

Tip of the iceberg

Laura French explores the vast, pristine land of Patagonia on a Latin Routes fam trip to Argentina

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“Iceberg ahead!” shouts the Leo DiCaprio-loving voice in my head as I glimpse something quite extraordinary: a cluster of colossal, rugged ice chunks coloured bright white and aquamarine blue, floating on glacial water and jutting out in such bizarre shapes that they look like a Damien Hirst artwork.

Fortunately we’re expecting the icebergs – and we’re not about to collide with them. Behind, snow-capped mountains peep out like dollops of whipped cream; beneath, the water is flat and pristine, like a sheet of shimmering cling film.

It feels like Antarctica, and in fact, I’m not too far away. I’m on a Latin Routes fam trip exploring the Argentine side of Patagonia – the sprawling, sparsely populated region at the southern

end of South America that takes up almost half of Argentina and a decent chunk of Chile.

Mountains, volcanoes, glaciers and desert-like steppe plains fill the vast spaces of this unique land, making up an area that’s around one and a half times the size of the UK, with Welsh, German and anglophone settlements scattered around.

Serious explorers and die-hard mountain climbers flock here in droves, but you needn’t limit its appeal. With the gateways of Bariloche and El Calafate both about two to three hours away by air from Buenos Aires, it’s relatively accessible. And with a handful of soft activities, it’s sellable too, offering just as much for walkers, horse riders and food lovers as it does for full-on, hardcore adventurers.

► BARILOCHE

First up on our tour was San Carlos de Bariloche, a tourist-centric resort set in northern Patagonia’s lake district. Sandwiched between the snow-dusted mountains of the region and the shimmering waters of Lake Nahuel Huapi, this busy, slightly industrial town is a melting pot of Argentine and Alpine culture – heavily influenced by Swiss and German settlers who came in the early 1900s – with rows upon rows of chocolate shops flanking traditional artisanal markets.

Its main draw, though, is the plethora of outdoor adventures available, with skiing in winter and hiking, abseiling, biking, kayaking and more in summer luring an outdoorsy crowd year-round. →

TOP TIP

The best time for hiking in Patagonia is October to March, while Bariloche’s ski season runs June to October



ASK THE EXPERT



Jessica Bain,
director,
Latin Routes

“Patagonia is becoming increasingly popular and we anticipate the destination will grow even more in 2018 with the increased exposure the region is getting. The direct British Airways flight launched from Heathrow to Santiago last year is also having an impact, connecting the UK to Chilean Patagonia more easily. For clients looking to get a taste, recommend at least a week, and if it’s their main reason for going to Argentina or Chile, we suggest two. The region is especially well-suited to clients with an interest in adventure, photography and wildlife, alongside serious trekkers. It’s an adventurer’s paradise and has some of the most beautiful and dramatic scenery on the whole continent.”



LEFT:
Bariloche

RIGHT:
Victoria
Island

BELOW:
Llao Llao
Hotel



➔ There’s a plethora of tours available from the centre; we headed out on a day-long trip with local guides (bookable through Latin Routes), who took us wandering through dense forests surrounded by huge, towering trees in twisted, monster-like shapes with various surprises along the way. Think mate tea tasting beneath the shaded pines; a surprise picnic laid out in front of a mirror-flat lake; and a bagpipe-wielding Argentine suddenly appearing from the depths of the forest with whiskies for us to sample.

Just as memorable was an excursion to Isla Victoria, a 12-mile-long island reached via boat from a lake harbour just outside the town. This lush green, forested patch of land is a magnet for walkers, with sequoia, myrtle and cypress trees shooting up from a ground coloured orange by autumn’s leaves. Getting there was just as spectacular as the island itself, with



Surprises on our forest tour included mate tea tasting and a bagpipe-wielding Argentine offering us whiskies

pointed peaks draped in puffs of mist surrounding us like the mystical forms of Machu Picchu.

Beyond the forests there’s plenty more to see in this region too, including a handful of gaucho-style ranches serving up smoky lamb asados and trout straight from the lake. We visited Estancia Peuma Hue, a cosy, family-run eco-lodge set amid the emerald-green, grassy pastures of Nahuel Huapi National Park, where

horse riding for all levels is offered alongside trekking, kayaking, wine tasting, rafting and more – worth recommending to those wanting to get back to nature in tranquil surroundings.

