wildlife and geology tell the history of this part of Patagonia.

Along the main street called Mitre, shops sell hand-knit sweaters, local ceramics, locally produced jams, and patés of smoked trout and salmon. The aroma of home-made chocolate lures you into supermarket-sized chocolate shops, where abstinence quickly turns into addiction. In Bariloche you can dine on anything from the usual steak and French fries, to fresh pastas and pizzas, to trout, salmon, venison or wild boar. Quaint chalets serve tea and pastries with scones and homemade jams in the late afternoon, fondue or raclettes at night. Tea in the garden looking out at snowy peaks above the lake at the Bellevue teahous near Llao Llao, or at an inn by Lake Guitierrez, is a delicious detour after skiing or summer activities. Later you can dance away the calories in one of four discos.

Perhaps the best part of Bariloche is away from the city on a mountain bike, horseback or on foot, lost in a field of chest high pink and purple lupine, or following a trail through tunnels of golden scotch broom to hidden lakes and waterfalls -- or hiking through forests and across glaciers to a secluded mountain hut. You can kayak, canoe or raft wild rivers or float peacefully in a serene lake.

Local tour companies can arrange any of these adventures with knowledgeable guides and equipment either supplied by them or rented independently.

Whether by rental car or with an organized tour, sightseeing is non-stop. An afternoon driving to Llao Llao and around the "short circuito" past still blue lakes hidden by primeval forests will take your breath away at every curve. All day excursions by boat go to Victoria Island and Peninsula Quetrihué where you can walk in the only Arrayanes forest in the world, or to Puerto Blest, where the Lake becomes a Norwegian Fjord enclosed in a jungle of Coihue trees.

Across Nahuel Huapi Lake from Bariloche and accessible by car or boat, is the village of La Angostura. Protected by 30 mile long Isla Victoria, it offers water sports in summer, three luxurious lakeside hotels and a ski area (Cerro Bayo). The Road of Seven Lakes is the scenic route to San Martín de Los Andes, but the paved road from Bariloche is better in winter.

San Martín is a small town much like Bariloche was thirty years ago. The ski area, Chapelco is 20 minutes by car, taxi or bus. Ideal for families and beginning and intermediate skiers, it is a small, peaceful resort with modern facilities (5 chair lifts, 5 poma lifts and a telecabin). For the more advanced, the ski school offers a clinic for competition and off-piste skiing. Almost all the runs are visible from the top at 6,534 feet, and so is the perfect white cone of Lanín Volcano, towering in the distance at 12,474 feet. On the lower trails, Lanín is seen through a filigree of gray moss hanging on the ghostly bare limbs of the Lenga trees.

San Martín has its own lake, Lácar, and plenty of small hotels and restaurants reflecting the distinctive Andean-Alpine architecture of Bustillo. La Cheminee, with only 18 rooms is a homey inn of pink flowery chintz, lace and ruffles. Home-made breads, scones, cookies and jams are served at breakfast and tea.

Like Bariloche, local tour companies can arrange excursions by land or water. A rafting trip goes over the border to Chile and requires a passport. Mountain biking, kayaking, hiking and

horseback riding can be done independently or with a group. Experienced fishing guides will lead you to pristine lakes, rivers and streams, but for the ultimate fly-fishing experience, you might want to go to a fishing lodge near Junín de Los Andes. At the Paimún fishing lodge, a profound stillness, clear air, sky and water, and the image of nearby Lanín shimmering in the lake give a sensation of being totally disconnected from the rest of the world. Nearby are many lakes and streams filled with lively trout -- the largest on record being 27 pounds.

The gateway to all the splendors of Argentina is the capitol city of Buenos Aires. Ten million people (one third the population of Argentina) live in the sprawling metropolis, All flights to the country on major airlines arrive in Buenos Aires, which is about a 10 hour flight from Miami.

At the turn of the century, when the British built railroads to ship Argentine beef, lamb and wheat to the capitol; refrigeration was just developing, making possible the export of agricultural products to Europe and the rest of the world. Soon Buenos Aires became the major South American port and business center on the Atlantic coast, and by the 1930s Argentina was one of the richest countries in the world. European immigrants and wealthy Argentines employed Europe's finest architects and city planners to design and build their city. When you walk the wide avenues and narrow cobblestone streets, look up at the art deco, art nouveau, gothic and stately Parisian facades to understand why Buenos Aires is referred to as "The Paris of South America". Stylishly dressed like Parisians, darkly handsome like Spaniards and animated like Italians, Argentines are extremely friendly.

