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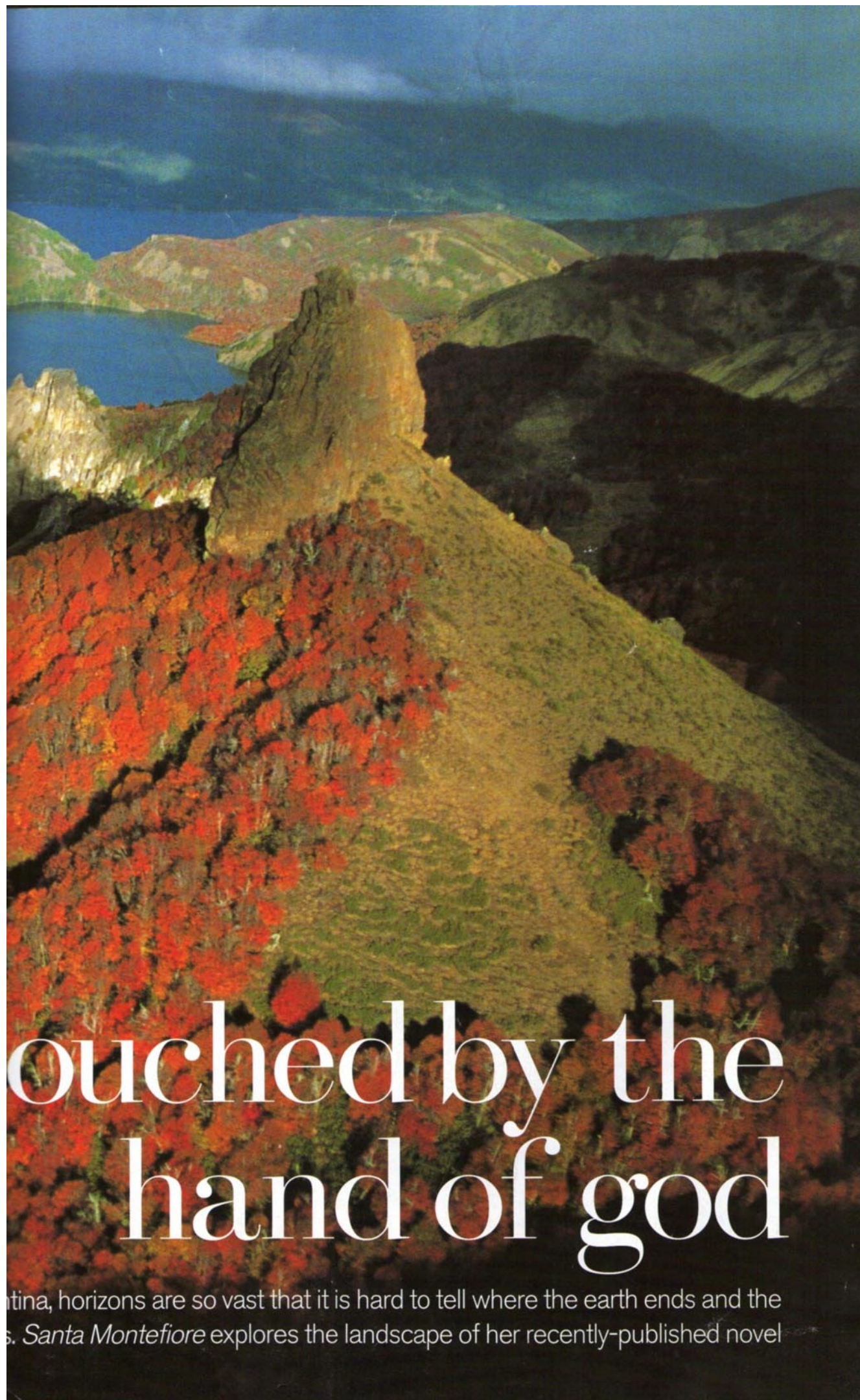
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ntina, horizons are so vast that it is hard to tell where the earth ends and the
s. *Santa Montefiore* explores the landscape of her recently-published novel



Latin lessons Clockwise from left: Santa at estancia La Paz; Dario Arias and Shakespeare the parrot; estancia Arroyo Verde; estancia El Bordo de las Lanzas; one of the famous lakes of Patagonia



in the world – it is situated in the refined quarter of La Recoleta.

