

A gaucho on a horse herding calves in a field. The gaucho is wearing a dark poncho and a wide-brimmed hat, and is holding a lasso. The horse is dark brown and is in the foreground. In the background, there is a herd of calves and a range of mountains under a blue sky with some clouds.

# BACK in the SADDLE

*The Argentina of NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE's teenage years was a spirited land of poets, gauchos and fervid politics. On his return, decades later, would he recognize the old country?*

#### GIVE ME A STEER

A gaucho rounds up calves for tagging at the Pampa Grande estancia, Salta, northern Argentina

**B**uenos Aires, my beloved. Almost no other city evokes such complex longing or solipsism. “One did not see it as it really was,” wrote the underrated novelist Gordon Meyer of Argentina’s riverside capital, “but as one’s self really was.” For Andrew Graham-Yooll, star reporter of the *Buenos Aires Herald* in the 1970s, this labyrinthine city, further away from London than Beijing, was “an invitation to be unfaithful to every love declared, to break every rule made. . .”

To listen to Carlos Gardel’s 1934 tango “Mi Buenos Aires Querido” and the throat-cutting chords of the *bandoneón*, is, for me, to be flung back to adolescence. The years fall away like dried mud. Out steps a long-haired English schoolboy into the supercharged atmosphere that had seized the country following Juan Perón’s death and then the takeover by his widow Isabelita, a former cabaret dancer, who decreed that 90 per cent of the music played on national radio had to be tango. As one friend put it: “You went down to the river with your girlfriend and you wanted Neil Diamond—and you got tango. It caused a reaction.”

It is 1974, the beginning of the period known as the Dirty War. Green Ford Falcons without number plates flit between the jacarandas—the men inside wearing sunglasses and holding machine guns—on the lookout for students with long hair who might be Montoneros guerrillas. My family have been here a year.

Dysfunctional, but at least now democratic, today’s city is mirrored in a gigantic stainless-steel tulip, 75ft high and weighing 18 tons. The message of this strangely arresting sculpture, designed by Eduardo Catalano and erected in 2002 in the Plaza de las Naciones Unidas, is for Argentines to reflect on their own country and to value what they have—i.e. to forget the brutalizing years of Isabelita and the military dictatorship that overthrew her; the kidnappings, tortures, disappearances; and, more recently, the decades of eye-popping corruption and graft. To reinforce this message, a mechanism is supposed to crank open the six metal petals at dawn and close them at dusk, but this broke down following the tulip’s installation and the sunlight bouncing off the shiny flower pierced the windows of the National Library opposite, stopping anyone inside from reading. As they say here, *muy argentino*.

A former director of the National Library—before Péron “promoted” him to be inspector of poultry and rabbits—was the blind writer and magus Jorge Luis Borges. As many did, I used to read to “Borges”, as everyone called him, even his wife, at his small, dark flat in Maipú 944. It was either there or in London that Argentina’s Homer dazzled me with a parable about a traveller who sets out on a quest to discover the world. The man spends his life gathering images of kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, horses, people. A little before his death he draws a map of his travels and “discovers that his patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face”.

So, in my 60th year, I have circled back to my 17th, looking for traces of the youthful self who lived here at a time when it was a crime to be young, hoping to add a line to the portrait,

but also to the much-changed and changing face of Argentina.

A good place to start is La Biela café in Recoleta. Borges loved the Anglo-Saxon world—his grandmother Fanny was from Northumberland—but he was also a connoisseur of his city’s cafés. His lifesize effigy greets you near the entrance, hands on walking-stick as I recall him, seated sightlessly at a table, like something out of Madame Tussauds rather than a denizen of Buenos Aires, that “vain tangle of wool/of streets that repeat bygone names”, as he wrote.

It was from this spacious, much-bombed café in 1975 that Andrew Graham-Yooll was taken to witness the release of the kidnapped businessman Jorge Born (for \$60million) by the Montoneros leader Mario Firmenich; in a timeless interior like this—with the same long-haired businessmen and elegantly dressed women, tall, arrogant, aloof—where, years later, I tried in vain to arrange an interview with Firmenich (he wanted \$5,000). On the eve of my return, Graham-Yooll reminds me that it was his testimony of having witnessed Firmenich’s handover of Born, in a house near ours in Acassuso, that secured Firmenich’s imprisonment in 1984.

Directly opposite La Biela is the Recoleta cemetery, where Borges hoped to be laid alongside his parents and grandparents; in fact, he is buried in Geneva—like Graham Greene, whose

#### IT TAKES TWO

The tango: fierce, pained, lustful. *Opposite, from top: a street mural depicting life in Buenos Aires; Eduardo Catalano’s sculpture Floralis Genérica; La Recoleta cemetery*



favourite among his own novels, *The Honorary Consul*, is set in the Argentina of those years. Rather as Buenos Aires parodies its European origins—flaunting a Harrods, a Claridge’s, a Hurlingham Club and an ugly clock tower modelled on Big Ben—so is Recoleta, in V.S. Naipaul’s words, “a mimic town”.

