



On the hoof

Jenny Geal, one of our Latin America specialists, sends us an email from Argentina's wild wild west.

Argentina, like its Chilean neighbour, is a country of incredible contrasts, and this north western region could not be more different from the snow-capped volcanoes and turquoise waters of the Lake District which I enjoyed on my last visit. This time around, I flew from Buenos Aires up to Salta, a lovely city in its own right, but for me the starting point for my adventures south to the Calchaquies Valley, and north to the Hill of Seven Colours, Purmamarca and the Humahuaca gorge.

Such exotic names are perfect for an area this exciting; I travelled on the Safari to the Clouds, an alternative to the more famous train journey, and absolutely understand how they came up with the title. At the start of the trip, you wind slowly through sunny mountain passes, while by the end, you feel you must surely be on top of the world, and the cosy woollen ponchos handed out by the guide are much appreciated.

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The vast expanses of wild and, for the most part, unpopulated landscape in the north west are exhilarating, startling, and constantly changing. It combined the Bolivian salt flats with the Chilean desert, with more than a passing resemblance to the moon thrown in too. This is the place to see the llama's dainty cousin, the vicuna, and to spot condors, cacti, and tiny indigenous settlements just where you thought none could possibly exist. And yet however tired you feel after a day spent trying to take everything in, and however dusty you might be, you are never far from a wonderfully warm welcome, a hot bath, and crisp white sheets.

In the north west of Argentina, the estancia (working farm) is known as a finca. And the best of these are perfectly placed to offer visitors a supremely comfortable and relaxing oasis right in the heart of it all. Most properties have no more than five or six rooms, a swimming pool, many a tennis court, and all have acre upon acre of beautifully kept land, offering the kind of hospitality you can only enjoy as the guest of a family. The experience of staying in an elegant Argentinian home, often steeped in history, exploring the owners' farm, and of filling yourself with fresh air, home cooked food, and superb local wines, is one that can and should be enjoyed by anyone.

I visited an English-owned estate just outside Jujuy where I was offered afternoon tea on the verandah, and later walked through the sugar cane fields with my charming hosts, one of whom was born in the house itself, and the other in Sussex. Just outside Molinos, which I reached via a stunning journey through the Bishop's Pass south of Salta, I was invited to sample the estancia's bottled produce, grown on the northernmost vines in Argentina, and this washed down a delicious example of the famous Argentine steak. My bedroom had a four poster bed, family portraits on the wall, and in the morning I was woken up by a rural alarm clock and a hearty homemade breakfast.

An hour's flight south and a short and bumpy car drive, and I was in a farmhouse high in the Central Sierras, home of the gaucho, the horse, and the most



Church of San Francisco, Salta



Chillies drying

spectacular rolling green mountain views. The highlight of my trip so far must have been the annual calf branding ceremony in a Córdoba corral, which I watched from the back of a Peruvian thoroughbred over whom I had no control whatsoever. I had exaggerated my horsemanship somewhat in an attempt to live up to expectations of the 'important English visitor', and sincerely wished I hadn't.

The skill and speed of the men as they lassoed and herded the cattle was breathtaking. Afterwards, gauchos, women, children and dogs settled down to a traditional asado (so much more than a barbeque) in the fields, and it would all have been idyllic had I not been so scared about the ride home. At this property, I ate dinner with three generations of the family who own it, and took a lamp to my bedroom as the electricity generator was switched off for the night.



Guachos in action

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As I have certainly proven, it is by no means necessary to be an accomplished rider to enjoy Argentine country life. The dramatic northwestern region is still relatively undiscovered, and yet every Argentinian I have met names it as their favourite area of the country, and certainly the scenery, climate, and properties make it a unique and very special destination for visitors. Those who aren't horsey, like myself, are extremely well catered for too, either as learner riders, or on walks instead, while simply relaxing with a book (and a glass of vino tinto or perhaps a cerveza) alongside the pool is just as good an option. Córdoba, Salta, and the countryside around them, are delightful all year round, and can therefore easily be combined with the glaciers of Patagonia, the wildlife of the Valdes Peninsula, majestic Iguazu Falls, and even a tango lesson or two in Buenos Aires.

Tomorrow, I'm off to the wineries region of Mendoza, to explore the vineyards and sample Argentina's best vintages, all in the name of research!



Travel file

A two week individual tailor-made tour of Argentina including the north-west, Buenos Aires, Mendoza, Iguacu and Buenos Aires costs from £2,300 per person based on two people sharing. For further details please call our Latin America specialists on 01869 276 210.