Most hotels in Buenos Aires are downtown within walking distance of the sights and scenes of the city. From the Plaza San Martín, where jacaranda trees lay a carpet of lavender blossoms on the lawn in spring, you can stroll with the Porteños down Calle Florida, a 10 block pedestrian mall of shops, cafes, mimes and strolling musicians. In the Galería Pacífica, shoppers circulate under the painted dome of a newly renovated Italian building. Calle Lavalle, another pedestrian street that crosses Florida, has movie theaters, fast-foo restaurants, shops and arcades. Another cross street, Corrientes, is called "the Broadway of Buenos Aires" because of its theater scene, and it attracts students and intellectuals to its fine bookstores and venerable wood paneled cafes,

Florida ends at the Plaza de Mayo, where hundreds of thousands have gathered to cheer or protest their government's changing policies. The Casa Rosada (the pink house) at one end of the square is the President's offices. Another important building in the city, was founded in 1580, is El Cabildo (Town Council), where Argentines elected their first government in 1810. Next door is the principal cathedral with the tomb of San Martín, the general who led Argentina, Chile and Peru to independence from Spain. The Avenida de Mayo, a wide avenue of grand buildings, stretches for 15 blocks from here to the Plaza de Congreso.

Sunday is the day to visit the old colonial barrio of San Telmo. Flower pots drip from sagging wrought iron balconies onto cobblestones. The flea market and surrounding shops sell art and antiques to dealers and individuals from around the world. Tango bars offer nightly shows along Calle Balcarcé.

Another place for a Sunday stroll is the colorful working class neighborhood of La Boca. Italians who worked in the docks and slaughterhouses along the Riochuelo Canal in the 1870s, painted their corrugated-metal houses in vivid primary colors. El Caminito is a narrow ally that typifies this tradition of artistic ingenuity. In the nearby cantinas, waiters and customers often break into song and dance, which sometimes spills out into the street.

A 20 minute walk from the Plaza San Martín takes you across the world's widest avenue (9 de Julio) to the elegant and exclusive neighborhood of La Recoleta. Small expensive boutiques sell the finest quality clothing, leather goods and antiques, and grand old mansions hide behind iron gates and fences, and trendy sidewalk cafes and swank restaurants attract the "creme de la creme" of Buenos Aires. Patio Bullrich, formerly a livestock auction house, is now a chic shopping center.

Whether spectating or participating, Argentines are passionate about their sports, and Buenos Aires offers ample opportunities for both. On weekends, everyone is out playing. Whether it's a pick-up soccer game in Palermo Park, a rugby match, tennis, track or swimming in the nearby sports complex, water skiing on the canals of Tigre, windsurfing or sailing on the River Plate, a polo game or show jumping at the Jockey Club or horse races at ritzy San Isidro; each sport is approached with skill and enthusiasm.

Just an hour away from Buenos Aires are ranches where a visitor can learn to play polo or can watch a game of Pato, the national sport of Argentina. Pato, which translates as duck, is a combination of basketball, wrestling and polo played on horses running at full speed.

Literature, drama, art and music are as important a part of Argentine culture as sports. National and international films are shown in old Cinemas, and the San Martín Municipal Theater presents free concerts, plays, lectures and films on its five stages. There are fine art and historical museums, but the pride of Buenos Aires is the Teatro Colón. Occupying an entire block on 9 de Julio, this beautifully proportioned building with near perfect acoustics is known as one of the great opera houses of the world. Opened in 1908, the Teatro Colón has seen performances by Caruso, Callas, Nijinsky, Pavlova and Nureyev.

Tours guide you through seven stories of elaborate dressing rooms, banquet halls, practice stages for ballet, symphony and opera; to studios for costume-making, scenery construction, painting and a warren of rooms for wigs, hats, and shoes from past and present performances.

With British formality, Parisian style, Italian spontaneity and a Spanish soul, the city and the people of Buenos Aires have their own unique identity -- as different from their fellow countrymen and the rest of Latin America as the lonely windswept plains of Patagonia are from the cosmopolitan capital of this fascinating country.