Today, shop fronts once again display their wealth, showcasing the latest European fashions behind polished brass and glass, and the parks are green and manicured, sponsored by corporations. And yet Buenos Aires still possesses the sensual, languid charm of an old-fashioned city. In the late nineteenth century, homesick European immigrants recreated their former

homes in the city's architecture, which is why the Teatro Colón echoes La Scala in Milan, the Retiro station looks like Waterloo, and the wide sycamore-lined streets are reminiscent of the south of France. Here, small cafés, complete with aged waiters, spill out on to the dusty pavements, offering *alfajores* and *medias lunas* pastries – too delicious to resist – and dog walkers still earn their living taking as many as 30 animals for a run among the trimmed flower beds and decorative ponds. Heady scents of gardenia and caramel

I lost my heart to Argentina when I was just nineteen years old. I was seduced by the flat, humid plains of the Pampas, the languor of a people whose lives are played out against a backdrop of eucalyptus trees, gardenia, glossy ponies, and a horizon so vast, it is difficult to tell where the earth ends and the sky begins.

When I left, I poured all my feelings of nostalgia into a novel about two young Argentine lovers, Santi and Sofia, who embark on an affair that can only bring shame upon their families. Once discovered, Sofia is sent away to Europe and spends the next 24 years in exile. A family tragedy then brings her home, where she finds herself face-to-face with Santi and a love that has never died. *Meet Me Under the Ombu Tree* is an allegory of my own affair with Argentina.

A recent visit rekindled my passion for a land that still stirs many tender memories. Beyond the elusive Pampas, the lyrical and familiar landscape of my early adulthood, I explored a new Argentina in the red hills of Salta and blue lakes of Patagonia, and opened another chapter of experience.

In November, it was the middle of the Argentine spring. The leafy plazas of Buenos Aires shimmered with blossoming jacarandas and birds observed the rush of morning traffic from the breezy heights of the red ceibo trees. It was not only a nostalgic return for myself, but for my mother too; it has been 50 years since she left the neat 'British' culs-de-sac of Hurlingham in the suburbs of the capital.

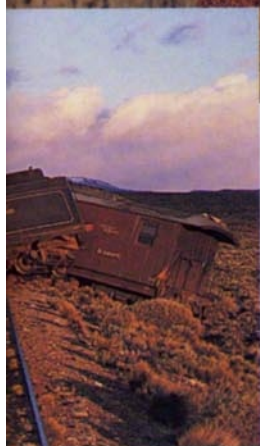
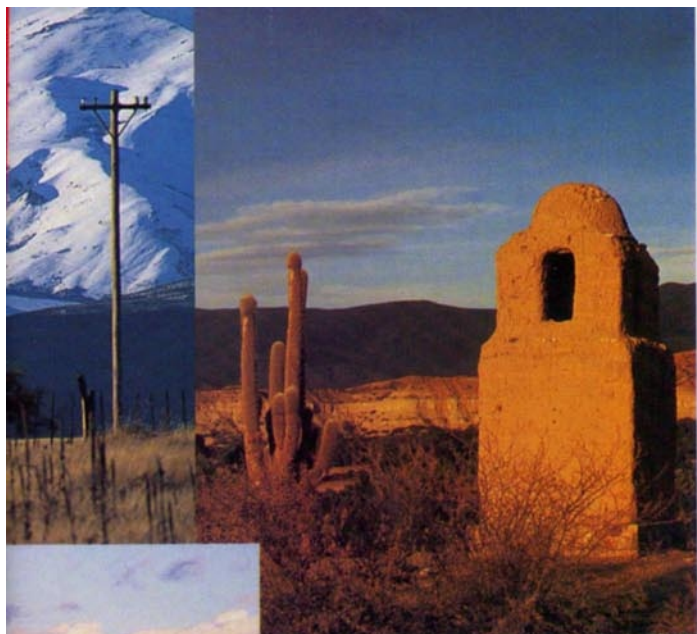
We stayed at the Alvear Palace Hotel, which is probably the oldest and most elegant hotel in the city. Opened in the early Thirties – the golden era of a country that used to number among the richest

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merge with the smell of diesel from the antique buses. Buenos Aires is defined by these contrasts; European restraint and Latin passion dance together in an easy tango.

The real Argentina, however, unfolds as you leave the city behind and head out to the countryside, where the estancia epitomises the nature of a country so vast it encapsulates every type of terrain within its borders.

