

Argentina: A new star in the wild north-west

Sophie Campbell, *The Telegraph*, UK (29 July 2005)

Foggy? It's not meant to be foggy. In my mind, the province of Salta, in north-west Argentina, is hot orange and red; somewhere you can fry a steak on your horse's rump.

But it is foggy. So much so that the plane takes a dummy run at the tarmac and zooms up again and into the fog.

Somewhere around us are hills, big hills - north-south ridges, wavelets in comparison with the mighty Andes to the west, but nevertheless big - and between two such spines lie the broad, fertile Valle de Lerma and the provincial capital, Salta.

Right now, this is the place to be in Argentina. After a long love affair with the south - Bariloche, Patagonia and so on - Argentines are suddenly intoxicated by their country's north-west, home to *peones* in elephant-ear chaps, alpaca and chillies.

It is the most Argentine of Argentine provinces, which may have something to do with its new popularity: in a see-sawing economy, a little national pride never goes amiss.

An hour later, I am swerving around rain-filled potholes on the way to an *estancia* west of the city. The car is a VW Rabbit with a strangely stripped-down feeling, like an army aeroplane (if you want to know the state of a country's economy, hire a car).

Despite the car and the rain, I am so excited to be here. The people by the road are stocky with wide cheekbones: there is a big *mestizo* population, not seen in the south, perhaps part-descended from the Incas (this was the southernmost part of their empire).

The landscape is rolling and very green. The road is lined with shade trees and little pueblos, each with a bus stop, a petrol station, a dusty plaza with swings. As I bump along the *estancia* roads, puzzling, windowless buildings rear out of the fields.

"Tobacco driers," the hotel manager explains, opening the fly-screened door into a low house with wide verandas and a crackling eucalyptus fire. In summer, the thick walls will keep the interior so cool that no one will be able to fry a steak on anything.

The **Finca El Manantial del Milagro** ("Miracle Spring") grows tobacco, alfalfa, peaches and pumpkins. It has horses for visitors: mine is a pretty little mare that threads through the *monte* - thorny brush that can rip your clothes, hence the wide chaps - with ease.

I set out for a ride with an English family, one of the *peones* and the *estancia* dogs. Brahman-Angus cross cattle gaze at us from the fields, among them a pair of nervy, llamas, and birds of prey called *carranchos*. Leaf-cutter ants march across our path, holding leaf shreds aloft like little green windsurfers.

The food is all grown and made here: plum and peach jams, spinach ravioli, tamales with chilli, parsley and garlic, served by sweet maids. I love my sombre bedroom with its convent air and the cosy chat of staff, which is audible from the kitchen. But something is missing.

It's the owners: they don't live here, they have a house in Salta, but the decor is so personal, so full of family possessions and photographs, that there is an odd sense of trespass. I keep expecting them to appear, late and apologetic, and offer us drinks.

At dinner, with the English family, an American family and a French couple, I say that I am going to drive the Cuesta del Obispo, an old Indian trail over a pass to the pretty village of Cachi. There is general approval.

Then I add that I might go north to San Antonio de los Cobres and there is consternation. "Not in that! It's over 7,000 feet! You need a four-wheel-drive." The VW Rabbit sits outside, whistling and scuffing its tyres.

Actually, I would never have had time. Partly because of the road surface, which is *ripio* (loose gravel), but also because there are so many crosses for people who have slid over the edge that you drive like a snail. I kick myself for not allowing longer.

It seems to be market day in the town below the mountain; there are exhausted heaps of people beside the road. I pick up a family and their bags and we start the climb into the red rock hills. Silence. Six pairs of eyes.

It must be 10 miles to their village (they were resigned to walking), more to their house on a dry river-bed, and we talk for less than five minutes, but as I leave, I can see them all in the rear-view mirror, waving.

The road swoops, the windscreen goes pink with dust, valleys gleam green. I stop by a plaque erected in memory of a coachload of pilgrims that went over the edge in the 1970s. Cachi, with its windbreak poplars and handsome plaza, comes as a relief.

The Spanish came into the north-west from Peru in the 16th century, establishing San Salvador de Jujuy, Salta and Tucumán along a route that existed to supply the mines up north with necessities (such as mules, which were bred in this region). Cachi was an outpost, a Jesuit mission, and is now a cheery little town with a crisp climate.

As I cross the plaza, there is tremendous activity. Teenagers are painting a cloth banner. A truck full of celebrating people roars around the square and disappears again. By the time I find out that a fiesta is taking place in a sports' hall, it's all over.

In the church (beautiful; with a lectern of cactus wood, holed where the spines were) a little boy sidles up to me. "Monedita," he whispers, pitifully. I give him a coin. Later I see him belting around the plaza, kicking a football.

At El Molino de Cachi, a converted mill hotel under the mountains, Salteño crafts are displayed to great effect; not only on the walls, which bristle with silver photo frames, or in the bedrooms, with their soft, striped throws, but on the owners, the Durands, in *bombillas* (trousers), hats and cowboy boots.

Over dinner I meet a couple from Buenos Aires, celebrating their anniversary: "We all know the south," they explain, "but now people are saying, 'You must go to the north. To Purmamarca and Cafayate and Salta.' We can't believe we've never been." They are thrilled by the fine textiles, the dramatic desert landscape and the people with their strong cheekbones.

Much as I would like to stroll through the vineyards with the dogs, or loll around in a hammock under the willows, I have shopping to do. So I retrace my route back over the pass, stopping only to hail three men riding along in chaps and ponchos. They pose politely for a picture.

Down in Salta, I miss the *ripio*: I can never tell when it is my right of way and, even when it is, people shoot across my path. I lose my nerve. The Rabbit and I spend two more days bunny-hopping from market to cathedral to museum, watching for danger.

By the time we bunny-hop out to the airport, I am feeling quite smug. Granted, the market was not 100 per cent successful (all those llama mittens, hats from the Andes, gourds from the tropics, silverware, ponchos and whips - and not one pair of boots my size).

But I have seen the cathedral, pink and yellow like a Battenberg cake, with cherubs straddling swings of flowers inside. Mass is every hour, on the hour, and in front of me were a dozen football shirts with "MALVINAS [Falklands] 100% ARGENTINAS" on the back.

I have strolled around the fine new Museo de Arqueología de Alta Montaña (MAAM), a cool white space with collections based around three mummified Inca children, sacrificed on the volcano Lullailaco and found in 1999. (To the museum's credit, it shows a video examining the controversial nature of the find; some feel the remains should have been left on the mountain).

Into these airport thoughts breaks an Englishman, also waiting for the plane, who has been to visit his gap-year son, working in the north, and has stayed to see Salta.

"Did you see that amazing fiesta in Cachi?" he asks. "It was great. Then our guide said there was a gaucho festival down the mountain so we stopped for that as well; fantastic!" I see a fleeting image of the truck roaring around the square and the men on horses all ponchoed up for a party. I grind my teeth.

Next time, fiestas, gauchos and cowboy boots my size. Next time, two weeks minimum.

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