For clients looking to splash out on a larger, luxury resort in the region, recommend Llao Llao Hotel. Home to a spa and golf course and located half an hour’s drive from Bariloche, it’s the area’s most-celebrated hotel and for good reason, with a remote, serene setting and rustic, traditional feel – all quaint wooden decor, antler-formed light fixtures and a cosy cocktail bar complete with a fireplace backing on to the sprawling lake and mountains.

EL CALAFATE

If northern Patagonia is the Switzerland of South America, then the south is its answer to Iceland. Here the scenery is more dramatic, with the Unesco-listed Los Glaciares ➔



AGENTS' VERDICTS



Millie Windeler,
Ponders Travel

"I was really impressed with the delicious food, friendly people and stunning scenery. I loved that there was a bit of everything, from outdoor adventures for active clients to spa resorts for those wanting to relax."



Eileen Allan,
Cresta World Travel

"I loved El Calafate and Bariloche and would especially recommend the Llao Llao Hotel to those heading to the latter – it had spectacular views and the service was first-class."



Tricia Conroy-Smith,
Off Broadway Travel

"I was blown away by the scenery and how welcome we were made to feel in Argentina. It felt like a very safe environment and I loved all of it, but the Perito Moreno Glacier has to be my highlight – it was breathtaking."

➔ National Park the key attraction for most visitors.

For those wanting to explore it, El Calafate, close to the Chilean border, is the main resort. Located nearly 900 miles south of Bariloche and two hours away by plane, it's a small, quaint town that's quieter and more peaceful than its northern counterpart, surrounded by film-set scenery that spans reddish, desert-like rocks, towering green trees and steep, verdant hills.

Among the park's most famous draws is Upsala Glacier, the second-biggest of its kind in the country and about three times the size of Buenos Aires. We got a glimpse of its mammoth scale on a tour from Estancia Cristina, a historic, remote ranch whose friendly, English-speaking team offer two-and-a-half-hour boat trips across Lake Argentino's glacial, iceberg-dotted waters.

Once there, clients can choose from various tours. We opted for the Discovery tour in a 4x4 and found ourselves jolting up steep, rocky dirt tracks surrounded by dry, Mars-like landscapes, before hiking up to a viewpoint that I haven't quite been able to forget: a huge, solid strip of cerulean water, with a glaring field of jagged white ice just visible behind it. Almost as impressive was the lunch that followed: crispy baked empanadas (stuffed pastries) bursting with meat and cheese, deliciously tender lamb



PICTURES: ESTANCIA CRISTINA/GUSTAVO CHERRIO; LATIN ROUTES/PICASA; RUGGERO ARENA



The glacier is a mass of white shards pointing up like castle turrets, carved in mishmash formations, like cake icing gone wrong

stew, and flan casero covered in indulgently sweet, caramel-like dulce de leche that had me full for days.

But the most memorable trip for

me was a visit to the Perito Moreno Glacier. This colossal spectacle, named after Argentine explorer Francisco Moreno, is one of the most-visited sites in the country and for good reason; picture one huge mass of white shards pointing up like castle turrets, carved in mishmash formations, like the icing on a cake gone wrong.

Exploring it on a boat trip with Hielo y Aventura gave us a chance to admire its intricate detail from just metres away as huge chunks of ice calved and crashed into the lake, and vivid blue blocks that had broken away floated by like shards of shattered glass.

It felt surreal to say the least, like stumbling upon the remains of the last ice age – which we were, effectively. Not that I'd come to expect anything less after 10 days exploring this vast, unspoilt land, where nature rules the roost and where such extraordinary sights – be it giant icebergs, expansive waters or vast, endless mountains – are just part of the plain old everyday.

Book it: Latin Routes offers a tailor-made nine-night trip to Buenos Aires, Bariloche and El Calafate for £12,145 for two people including direct BA flights from Heathrow, domestic flights and accommodation at the Serena Hotel, Villa Huinid and Posada Los Alamos. The price includes private tours, a tango show and high tea in Buenos Aires, and visits to Estancia Peuma Hue, Estancia Cristina and the Perito Moreno Glacier, with transfers and an English-speaking guide throughout. latinroutes.co.uk



ABOVE:
Upsala Glacier

LEFT:
Perito Moreno
Glacier