



ELLE TRAVEL

PATAGONIA

ELLE's Associate Editor Fern Ross went to the end of the earth and found a place she could call home



Above: Cycling with Biking Buenos Aires. Top: Succulents at El Porvenir winery. Main: The view of Torres Del Paine from Explora

I have a confession. Unlike (nearly) every other traveller who sets foot in Patagonia, I haven't read Bruce Chatwin's seminal 1977 travelogue *In Patagonia*. I had every intention of doing so, but then Patagonia itself got in the way. On some level, I think I wanted to leave Chatwin's book untouched, to allow myself to shape my own, unfiltered experience of a region often referred to as 'the end of the earth'. In reality, Patagonia sits at a latitude of 51°S. To put this in context, London is 51°N. So it's not that Patagonia is actually that far south, it's just that there is nothing between it and Antarctica. Part-Argentinian, part-Chilean, Patagonia follows the spine of the Southern Andes and straddles the border of the two countries, but has an identity all its own. It's a place where you truly feel like you have space to gather your thoughts and reset. But first, there is the not-so-small matter of getting there...

LONDON TO BUENOS AIRES

To get anywhere close to Patagonia, first you need to fly to Argentina. I've wanted to see Buenos Aires ever since seeing photos of its iconic crumbling colonial façades in the Nineties, so my husband Mark and I spend our first few days in the capital at the Philippe Starck-designed Faena Hotel (faena.com/buenos-aires, rooms from £272 B&B). Set in the regenerated Puerto Madero district, it isn't exactly vintage BA – once a warehouse, it now showcases leather and red velvet furnishings, marble bathrooms and views of the Costanera Sur ecological reserve. After a 15-hour flight, the hotel's opulent pool is just what we need. With a giant crown fountain in the centre and cocktails on tap, it's definitely a pool to pose around, rather than swim in.

Come 9pm, it's time for dinner (early by Argentine standards) at Don Julio, a famous *parrilla*, or steakhouse. As we sit down, Mick Hucknall (not the best celeb



Photography: Tim Clinch, Courtesy of Home Hotel Buenos Aires, Fern Ross.



Top: Colourful Caminito. Above: The Presidential Suite at the Faena Hotel



spot, I know) walks in with his entourage. The *bife de chorizo* (rib-eye) steak is probably the best I've ever had.

Day two in BA, and we're feeling more energised (there is only a three-hour time difference, so no jet-lag), so it's time to explore the city on two wheels with Biking Buenos Aires. Our guide Rodrigo is fun and politically engaged, and takes us everywhere from the famously colourful Caminito in the Boca district (where port workers painted their houses with leftover tins of boat paint) to the Plaza de Mayo. So much of Argentina's political history has taken place here, from the attempted bombing of Peron in 1955, to the campaigning mothers of the 'Disappeared' whose children were taken from them during the state terrorism of the Seventies military dictatorship. It's an insight into Argentina's often uncomfortable political history, and this tension is still evident throughout the city.

That evening, we hit up the city's oldest bar El Federal (established 1864),

which still has its original cash registers and espresso machine on display. It does a mean negroni, the perfect aperitif for fresh, flavoursome and cheap sushi at Comedor Nikkai, housed in the Japanese Society of Buenos Aires.

'IT'S A PLACE WHERE YOU TRULY FEEL YOU HAVE SPACE TO GATHER YOUR THOUGHTS AND RESET'

BUENOS AIRES TO CAFAYATE

Buenos Aires done (for now), it's time to try some of Argentina's famous wine. We sidestep Mendoza in favour of its less famous wine-making cousin, Cafayate. It's a three-hour flight to Salta, followed by an incredible three-hour drive through the Valles Calchaquies: rich red earth, alien-looking desert rock formations and armadillos crossing the road, all set against the backdrop of the Andes.

A town of 12,000, Cafayate is small and lively: the quaint main square is lined with restaurants, bars and artisan shops, and the *bodegas* and their respective vineyards stretch from the outskirts. People come from far and wide to taste the famous Torrontes: think crisp, fruity sauvignon but with a lovely minerality.

We get a chilled glass of it on arrival at Grace (gracehotels.com/cafayate, doubles from £280 B&B), a luxurious hotel with residential villas, a mile outside of town. We can't believe our luck when we get our own villa for the next three nights. Set over two floors, with a private garden and hot tub, it is something else.

The next few days are all about massages at the on-site spa, bike rides and walks around the huge grounds (1,360 acres) and yoga on the terrace. And, obviously, wine tasting. We spend a long, boozy afternoon at El Porvenir, a family-run winery producing intelligent, interesting wine. Our evenings are filled ▶



Below: El Porvenir winery. Below left: Valles Calchaquies





Above: Setting off to see the Grey Glacier in Torres Del Paine

with low-key dinners and stargazing out on the terrace. Our favourite Cafayate night is when we stumble across Chato's wine bar; with hundreds of local wines on the list, Chato's enthusiasm and pride for the local grape is infectious and inspiring.

CAFAYATE TO BUENOS AIRES

It's back to BA for the weekend before flying to the southernmost tip of the country. This time we're at the boutique Home Hotel (homebuenosaires.com), rooms from £119 B&B) in the hip Palermo district, which is filled with shops, bars, restaurants and loads of green space. We set off on what ends up being a 15km walk around the city, taking in all of Palermo's parks (including the famous Jardins Botanico and Japones) and the statue-filled La Recoleta Cemetery, where Argentina's most celebrated are laid to rest, including Eva Peron. Knackered, we take a safe and cheap Radio Taxi back to the hotel to chill out in our suite. With its vintage wallpaper, Sixties-style furniture (all sourced at local flea markets by its owner, former record producer Tom Rixton) and private terrace overlooking the pool, it's our own little oasis.