A beautiful, wounded nation seeking its identity in plagiarized dreams. That is how a walk through Recoleta’s extravagant cemetery makes me think of Argentina. Compressed into marble mausoleums the size of houses are the families who moulded and misshaped the country. Incontestably the best known is Eva Péron, the Generalissimo’s embalmed first wife, whose cult continues to flourish 65 years after her death. Poking from a grille stuffed with roses, a fresh handwritten note from the sharply diminished “Armed Forces” commends “Evita” for “standing up for social rights”.

Embellished with iron roses, a grey bunker houses Argentina’s quintessential dictator, General Manuel Rosas—“the implacable butcher” as Borges called him—who died in exile in Southampton in 1877. A journey I never made was with Bruce Chatwin to the dairy farm where Rosas sold milk for two pence a quart, and to see his grave. Chatwin died in the same year, 1989, that Rosas’s remains were repatriated with enormous fanfare to the Recoleta. A riderless horse draped with Rosas’s symbolic red poncho

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accompanied the casket, alleged by critics to contain the bones of a Blitz-blasted cow. Also in the procession were 5,000 gauchos and members of the security services dressed as members of the Mazorca, Rosas’s dreaded secret police—nicknamed the *colorados*, after their ponchos—although not many of the estimated two million observers lining the streets knew this. The Mazorca dumped the corpses of their victims over the walls of the Recoleta—as, in copycat style, did Isabelita’s paramilitary successors, the Ford Falcon-driving Triple A.

It is no easier in Argentina to avoid the colour red than to ignore the kitsch, gnawing clutch of the tango. Both themes unite in Tango Rojo at the Faena Hotel, in the old dockland opposite the landmark presidential palace, the Casa Rosada. Reached through a crimson interior designed by Philippe Starck, this enjoyable show, slick as brilliantine, efficiently captures what the novelist Ernesto Sábato called “the hybrid dance of a hybrid people”. You mock it at your peril—the tight-fitting flapper’s caps and cigarette holders, the butcher’s cut looks, the faces austere with desire. “Tango is the soya of Buenos Aires,” said current president Mauricio Macri when he was the city’s mayor—the country’s most important export, though of questionable cultural value locally.

“Argentina is Buenos Aires, and then there is the countryside,” believed Borges’s literary rival Julio Cortázar. I discovered the



## GAUCHO LARKS

Clockwise from top left: the vast sweep of scenery at Pampa Grande, viewed from the highest point on the 30,000 hectare *estancia*; a lone gaucho rides out at Pampa Grande; two-year-old bulls during selection for castration at Pampa Grande; gauchos prepare *mate de yerba*—the Argentine national brew



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Pablo Marcel Flores is the third generation of his family to be born on Pampa Grande. Its landscape is etched into the lines of his hands and face

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gauchos I worked with are dead. Don Julio, who had never seen a mountain or the sea; Pedro, whose broad leather belt chinked with silver coins; Gallo; Carlazan. . .

**I**n the 1990s, cattle yielded to soya. Today's young *peones* straddle tractors and motorbikes. “We play polo now, but to get guys on horseback. . . They don't know how to ride.” As for the beef herds which helped create Argentina's original wealth, soya has driven these out to the margins. “Pampa” comes from the Quechua word for flat, but the Indians first applied it to the Andean valleys where the gauchos still are. To find a working gaucho—a national icon as kitsch yet authentic as the tango—I must follow the cattle trail 800 miles north, to the heartland of Rosas's legendary predecessor, the gaucho hero Güemes.

On my only previous visit to Salta, shortly after the 1976 military coup, the mayor let slip that Güemes, the leader of the local resistance against the Spanish, was probably a hispanicization of the Scottish name Wemyss; and that the colours of Güemes's celebrated red and black striped poncho, later popularized by Rosas (“black for the death of Güemes, red for the blood of his soldiers”) and which even I used to wear on chilly night rides, were the colours of the Wemyss tartan. I share this story with an



taut horizon of the pampas at 17, when I worked as a cowhand on an *estancia* west of Buenos Aires. A pen drawing of a gaucho I had done and presented to the local *boliche*, or bar, was spotted five years ago hanging behind the counter. Forty-one years on, I hanker to see if the drawing is still there. The last train went through Hortensia in 1976, so I have to go by car. A night's rain lay in pools on the dirt road. Reflected in them were avenues of eucalyptus that have doubled in size since I was last here. But Hortensia has shrunk savagely, the *boliche* boarded up, the only vestige of my artwork on the crumbling wall a solitary pin-hole. When I meet my old manager by chance, he confirms that the



attractive *Salteña* woman who rode side-saddle as a girl in the annual gaucho parade to Güemes's equestrian statue, on the anniversary of his death on June 17, 1821. She laughs. "Tell a gaucho he should be wearing a kilt, he'll kill you."

