

Travel &
Lifestyle

Infinite variety

From the Tropics to Tierra del Fuego, the Atlantic to the towering Andes, Argentina promises the intrepid traveller an unequalled view of the natural world

Words Alan Harper



Mount Fitzroy and its
glacial lake in
the unparalleled
Argentine Andes.

N

amed after the captain of HMS *Beagle*, although neither he nor Charles Darwin ever clapped eyes on it, the massive granite pinnacle of Mount FitzRoy in the Argentine Andes dominates one of the world's most spectacular mountain landscapes.

The naval officer and the young English naturalist got close, but after 16 days of dragging boats up the Santa Cruz river in 1832 they reluctantly abandoned their inland exploration, during which they mused on the effects of vast aeons of time in the forming of the landscape. Nothing about it suggested that it could have been created in the six days of the scriptures, nor in any way altered by Noah's 40-day flood. The timeless expanses of Patagonia might inspire similar meditations in today's traveller.

It says everything about Argentina that this vast, other-worldly wilderness is just one of its essential attractions. It is a huge country, stretching 2,300 miles from the Tropics to Tierra del Fuego, and from sea level to nearly 7,000 metres (23,000ft). Its natural variety is unmatched anywhere on earth. There is so much to see and the distances are so great that you'll need



to consider carefully how much you plan to pack in.

Deciding that we could investigate Argentina's famous wine regions more fruitfully in the aisles of our local supermarket, we opted to use Buenos Aires as our hub during a three-week holiday and selected three areas to explore that showcased the country's unique natural attributes. There are internal flights to most places people want to go, and a somewhat vestigial railway network, but also an excellent long-distance bus system, whose comfortable coaches complete with curtains and reclining seats offer a more immediate and greener alternative to flying, along with an ever-changing picture out of the window.

Even if you have been to Victoria Falls, nothing prepares you for the awe-inspiring power of Iguazú. Niagara doesn't come close. At the north-eastern tip of the country on the border with Brazil, this complex network of waterfalls is created as the mighty Iguazú River hurls itself headlong over the precipice of the Paraná Plateau. The cataracts are criss-crossed by steel walkways that take you into the jungle, to the heart of a thunderous maelstrom that will leave you drenched and dumbstruck. To stand on a platform staring down into the

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The awe-inspiring spectacle of just one section of Iguazú Falls. Above right: capybara patrol, Iberá. Opposite: an Iberá caiman.



Devil's Throat, a roaring plunge pool some 90 metres across and of seemingly bottomless extent, is a mesmerising and terrifying experience. And not to be missed.

Even amid the spray and racket it was impossible not to notice the birds flitting among the trees, apparently indifferent to the din: exotic purple and yellow jays, turquoise parrots and plenty of others I failed to identify hopped along the handrails or cavorted in the upper branches of the canopy. The country has more than a thousand resident bird species, and the Iberá wetlands, a huge system of lakes and marshes covering more than 15,000km², is home to quite a few.

On the edge of the Parque Nacional Iberá, Colonia Carlos Pellegrini is a straggling hamlet of dusty roads and single storey dwellings. There are a couple of basic restaurants for evening meals, and a little shop where you can pick up a bottle of wine. Many of the houses are set up as tourist lodges, and some of them are fitted out to a remarkably comfortable degree. Ours, called simply Arandu, had shaded verandas, a beautiful pool and served an excellent breakfast. It's not an easy town to get to – a four-wheel-drive is essential – but once there you might not want to leave.

The contrast with the cacophony of the waterfalls could not be more complete. Tranquil, flat, with huge skies and low-lying scrubland between vast areas of fresh water, Iberá is a paradise for wildlife, and a perfect spot for a few days' relaxation. →

Canoes can be hired, in company with a guide. Or take a boat trip at dawn or dusk (I recommend both) and you can get up close, really close, to a caiman. They're alligators to you and me, and as they sit in the shallows, mouths open to regulate their body temperature, there doesn't seem to be a lot going on between their ears. But that just makes them more mysterious. They haven't evolved much in the last 200 million years.

You will also see ringed kingfisher out in the marshes, and marsh deer, and jacana, and the noisy southern screamers known locally as *chajá*. Giant wood rail patrol the roadside ditches as you go off in search of dinner. You'll stop noticing the red-crested cardinals as they hop about by the pool, as commonplace as the sparrows at home, but we never quite got over the capybara, rotund and comical guinea pigs the size of labradors, that roam around the place munching on the grass – almost tame, but not quite.

There are several ways of getting down to Patagonia, the easiest being a three-hour internal flight from Buenos Aires to the regional metropolis of El Calafete, which with its bars and restaurants and bookshops offers an easy introduction to the region's unsettlingly alien landscape. The famous Moreno glacier is just up the road.

El Chalten is a true frontier town: a low-rise huddle of ramshackle structures which dates from 1985, when the Argentine government decided that a more obviously settled presence in the region might cool the territorial fervour of neighbouring Chile. It's a 200-kilometre drive from El Calafete, through Patagonia's dry, lunar scenery and along the shores of the stunning, turquoise Argentino and Viedma lakes. The looming heights of the Andes draw you in without ever seeming to get closer. Gaunaco graze among the stones, long-necked rheas stand around in groups, and grey foxes sniff

Behind you: the mesmerising peak of FitzRoy looms over El Chalten. Below left: the Moreno glacier, a short drive from El Calafete.



for scraps among the cars at the viewpoints. An armadillo tottered across the road in front of us. Overhead soared a white-collared Andean condor, big as a barn door.

We had rented a sort of Hobbit house, made of plywood and tin, via Airbnb. The house next door was a windowless shipping container.

Overlooked by the 3,359-metre (11,020ft) monolith of FitzRoy, El Chalten is a jumping-off point for Lycra-clad hikers and mountaineers who bestride the potholed streets in enormous boots, parting gentle shoals of Chinese tourists wearing anti-pollution masks against the pristine air.

If you're young, or in a hurry, you can walk from the back of the town directly up to the mountain, but for a more circumscribed approach take the minibus north about 12 kilometres (7.5 miles) along an increasingly rough track to the El Pilar hostel, and walk from there. The path up the wooded

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Rio Blanco valley past the imposing Piedras Blancas glacier is an easy morning's hike with 700 metres (2,300ft) of ascent, and only the last bit, straight up the contours from the riverside campsite to the glacial lake at the foot of FitzRoy, is at all strenuous. It's worth it. The great peak and its jagged consorts jut through the icefield like claws.

Once you've waited – and waited – for FitzRoy to shed its persistent veil of cloud, the descent back down to the town takes a couple of hours – or longer if you keep looking back for a last, spectacular view. ♦