Our first stop was at estancia El Bordo de las Lanzas in Salta province, a vibrant, mountainous region famous for its textiles, which reflect the bright colours of neighbouring Bolivia. This working tobacco and cattle farm is owned by a charming family whose head, Dario Arias, could have stepped straight out of a Gabriel García Márquez novel. Built in 1790 on 6,200 acres of agricultural land, the estancia is colonial in style and built around a fragrant courtyard. As



The owners of the estancia, Mauricio and Meme Larivière, are famous for creating this corner of paradise. (When I was in Buenos Aires, any mention of my impending visit to Arroyo Verde was met with envious looks.) Gazing out of the sitting-room windows at the snow-capped mountains and lush valley, I basked in my good fortune. Arroyo Verde offers hunting, fishing, and riding within its 26,000 acres, on which Mauricio keeps red stag, cattle, horses,

and sheep, but being pregnant, I settled for quiet strolls and eating.

I took a walk as the sun dissolved into the valley and watched the gauchos gallop up the dusty track, their leather boots and shiny coin belts glittering in the waning light. Historically, the gauchos were wild *mestizo* (people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood) – outlaws who rustled cows and sold the hides and tallow, in exchange for *maté* (the traditional herbal drink) and tobacco. Now, they work the land all over Argentina. It is reassuring to see that in a world that is changing so fast, the gauchos have remained true to their culture. □

'Meet Me Under the Ombu Tree' by Santa Montefiore is published by Hodder and Stoughton on 1 March, £12.99.

Alexander Ross

Travel facts

Tailor-made trips to Argentina and stays at all of the estancias visited by Santa can be arranged through **Exsus** (020 7292 5050; www.exsus.com). A similar seven-night round trip, with international flights on **BA**, costs from £4,380 per person, based on two people sharing. For information on internal flights, ring **Lan Chile** (01293 596 607).

Shopping in Buenos Aires

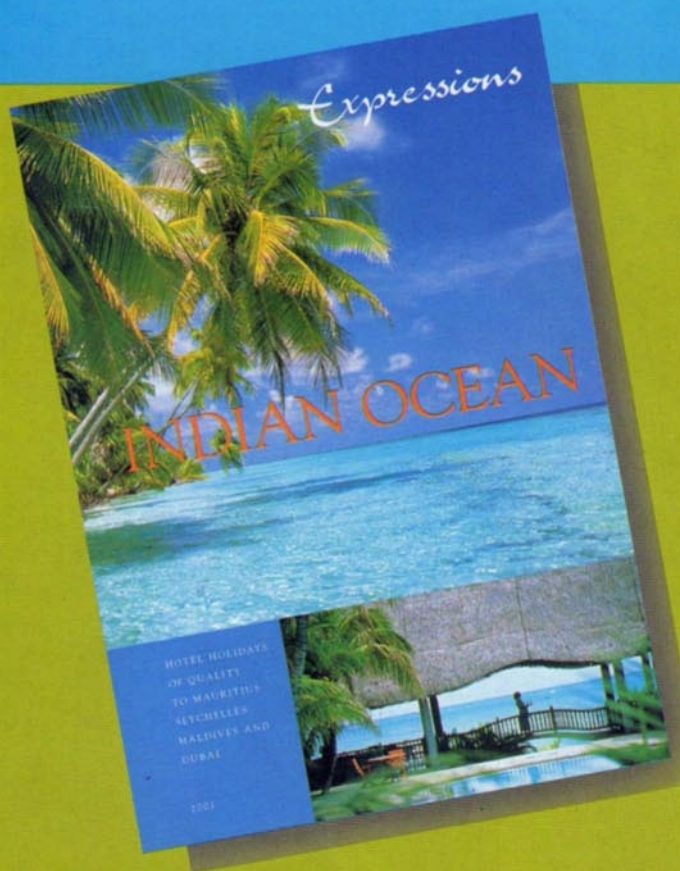
Guido, Montevideo 1613 (0054 11 4812 3939) for leather goods and silverware. **Arandu**, Paraguay 1259 (0054 11 4816 6191) for gaucho trousers, leather boots, and traditional Argentine riding and horse equipment. **Juan C. Pallarols**, Defensa 1039 (0054

11 4361 7360) for beautiful hand-crafted buckles, frames, and ornaments. His father made the famous silver sarcophagus for Eva Peron. Other clients range from the Vatican to European royalty. Expensive, but definitely worth it.

Dining out in Buenos Aires

Go to the Puerto Madero district. The old wharf and warehouse have been converted into restaurants and bars. **Cabana las Lila** offers wonderful steak from the owner's estancia. Alternatively, try tea at **La Recolata**, which overlooks the atmospheric walled cemetery where Eva Peron is buried. And buy some delectable Dulce de Leche – a traditional Argentine milk and sugar spread.

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