

Title/ Heading: A land untouched- the Andes of Northern Patagonia

Subheading: The Mountains, River Valleys, and Plains of Argentina

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Words: 1,122 (1,313 words including the side bar)

Rafting a flat section of the class IV undammed Rio Manso, the helmet and wetsuit I donned telling of the type of treacherous rapids ahead, I reassured myself, "Don't worry about what's coming, just soak it all in, who knows when you'll be here again". And so I panned around gazing at the surrounding hillsides and cliffs rising out of the valley, reminding me much of my beloved Sierra Nevadas, and it was then when I noticed our two guides doing the same- that's when it hit - here were two men who ran this river hundreds of times and yet still understood and appreciated its beauty. This is what Patagonia is all about- a land much undisturbed by human "progress" and a people living in harmony with it.

BASE CAMP

Twenty hours of flights from California and 6000 miles to the south finds you in the picturesque mountain village of San Carlos de Bariloche, situated at the base of the central Andes in the Northern Lakes District. Founded in 1902, this Swiss-styled resort town, with a mix of Italian and Argentine influences, lies along the southern shores of Lake Nahuel Huapi 1000 miles west of Buenos Aires City. It owes its name from the term *Vuriloche* ("different people from behind the other

side"), used to distinguish the natives from the valleys located west of the Andes, before the arrival of the *mapuche* people. Since then, Bariloche has become one of Argentina's main tourist destinations offering quaint hotels and village facilities, energetic discos, and a great deal of stunning scenery, beauty offered by the natural environment surrounding the area. . Northern "Patagonia", as Magellan named it, is also where Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid hung out when on the lam, and where Charles Darwin wrote about the vast plains as "created solely to give the imagination room to flourish".

THE MOUNTAINS

The Andes are immense, and to stand atop one of its snow-capped peaks staring out at the hundreds surrounding you speaks of this. The mountain trails that pass through lush forests are great for hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding, while the high peaks and ridges offer challenges for climbers and mountaineers alike.

"Prrrraaack!" is the sound you'll hear traveling across the valleys below as Monte Tronador's glaciers break away from the fractured snowfields along its steep couloirs. At 11,411 feet "Thunder Mountain", as it translates, borders Chile and as the highest in the area offers breathtaking views and difficult climbs to its summit. After a long hike took me above tree line I arrived at Refugio Meiling, a mountain hut and rest spot for climbers before they trek onto Tronador's glacier. Catching my breath, I sat mesmerized watching the familiar black and white

patterns of the Andean condor as it rode the thermals effortlessly – a true site to see. The world’s largest bird of flight with up to ten-foot wingspans, they have soared above these mountain ranges for thousands of years.

THE RIVER VALLEYS

The Rio Manso cuts through the Andes range, originating from glacier melt of surrounding peaks, flowing through the bamboo and pine forests of Nahuel Huapi and Los Alerces National Parks, and cutting a deep gorge as it winds into Chile.

From our valley lodge, we loaded up into an old Land Rover, our driver resembling an NFL lineman out of the 70s - big, unrefined, with long frizzy hair shooting out from under his weathered cap. While we headed to our drop in location to meet up with our raft guides, bouncing along rough mountain roads and traversing glacier-fed rivers that rose over our vehicle’s wheel wells, I began to romanticize my trip. “What an adventure” I thought, but before I could wax rhapsodic, our driver popped his glovebox open, grabbed a tape, and jammed it in his radio. As REM’s “Shiny happy people” blasted out of the thirty-year-old waterlogged speakers, I chuckled to myself thinking how the world could grow so small so quickly.

Once on the water, our rafting excursion through class IV rapids did turn out to be an adventure. Powering through numerous whitewater sections our confidence slowly built, but knowing all along El Tobogan, the largest rapid, still

lie ahead left me a bit uneasily. When the moment came, our guides instructions still fresh in our minds, we paddled hard over a lip sliding down a steep drop hoping to break through the churning wave at the bottom of the rapid, but we were no match. As we hit, the force of the water and the impact was so violent all I can remember was the view of my legs and the sky as I launched backward out of our raft into the torrents. With the breath knocked out of me it felt like an eternity before emerging above water, my first thought to find a way down river without having to get back in our boat. But knowing I had no choice, I pulled myself back into my front position on the raft and we continued on our way.

THE PLAINS

As we sat around watching a dinner fire being built and fresh lamb prepared, a Gaucho approached me noticing the Diet Coke in my hand. “My friend, you can’t drink that. You must join us and drink red wine with our dinner. It is the only way”. The Argentinean Pampas is home to the Gaucho, the original South American cowboy, and “the Pampas” are a grassland biome, the great wide and fertile plains than span a wide area from the Atlantic Ocean to the Andes. Riding horseback with these cowboys across the vast plateaus of Las Mellizas was yet another amazing experience. On a horse before they could even walk, their riding skills were obvious, and in contrast it was all I could do not to fall off my horse, most of my energy spent balancing my gear and myself. They are proud and generous people sharing a life with the land most imagine living centuries ago.

As I spent my last night camped out on the plains before heading back to Bariloche for the series of flights home, I stared up at the stars. Shining strong in the darkness of the plains I could easily locate the collection of illuminating pinpoints amassing the Orion constellation- and then it hit me again - when I noticed Orion, compared to astronomical views from my Bay Area home, it was upside down. I was in Patagonia, not far from the bottom of the Earth - who knew when I'd be here again.

SIDE BAR: Find out what Argentina is all about (for all websites, look for the English version link if not fluent in Spanish)

Authors/Books:

“A book-lover’s holidays in the open”, by Theodore Roosevelt.
Published: New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1916, and again by Bartleby.com, 1998. www.bartleby.com/57/
(a section called “Across the Andes and Northern Patagonia” he writes about Mount Tronador and the surrounding area)

Music:

Carlos Gardel, revered in Argentina as The King of Tango (also known as “El Zorzal Criollo” or “The Creole Thrush”), he created music in the early 20th century yet his music still endures today. Some of his most popular songs include “Adios Muchachos” and “El Día Que Me Quieras”. You can find his music in most music stores, on iTunes, or at www.todotango.com/

On the web:

www.interpatagonia.com (travel guide website)
www.turismo.gov.ar/ (Argentina Government Tourism Office)
www.patagonia-argentina.com/ (information, trips, and more)

Tour companies:

Vaya Adventures
800-342-1796 www.vayaadventure.com
(based in the Bay Area, they specialize in custom trips to Northern Patagonia, Central and South America)

REI Adventures

800-622-2236 www.rei.com/adventures.html
(the popular outfitters offer trips to Northern Patagonia for biking, hiking, and rafting)

Andes Cross
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Trek Patagonia
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