That night we have dinner at I Latina. Originally a 'Closed Door' restaurant (supper clubs run out of the chef's home),

I Latina was established by Colombian siblings Santiago (the chef), Camilo and Laura Marcias (the hosts), and has already been listed as one of the world's 50 best Latin restaurants. The food is incredible and the seven-course tasting menu is innovative, exciting, unique and full of flavour: corn and

'AS WE PADDLE AROUND THE ICE FLOES IN OUR KAYAK WE HEAR THE GLACIER RUMBLING. ICEBERGS ROLL AND CRACK ALL AROUND US'



Above and top: Home Hotel, Buenos Aires

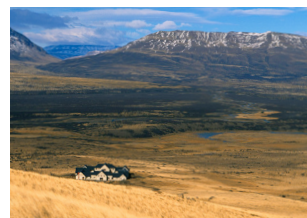
cacao breads, Oaxacan mole, seabass ceviche, and Colombian coffee ground and brewed at your table. The decor is equally inspiring: a vibrant modernised colonial house with amazing palm-frond wallpaper.

BUENOS AIRES TO EL CALAFATE

It's time to leave civilisation and head south to Argentinian Patagonia. We're up early for our flight to El Calafate, a town of 20,000 on the edge of the Los Glaciares National Park. The view from the sky is incredible: glacial lakes and tundra as far as the eye can see, the Southern Andes looming in the background. It feels as if we've landed on another planet, and everything is bathed in a luminous golden light. After all the travelling, I feel like I've come home: the wild landscape's muted hues remind me of my native Scotland and I feel an instant sense of calm.

We pick up our hire car and drive for 30 minutes along the edge of Lake Argentino to EOLO (eolo.com.ar, doubles from £650 all inclusive), a magical lodge on a 4,000 hectare estate, a few kilometres out of town. As a member of the Relais & Chateaux group, the food is the main focus, but every little detail has been thought of, from the miniature L'Occitane bath products and waterfall shower, to the giant windows and telescopes throughout the hotel showcasing panoramic views and close-ups of the wildlife. We even see an armadillo scuttling around in the scrubland in front of our room.

We spend our one full day on this side of the border kayaking around the Upsala Glacier (vivapatagona.com/mil-outdoor). Flowing from the Southern Patagonian Ice Field (the third largest in the world after Antarctica and Greenland), the ice is a vibrant blue and constantly changing: as we paddle around the ice floes in our two-seater kayak we hear the glacier rumbling in the background,



Above and left: EOLO's stunning setting in Argentinian Patagonia makes it perfect for nature lovers



Above: Explora's spectacular location in front of the Torres Del Paine

and icebergs roll and crack all around us. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and we're wind-beaten and exhausted by the time we make it back to the lodge. After an incredible dinner of trout tartare and Patagonian toothfish, we retreat to our room to stargaze.

EL CALAFATE TO TORRES DEL PAINE

Our trip across the border into Chilean Patagonia to Explora (explora.com, rooms from £2,000pp for a three-night all-inclusive stay) starts early. A four-hour drive across the barren Patagonian Steppe (the seventh largest desert in the world), the road ahead stretches as far as the eye can see, with nothing but tufted grass and the occasional guanaco herd to either side. Being somewhere so remote is oddly comforting – we have nothing to do but keep heading towards the iconic 'towers' of the Torres Del Paine peaking out of the horizon. The only other people we pass are truck drivers and a stoner doing the classic Ruta 40, which runs from Rio Gallegos at the tip of Patagonia to La Quiaca in the very north of Argentina, with what looks like all of his worldly possessions packed into a rusty old car painted the colours of the Argentine flag.

We cross the border at Cerro Castillo, which feels like something out of a Western, leave our car with the local cafe, and hop into the Explora van, which takes



us on the final 90-minute leg of our epic journey into the Torres Del Paine national park. Arriving at Explora takes our breath away: its iron, wood and glass architecture is award-winning. The lodge is perched on the banks of the turquoise Lake Pehoé, in front of the granite peaks that form the iconic Paine Massif, of which we have a panoramic view from our room. We head down to the outdoor hot tubs for a well-earned beer and a soak before dinner.

We're up early for our first expedition, the Grey Glacier tour: a short boat ride across the lake, followed by a six-hour walk to the mouth of the Grey Glacier. Luckily it's mostly sheltered, as the wind is so strong that we nearly get blown off the edge of a viewpoint, and my chin is chapped that evening (the glamour). On the boat back, the crew get ice from the glacier and make a round of Pisco Sours for everyone on board.

Day two, and it is time for the towers, a 22km hike across rocky moraine (glacial debris) to the top. Our guide, Ana, is great at keeping up morale, especially when 70mph winds threaten to blow us off the side of the mountain. At the base of the towers is a glacial lake, and we all shelter behind a giant rock to eat lunch. We spent our third and final day with gauchos, riding across the plains before celebrating with a traditional *asado* lunch. It's a wonderful way to end the trip, and as we race back to the ranch, I hope that I'll return soon. Patagonia has stolen a piece of my heart. ■

British Airways (ba.com) flies daily from Heathrow to Buenos Aires from £380 return. With thanks for Destino Argentina, destinoargentina.com.ar. For full listings, go to elleuk.com



Above and left: The full Gaucho experience at Explora



Above: Ice kayaking around the Upsala Glacier. Above left: Explora's award-winning interior