

A ride through **ARGENTINA**

FORGET THE TRADITIONAL TOURIST HOTSPOTS OF PATAGONIA OR BUENOS AIRES, **ED STOCKER** HEADS TO THE ARGENTINIAN INTERIOR TO EXPLORE THE UNDISCOVERED PLAINS OF THE CENTRAL SIERRAS





WRITER PROFILE

NAME ED STOCKER

AGE 28

INFO Ed lives and works in Buenos Aires where he's been eating too much meat and not doing enough exercise. His recent travels include Rio for New Year, the Atlantic rainforest of southern Brazil and Uruguay's coastline.

My heightened state of disorientation isn't helped by the gnomes. From their fixed vantage point on the shop windowsill they stare at me with a sort of gleeful amusement, revelling in my confusion. The store in question – one of those gift shops that sells everything you've never wanted to buy – feels part Hollywood film set, part über-kitsch theme park. Nothing, though, prepares you for what's inside, where the chintz factor reaches new heights. Stumbling my way through the bizarre assortment of goods, I pass more miniature bearded folk frozen in time and every conceivable type of wooden cuckoo clock.

This all seems doubly bizarre, as I'm currently several thousand miles away from the Alps. Several thousand miles away from *lederhosen*, fondu and *steins* of lager. Still, that doesn't seem to be stopping the local Swiss restaurant, which is doing a roaring trade in Black Forest strudel. This is Argentina, and it's meant to be in a

land of well-worn clichés: gauchos, red wine, steak and tango. However, this might be Argentina, but it's not as we know it...

I've come to the central sierras – mountainous countryside that juts up dramatically around the nation's second largest city, Córdoba – in a bid to discover a different side to this vast land that stretches from the sub-tropical jungles of the north to the Arctic fringes of the south. Many of Argentina's visitors journey to these farthest of frontiers. They head to the border with Brazil to see Iguazú Falls; they journey to Patagonia, the land of glaciers and fjords, to go hiking; but for the most part they ignore the vast swathes of Argentina's interior – relatively undiscovered by international travellers. Located around a ten-hour bus ride west of Buenos Aires, the beautiful peaks, which culminate nearly 3,000m above sea level at Cerro Champaquí, are most popular with local tourists, who flock en masse during the summer months to sample the cool microclimate and escape the intense heat of the cities.

The rolling hills, pebble-fringed streams and rugged scrubland have proved a seductive draw. And I'm not the only one to have been won over by the picture-postcard scenery. The British, shipped over to help construct Argentina's railways at a time when their industrial might was the envy of the world, liked what they saw. Many decided to stay and make Argentina their home, building faux-Tudor houses and settling in small towns like La Cumbre. Hanging onto the traditions of the motherland – and praying to king and country at meal times – perhaps there was something in the windswept, sunny plains that reminded them of an idealised England. The Germans, too, were love-struck (possibly due to the area's uncanny similarity to Central Europe), and began settling in the region in both the 1930s, and again in the aftermath of World War II following the renowned Battle of the River Plate.

This is where all the beer-swilling, tart-munching tradition comes in. In my two weeks travelling around the sierras, I visited two German towns:



La Cumbrecita and Villa General Belgrano, the latter famed for its annual Oktoberfest. Despite their twee, wannabe European vibe, it's the raw natural beauty of the surrounding scenery that leaves the largest impression. La Cumbrecita, 130km north of Córdoba, is just a hamlet of a few restaurants, homes and hotels. In fact, the winding roads that lead uphill to the mountains above it are unsealed dirt tracks with cars forbidden from circulating during the daytime. Whilst the village can heave with visitors in January and February, outside peak season it's an excellent place to come and unwind, with warm temperatures and long hours of sunshine in spring (October and November) and autumn (March and April). The hotels are also great value at this time of year, and often half what they would cost in summer. And best of all, there's hardly a soul about.

Follow the trails from the centre of town in La Cumbrecita and you can work your way towards trout-rich fresh water swimming lakes – known as *balnearios* – or tackle one of the town's several peaks that peer down on top of it. Wandering across the rocky terrain and yellow-green shrub grass, you feel utterly alone. The noise of the wind gently blowing the surrounding vegetation is broken only by a trio

of sheep that totters past us, bleating vocally as they pass. In the distance a lone gaucho rides up a meandering path. But he isn't the sort of cowboy you see in the postcards dressed up in his finest gear. Modestly clothed in a shirt, trousers and a black beret, his

“IN THE DISTANCE A LONE GAUCHO RIDES UP A MEANDERING PATH. BUT HE ISN'T THE SORT OF COWBOY YOU SEE IN POSTCARDS”

cheeks are red and peeling from the sun, and his clothes tattered. Tucked into his belted trousers, a silver hunting knife glints in the sun as he speeds past.

And that was about as close as we came to making friends on our trip. Human ones anyway. That's not to say Argentines are unfriendly – far from it – but in these tranquil spots you don't come across many people. Even larger towns in the sierras, like Mina Clavero, border picturesque countryside where you can walk for only a few minutes out of town and feel truly at one with nature. It's from this particular town that we visited the Parque Nacional de la Quebrada del Condorito, a national park that is one of the country's major breeding grounds for condors. It's not the easiest place in the world to get to – you have to get a local bus that drops you at the

park entrance by the main road, but it's a further 1.5km walk to the welcome centre from there – although it's well worth the effort. Be warned, though, there's no food or drink on sale within the park boundaries, so bring grub and ample protection from the powerful

sun, as there's little shade. The area itself is a wonderfully barren, dramatic stretch of land. Dotted with yellow pampas grasses and rocky boulders that lend the whole park a lunar atmosphere, you wander about feeling thoroughly insignificant as giant condors swoop and soar majestically in the blue sky above.

But the vastest wilderness we visited was Cerro Colorado, six hours by bus from Córdoba, a city

that makes a useful springboard for seeing all the weird and wonderful environs nearby. Colorado is best known for its ancient cave paintings – naive but beautiful motifs scrawled on rock faces with white, black and brown paints – dating from between 1,000 and 1,600AD. Arriving in the valley at sunset was beautiful, as the orange sun descended behind the rocky landscape with thousands of palms fanning out into the distance. Cerro Colorado really does feel like the last place on earth. It's only made up of a handful of houses and, in the evenings, the village's youths hang out at the lone *bodega*, chatting and sipping Quilmes beer. There's no internet here; no phone connections either. In fact, the only people with communications rely on a satellite. We were staying at a basic *posada* costing around £15 a night, run by a friendly but rustic elderly owner. Though both my partner and I speak Spanish, his

