

TRAVEL

ARGENTINA DRAWS OUTDOOR ADVENTURERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD, EVEN 'OC MAN.'

SUMMER SKIING

BY
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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When I was a young reporter in Orange County, we played a “Where’s Waldo” newsroom game that involved finding OC Man anywhere in the world.

I was thinking about OC Man recently, while riding a chairlift to the top of Cerro Catedral, a magnificent peak in the whipped cream meringue of a mountain range that marks the border between Argentina and Chile. I hadn’t met an English speaker in a week in Bariloche, gateway to the Andes, so any chance of

finding OC Man on ski season’s opening day seemed as remote as the distant peaks.

From the top of Cerro Catedral, the view of Lake Nahuel Huapi’s Miocene-age glacial valleys carved along the range’s fault lines is heart-stirring. An Andean condor with 8-foot wings, soaring

between the ridges, stunned the few people around me on this brilliant, azure day, and they snapped selfies in front of what I imagine infinity looks like, the sound of breathless Spanish and Portuguese mixing with whooshing chairlifts and schussing snowboarders.

Rising above the contrapuntal chords

SEE SUMMER SKIING PAGE 6

Above: Nahuel Huapi Lake, seen from the Cerro Catedral ski area near Bariloche, Argentina. At left: A snowboarder gazes across the Andes toward Chile.

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Travis Smith of Anaheim was snowboarding during a break from classes in Buenos Aires. In Argentina, vistas like a natural bay near Bariloche, at right, abound.



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IF YOU GO

Getting there: From LAX, LAN airlines has connecting service through Lima or Santiago to Buenos Aires for approximately \$1,000 round trip; lan.com

From Buenos Aires to Bariloche, the best rates are on LAN and Aerolineas Argentina, about \$300 round trip; lan.com and aerolineas.com

Where to stay: For Buenos Aires, TripAdvisor lists excellent and inexpensive accommodations. Make sure the rentals locate you in safe neighborhoods such as Recoleta, Belgrano, Palermo, San Telmo and Barrio Norte; tripadvisor.com. We used Perfectolugar Apartments, perfectolugarapartments.com; phone: 54911-018-7686. Rate of \$57 per night includes weekly housekeeping. Contact English-speaking owner Alejandro Sorrentino at alex@perfectolugarapartments.com

For Bariloche, we used Airbnb (AirBnb.com) to find a one-bedroom with loft eight blocks from the city center for \$50 a night. Contact English-speaking Carlos Alberto at vista.bella.departamento@gmail.com to rent the apartment we had. For more expensive accommodations, from \$350 a night, try the Llao Llao Resort; llaollao.com

Getting around: In Buenos Aires, Radio Taxis are inexpensive and safe (no more than \$5 for most rides in the city). Look for the "Radio Taxi" sign on the cab roof and side. Though we occasionally took "gypsy cabs" the locals warn to avoid them. The subway (Subte) is easy to navigate (40 cents a ride) but closes at 10 p.m. Buses are less expensive but daunting unless you speak relatively good Spanish.

In Bariloche we used Joaquin Lagos, an excellent official tour guide and ski instructor. Because the government regulates tour guides, prices rarely vary. Contact him at lagos.joaco@gmail.com; phone: 54-92-94-453-5654

Spanish classes and homestays: In Buenos Aires and Bariloche, we used Sol Education Abroad with United States offices in Austin, Texas, and classes in Buenos Aires, Bariloche and Montevideo, Uruguay; soleducation.com, 512-380-1003

Telephones: Rent reasonably priced local cell phones through Texas-based Cellhire USA (214-355-5222) to avoid excessive international charges on smartphones. The company mails the phones prior to departure and includes international dialing, country and area codes; cellhire.com

Information: We used "Rough Guide South America,"

roughguides.com/shop/rough-guide-south-america-budget, and "Lonely Planet Argentina," shop.lonelyplanet.com/argentina/argentina-travel-guide-9



EL TIEMPO, ZUMAPRESS.COM

Patagonia offers some sweet "summer" temptations - summer if you're a resident of the Northern Hemisphere, that is - with \$35-a-day lift tickets and abundant snow.

SUMMER SKIING

FROM PAGE 1

came the discordant and unmistakable patois of Southern California snowboarders. Lots of them: cheery, profane, adorable, sitting on a snow bank, remarking on the relative frozenness of their derrieres.

"Where are you from?"

"Orange County! California!"

Travis Smith, hometown Anaheim, experienced snowboarder shredding the gnarl in South America with buddies from Los Angeles, on break from classes in Buenos Aires. Travis and I came to northern Patagonia for the same reasons: summer snow and \$35-a-day lift tickets.

The experience more than met his expectations ("I had a blast shredding the slopes! I'd recommend it to family and friends!"), but what I found diverged from the travel industry's marketing promises of glitz and glamourati.

My husband and I had arrived in Argentina believing the dollar's strength against the peso would make traveling affordable, and that was the only certainty we took home. Our journey was less glamorous than we anticipated, intensified by Spanish classes, socializing with locals, and experiencing the culture in a way unfamiliar to most American tourists.

We embraced authentic Argentina, finding it a superior summer alternative to hot, crowded, expensive Europe, the unforeseen offset by modest prices, a temperate climate, few crowds and the overwhelming generosity of the people.

