



Words by MARK C. O'FLAHERTY

# BEYOND THE BEATEN TRACK

*Wild West landscapes and boutique hotels –  
Argentina's northwest is the perfect mix of roughing  
it and luxury. Just don't go in the rainy season*



SALTA  
ARGENTINA

ROUTE 60  
CEMENTERY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAMY, JAVIER ETCHEVERRÍA/ALAMY, MARK C. O'FLAHERTY



# ELLEtravel



Despite earlier assurances to the contrary, it was very obvious we weren't going to be driving any further that day. We'd had an elegant lunch at Estancia Colomé, just outside Salta, while waiting for the all clear, driven for an hour, and then... where once there was road, there was river: vast, fast-flowing, mud-brown. So wild, it created its own surf. 'This hasn't happened in six years,' said someone with a walkie-talkie. 'We'll tow you through in about an hour with a tractor.' My partner and four other not-quite-departing Colomé guests looked sceptical and well and truly adjacent to their comfort zone. An hour later, half a tree floated past at high speed, as if towards a waterfall's edge and we drove back to the vineyard, defeated and largely stranded for the foreseeable. But I had a plan...

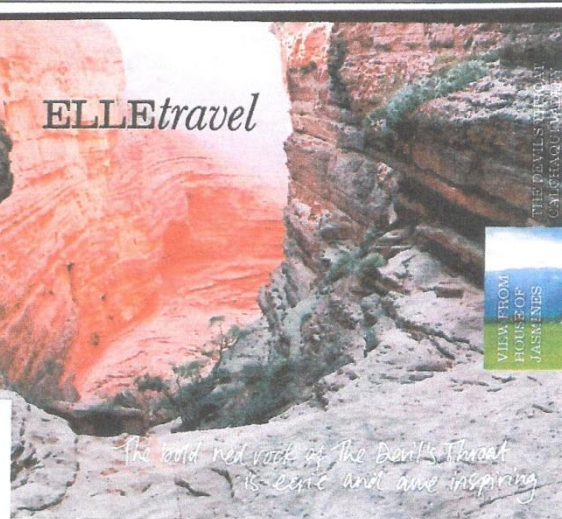
The journey around the region of Salta in northern Argentina had, so far, been merely mildly adventurous. We'd flown there from Buenos Aires. Harry at PlanBA – our tour operator, fixer and 'man in Buenos Aires' – had warned us the drive might, on occasion, be hairy: some of the roads aren't really roads, many come with vertiginous mountain aspects and unexpected rain can cause havoc (rainy season is from December to March). A few days earlier, we'd been towed out of a ravine next to an alligator sanctuary. I'd never before been in a car

whose wheels churned up mud across the windscreen rather than moving. I thought it only happened in films.

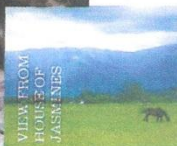
And yet, misadventures aside, Salta – which borders Bolivia to the north and Chile to the west – remains the most beautiful place I've ever set eyes on. You have to forgive its capricious tantrums. I have never experienced so many dramatically different, wild and alien landscapes in such a short period of time, while bedding down in serious luxury night after night. One minute there are lush, velvet-green Hebridean hills; a mile

later, Wile E Coyote red-earth desert with thousands of seven-foot cacti spread out as far as the eye can see, like some vast, static army in thorny camouflage.