**G**üemes would have known Pampa Grande well as the base of his guerrilla force. Situated on a plain hedged in by mountains, and irrigated by a lake that attracts 230 bird species, this mesmerizing *estancia* is the Shangri-La of the Andes. Argentines are truest to themselves when talking in hectares. At 30,000 hectares (115 square miles), Pampa Grande is nearly twice the size of Liechtenstein. "It's everything you can see," the co-manager Anthony Leach tells me, standing on the topmost vantage point and looking down over not so much a plot of land as a kingdom. "Quite a nice feeling, really."

Early the next morning I ride out to watch the gauchos clip the ears of calves and select young bulls by their "ball circumference". Leach says: "The bigger the balls, the better the bull." Swish of tails, twitch of ears, glint of horns like the white wingtips of the *carancho* hawk. It's been a while. During a *mate* break I fall into conversation with one of the gauchos. Pablo Marcel Flores is the third generation of his family who was born on Pampa Grande. Its landscape is etched into each line of his hands and face. Every year, Pablo says, they lose 200 calves, half of them to condors that fly in from craters the other side of Mont Pirgua. Wild pumas account for the other half. Six years ago, Pablo trapped a puma in a fork in the branches of a pepper tree. He climbed up to grab it, but his hand went into its mouth. He takes off his woollen glove to show me the scar where the puma razored his fingertip.

With his free hand, he slashed the puma's throat with his knife.

"Did you then eat it?"

"Yes!"

"What was it like?"

"Tasty." □

## ARGENTINA

Plan South America ([plansouthamerica.com](http://plansouthamerica.com)) offers seven days in Argentina, with three nights in Buenos Aires at the Park Hyatt and one night at the Alvear Palace, two nights in Salta at Pampa Grande, flights from London with British Airways and internal flights with Aerolíneas Argentinas, as well as transfers, city and art tours, and a Rojo Tango show, from £3,997 per person.

### NEXT TIME YOU'RE IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD...

Get squiffy on the laid-back charm as well as the justly famous wines of **Mendoza**, 1,000km west of Buenos Aires, in the shadow of the Andes. Given the oceanic quantities of Malbec that the region produces, you'd never guess that it's actually a cunningly irrigated semi-desert. For those who take such things seriously, the fact that Robert Parker, the influential American grape guru, awarded a 2009 Finca Altamira 99 points out of a possible 100 is reason enough to hop on the next flight to Mendoza—99 reasons, perhaps. But although the wineries are the main attraction, the town itself is a pleasing concatenation of eclectic architecture, grand plazas, leafy avenues (must be that cunning irrigation again) and thronging bars, restaurants and cafés. Not to be missed is Francis Mallmann's Siete Fuegos restaurant, in the Uco Valley. The name means Seven Fires—grills gone wild. Vegetarians can console themselves with the wine list.

The **Iguazú Falls** bestride the border between Argentina and Brazil (on which side they become the Iguacu Falls). They are undeniably spectacular in either Spanish or Portuguese. However, you can get a teensy bit closer to them on the Argentinian side—which is a good thing, as long as you don't have a problem with clambering about on narrow walkways above gigantic volumes of raging white water. "Poor Niagara," was a gobsmacked Eleanor Roosevelt's reaction.

An altogether different aquatic experience awaits at the **Los Glaciares** national park at the opposite end of the country, in southern Patagonia, a vast wilderness of jagged mountains, rolling steppes and virgin forests of *lenga*, *ñire* and *guindo* trees. Between the towering Fitz Roy massif and the huge, turquoise-coloured Lago Argentino is the Perito Moreno glacier. Not merely uniquely beautiful but also uniquely noisy—the ice expands until the warmer waters beneath cause it to fracture, with a great booming crack, the consequent implosion sending huge waves crashing on to the terminal moraine. The net result of this is that the glacier currently maintains its precious and increasingly rare equilibrium: Perito Moreno is one of the only glaciers left on the planet that recedes and grows in equal measure, maintaining a sense of overall balance. As to where to stay, forgo the backpackery hub towns of El Chaltén and El Calafate in favour of the sheep-farm chic of Eolo, a lodge on 7,000 windswept acres, with views all the way to Chile's Torres del Paine national park. [eolo.com.ar](http://eolo.com.ar)