South America's most European nation, Argentina can be frustrating for people who speak no Spanish expecting luxury at bargain-basement prices. This is not a country that caters to entitled North Americans - many blame U.S. hedge funds for pushing Argentina into economic crisis - but nowhere else will you find folks more willing to open hearts and homes to you, to share their lives and exceptional wine, to treat you like one of the family. And though being family means unconditional love punctuated with scolding, the payoff is an experience that defies expectations.

Finding authentic Argentina is as easy as enrolling in a Spanish school that arranges inexpensive lodging with local families. We dropped our 15-year-old daughter, a student at the Orange

County School of the Arts, and left her for three weeks to take classes at Academia Buenos Aires, live with a family, and negotiate the city, where temperatures average 60 degrees with little rain in the winter (California's summer). We rented an inexpensive studio in Recoleta and spent a week exploring the city's cafes, museums and restaurants with another daughter, a Harvard junior studying abroad.

At week's end, she and her friend wanted to take the 20-hour bus ride from the capital through northern Patagonia to Bariloche, as much for the experience as for the low price. My concern for their safety was allayed after talking to a University of Puget Sound backpacker. "It's super safe," she told me. "I hitchhiked alone through the north. Don't tell my mom."

My husband and I flew to Bariloche, where Academia Buenos Aires has a campus catering largely to Europeans. Academia arranges transport to the slopes, and action sports excursions including paragliding, rock climbing, mountain biking, kayaking, sailing, boating and hiking in the Patagonian Andes of Nahuel Huapi National Park, the oldest and largest in Argentina.

Inside the park, Lake Nahuel Huapi, fed by Andean glaciers and more than a quarter-mile deep, has three times the shoreline of Lake Tahoe. Wending its way around the base of the mountains, the lake becomes an unfathomable infinity pool, Patagonian peaks towering overhead. The park's biosphere encompasses lakes, rapids, waterfalls and rain forest, dense with ferns and bamboos. The Alpine Villa La Angostura is as tidy as Switzerland, hewn of logs harvested from evergreen and hardwood forests, its cafes decorated with cuckoo clocks and modern art.

The cheapest way to La Villa is through Bariloche's public bus terminal, well worn and crowded with working people. I sidestepped friendly stray dogs into the gift shop and found a rack of classics. Between Marx and "The Diary of Ann Frank" I saw several volumes of Pablo Neruda's poetry, picked one up and caught the bus along Argentina's famous Highway 40 to Los Arrayanes National Park. We hiked the woods that inspired scenery for Disney's "Bambi," then boated across the fog-shrouded Lake Nahuel Huapi back to La Villa. The



COURTESY OF ROBERT OSTMANN

Fly from LAX to Buenos Aires, where new and not-so-new buildings mix.

next day, we biked the 27-kilometer Circuito Chico over steep tree-lined hills, with periodic panoramic pit stops for photos, eventually arriving at the iconic Hotel Llao Llao for tea.

In Bariloche, we rented an apartment with a loft and a spectacular view of Lake Nahuel Huapi, eight blocks from the faux-Bavarian city center where a half-dozen St. Bernards and several puppies pose for photos. The apartment's owner, an architect with a doctorate in economics, met us at the airport and gave us a tour, explaining the complicated social and economic history of this nation of European immigrants.

Encountering Bariloche is both refreshing and shocking. The town's garish embrace of kitsch lends it a universality that makes it familiar, but its stubborn refusal to accept any definition of authenticity other than its own makes it uniquely Argentine.

At nearby Cerro Catedral - "the people's ski resort," explains Joaquin Lagos, a local ski instructor and tour guide - skiing and snowboarding are accessible, inexpensive and modern, but "it's not Aspen." Lagos splits his year between Aspen and Bariloche; his Colorado clients summer in the Bahamas rather than ski South America, he says.

While a few American and European companies are establishing luxury properties for well-heeled North Americans, the Llao Llao, considered Argentina's most luxurious resort, stations guards at the entrance who demanded our reservations. In Spanish. When my husband indicated he didn't understand, the guard repeated himself. In Spanish. (No staff members attempted

to speak English to us, helpful if you're learning Spanish but annoying if you're not.)

Graceful and stately, the hotel has a slightly fraying, early-20th-century aristocratic feel, a Latin American Downton Abbey hunting lodge with animal skin upholstery, antler chandeliers, fine china, officious staff, afternoon high tea, and, on the day we visited, a skinned whole lamb roasting on a spit near the patio where two South Americans smoked 6-inch Cohibas, sipped malbec and ignored the majestic view of the lake and its islands rising from the water like humpback whales.

A short drive from Cerro Catedral, the resort provides transportation to the slopes and ski services along with a spa, golf and action sports in warmer months. Its setting, on the shores of the glistening crystal-clear lake with snow-capped Andes encircling the property, is unmistakably magical.

In the end, though, the Llao Llao's obvious charms were less surprising than the secrets we found by leaving ourselves open to chance - such as trusting a Bariloche waiter's suggestion we split a \$10 "lomo" rather than each order an entrée, and being handed the best grilled steak we'd ever eaten, the size of a 10-inch dinner plate.

"O Patagonia! You do not yield your secrets to fools," writes author Bruce Chatwin. We discovered the unexpected far more authentic, and ultimately enjoyable, than the predictable in Argentina. Such as buying Neruda's poetry at a rural bus terminal. Or seeing a condor dodge a glacier. Or finding OC Man at the top of the world.