After several days of 85 degree, blue-sky poolside lazing at the whitewashed-elegant House of Jasmynes (previously actor Robert Duvall's private residence), we moved to Estancia El Bordo de las Lanzas, about an hour from Salta, a rich, dark, colonial, antique-filled estancia that's still a family home. It's the embodiment of genteel Argentinian estancia life – every meal time calls for fine ornate china and silver cutlery, there's sunset horseriding before rounds of gin and tonic, and every night is a dinner party. ➤



*The bold red rock of The Devil's Throat is eerie and awe inspiring*



VIEW FROM HOUSE OF JASMYNES

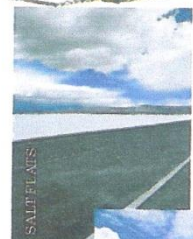
THE DEVIL'S THROAT CANYON



SEA PATIO DE CATA



CHURCH MOLINOS



SALT FLATS



ESTANCIA EL BORDO



HOUSE OF JASMYNES

*The vastness of Argentina's salt flats plays tricks on your eyes*

SALT FLATS



From El Bordo we took Route 9 further northwest towards the province of Jujuy, stopping at the tiny, clay-coloured adobe market town of Purmamarca for a lunch

of steak washed down with Cerveza Salta Negra, a kind of effervescent, sweet stout that's more Coca Cola than Guinness. We drove onwards and upwards, upwards and upwards, to an altitude of 4,200 metres – where we felt light-headed and, most bizarrely, couldn't whistle because of the thin air – then



down again to the Salinas Grandes (salt flats), where it's difficult to establish from sight alone what is solid, liquid or air. Black clouds streaked across an otherwise blindingly bright blue sky and we took pictures of each other leaping into the distance and lying flat on the dazzling, crystalline white earth. The salt resembles the crust of a frozen lake, or clouds that have become heavy and descended below the level of the horizon.

On our journey, it was the cemeteries I found most incredible. They were as beautiful as they were moving: simple stick crucifixes that had succumbed to the weather and come awry standing next to ornate colonial-style iron crosses, gleaming white gravestones and mounds of pebbles. There was one huge, decorous graveyard at the foot of a lush green mountain on the way to Purmamarca, and another on the desert road from Cafayate to Colomé, just past a ghost town with an abandoned post



office and rusted petrol pumps. Its prosaic headstones stood within sculptural boulders in the dusty earth, covered in brightly coloured garlands of flowers that had been hung during a festival a few days before. The place felt so remote, it seemed inconceivable that anyone would ever visit. But the flowers were vibrant signs of life, memory and tribute.

Much of our trip took the form of an elongated loop. First, down from Salta to Cafayate, a journey of about 100 miles, with one pit-stop for rather too many delicious empanadas (essentially mini Cornish pasties) at the rustic, but wonderful, El Papabuelo

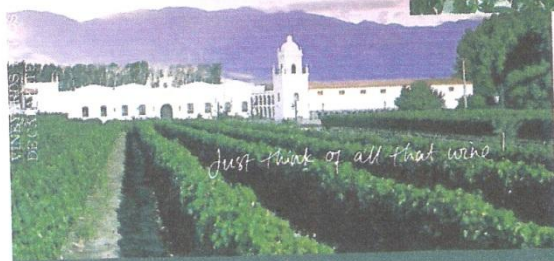
in El Carril, and several more to take in the sights around Quebrada de las Conchas – The Devil's Throat. This was the most mesmerising and disorientating of the attractions; a cave full of distorted, rippled red stone with a vast back wall that looked like the bottom of a valley tipped up on its side, trees growing towards you, as if defying the laws of gravity.

After a stay at the luxurious ranch-like Patios de Cafayate and a night out at the



riotous local folk festival that coincided with our stay, we began our drive up Route 40 towards Colomé, prepared for the worst. 'You'll see a sign for a short cut, but don't take it!' warned someone at Cafayate. 'The Dakar Rally drove through last week and destroyed it.' Naturally. The first hour or so was plain sailing. Then the asphalt road ended and we began driving through sand and over rocks, entranced by the ever-weirder and more spectacular boulder formations, ghost towns and frequent sightings of condors gliding overhead. Just after the village of Molinos – whose tiny church is hung with the most charming Andean, woven, Stations of the Cross – we were towed through a small river by a tractor. Then, for an hour, we wondered if we'd taken a wrong turn and were off-roading further into the desert. Surely nothing could be out here? Surely this can't qualify as an actual route on a map? Then we came to a sign for Bodega Colomé.

Colomé is the incredible, impossible, Fitzcarraldo of organic-wine resorts, built and



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY, MARK C. O'LAURITY





planted by tycoon Donald Hess – with no expense spared – in the middle of a high-altitude nowhere. One of the most luxurious bodegas in Argentina, it takes up the whole village, produces well-respected wines (the Syrah is a stand-out) and, most bizarrely, has an architecturally phenomenal museum devoted to the contemporary art of James Turrell. It's a curious and delightful experience to go from off-roading through hell to walking into one of several vast, disorienting, pristine light installations by one of the world's foremost conceptual artists.

Colomé was bliss. Until it came time to leave, of course, and that tiny river we'd expressed only mild alarm at being towed through a few days before, had turned into an impassable force of nature. But as I said earlier, I had a plan...

I called Harry in Buenos Aires. 'A helicopter is nearly £2,000 so that's out, but I saw a Caterpillar truck make it most of the way through the river when it was moving trees to try to stop the town flooding. Abandon the car and get in that!'

And so, after another night of enforced luxury (poor us) at the estancia, with a little palm-greasing for the driver in the form of crates of vintage Colomé wines, we dressed in swimwear and vests, sealed our Mandarin Duck luggage in bin liners and climbed aboard a juddering piece of very heavy machinery to plough our way to the other side of the river. Once there, we made our way to the Hacienda de Molinos for empanadas, humitas and some restorative Malbec, while we waited for

Santi, the guide Harry had arranged to drive us to Salta for a flight to Buenos Aires.

'It's going to be a tough drive,' warned Santi on arrival. 'And you won't make your flight.' It was, and we didn't, but Santi was our own Indiana Jones and the experience was as amazing as the scenery we drove through. The rains in Salta had done much more than swell the river at Molinos: an

hour after leaving the hacienda, we hit a landslide several thousand metres up a mountain, on a hairpin bend. Santi jumped out, waded through gushing water over perilous, freshly fallen rocks,

hurled what he had identified as the most troublesome boulders over the cliff, and drove us over it and through. It was a feat he repeated time and time again until we got back to the city where we checked in to the Legado Mitico hotel, changed out of our mud-covered swimwear and headed to the bar for cheese and wine. 'So, how was your journey in?' asked the waitress. ■



## NEED TO KNOW

### WHERE TO STAY

ESTANCIA COLOME, Colomé. Doubles from £211, B&B.

[Enq.bodegacolome.com](http://Enq.bodegacolome.com)

ESTANCIA EL BORDO DE LAS LANZAS, El Bordo. Doubles

from £224, all inclusive.

[Enq.estanciaelbordo.com](http://Enq.estanciaelbordo.com)

HOUSE OF JASMINES, Salta.

Doubles from £215, B&B.

[Enq.houseofjasmynes.com](http://Enq.houseofjasmynes.com)

LEGADO MITICO, Salta.

Doubles from £115, B&B.

[Enq.legadomitico.com](http://Enq.legadomitico.com)

PATIOS DE CAFAYATE, Cafayate.

Doubles from £145, B&B.

[Enq.patiosdecafayate.com](http://Enq.patiosdecafayate.com)

**GETTING THERE**

Air France flies from London to

Buenos Aires via Paris, from

£806 return. [Enq.airfrance.co.uk](http://Enq.airfrance.co.uk)

LAN Airlines flies from

Buenos Aires to Salta from

£329 return. [Enq.lan.com](http://Enq.lan.com)

**GETTING AROUND**

Car hire is essential. Holiday

Autos offers seven days 4x4

hire from £774. [Enq.holidayautos.co.uk](http://Enq.holidayautos.co.uk)

If you don't want

to go alone, PlanBA offers

a week in the best estancias,

including transfers, from

£1,787. [Enq.planba.com](http://Enq.planba.com)

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