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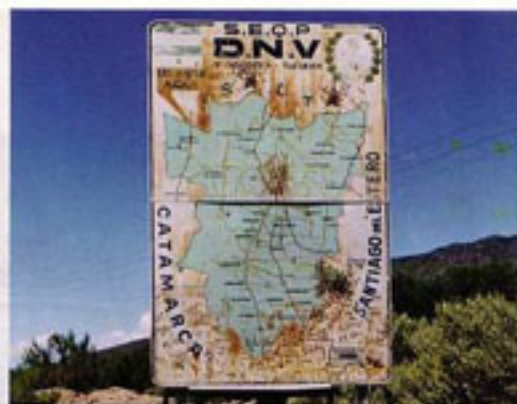
Dramatic Detours

Clockwise from above: The colonial-style porch at Viñas de Cafayate hotel, in Cafayate; a road sign along Ruta 40; the 12-room Viñas de Cafayate abuts Cerro San Isidro mountain.



We were somewhere around 9,000 feet when it dawned on me why the car was struggling. A few miles back I had hit a gaping hole hard enough that the trunk of the VW hatchback had popped open. For the next half-hour, I had figured that was the reason this little four-cylinder was wheezing. But, no, it wasn't that at all. It was the altitude. For two hours I had been navigating hairpin turns, watching the spectacular Argentine countryside fall away as we climbed ever upward, the wheels kicking up clouds of dust that now covered every surface inside the car, including those of its three occupants, myself and two friends.

Back in Salta, the rental-car shop owner had pulled out a map and highlighted his recommended route for our five-day trip to Mendoza. His was a meandering, often ridiculously inconvenient way that stuck entirely to major highways.



"But we want to go out *here*," I said, pointing at the green line that marked the dirt of Argentina's hallowed Ruta 40.

"No," he responded, pointing back at his highlighted lines. "This road is good."

And so I smiled, took the map, and headed in the opposite direction, up over the 10,000-foot Piedra del Molino pass toward Cachi, where we would pick up Ruta 40 and begin the long journey south.

Commonly called La Cuarenta, this famed stretch of pavement and dirt covers more than 3,000 miles from Argentina's northern border with Bolivia all the way to Cabo Virgenes in the south. It is one of the longest roads in the Americas, and along the way it crosses 18 major rivers and 236 bridges, touches 13 lakes and salt flats, and passes by 20 national parks as it follows the spine of the Andes across all manner of ecosystems and jaw-dropping topography.

The road, though, is largely unknown outside of Argentina. I was drawn to its mystique: I had read that Che Guevara traveled down this very highway on his year-long motorcycle journey through Latin America. I was also eager to sample the country's famous—and famously affordable—wines and beef. Though Argentina has recovered from its 2001 economic collapse, in which the peso plummeted and citizens took to the streets to demand the government's ouster, the country is still a bargain for Americans.

STARTING IN SALTA, A LOVELY CITY AT THE FOOT OF THE eastern Andes known to Argentines as La Linda (literally, "the beautiful"), we drove through a stretch of red dirt littered with darker red rocks, a vista eerily reminiscent of the lander shots beamed down from Mars. Every half-hour, it seemed, the landscape would change. Outside Cachi, the snowcapped Andes appeared at last, towering 7,000 feet over a plain dotted with saguaro cacti and signs warning of crossing llamas. Then it was on to the moon: the dirt turned a pale yellow as we approached the sandstone formations known as Las Flechas, jagged knives of brittle rock that stick up from the earth like, well, arrows, which is how they got their name.

We finally hit pavement at kilometer 1,078 (the markers count down from Salta to Mendoza, and then start again at zero as you head farther »)

south), just outside San Carlos, where we witnessed a sunset unlike any I'd seen—a mix of bloodred and deep orange and purple-tinged clouds that made the sky over the town's cathedral look as if it were on fire. San Carlos is the entrance into an enormous valley between two ranges; Ruta 40 is straight and smooth here, surrounded by vineyards that are some of the highest on earth.

The Viñas de Cafayate Wine Resort, hidden by vines and ringed by mountains, is a mile above the village of Cafayate. A fireplace crackled off the lobby; we sat down in front of it and ordered a bottle of the local varietal, a white called Torrontés de Cafayate that smelled sweet but was actually dry and crisp. At the hotel's restaurant, we selected a handful of the menu's oddest dishes: llama pâté; *pacú*, a local river fish served *lomo*-style (tenderloin); more llama, this time a loin in



Authentic Argentina
Clockwise from below: At La Palmera, wolverine skins, antlers, and horseshoes set the mood; the Andes form a picturesque backdrop; tables await platters of *chivito*, or roasted goat, at La Palmera.

a Malbec reduction. Each dish was excellent, and was even better once I did the math: the most expensive entrée on the menu was \$7.

Less than an hour from Cafayate, just across the border of the Tucumán province, are the remnants of an indigenous civilization called Quilmes. Part of the regional Diaguita/Calchaquí culture, the Quilmes came under Incan influence in the 15th century and then fiercely resisted the Spaniards before falling to them in 1667. At its height, in the early 17th century, the Quilmes tribe numbered nearly 5,000. In the ruin's small museum, we examined arrowheads and pottery shards; outside we scrambled over rock walls and peered into the stone houses built into the cliffs. The sun was high and hot, and to reach the shrines atop the village's tallest peaks, we had to hike straight up a trail for 20 minutes. From our perch we could see additional ruins, hidden by brush, that had clearly not yet been restored.

DRIVING SOUTH ON RUTA 40 THE NEXT DAY, WE CRUISED for hours through the high desert on an arrow-straight paved stretch of highway. Our destination was Talampaya, an under-visited national park sometimes referred to as Argentina's Grand Canyon. It was here—a place of towering red cliffs and 2,000-year-old petroglyphs etched in black by indigenous nomads—that we were tipped off by some locals to what would be our best meal in Argentina. Our new friends drew up a crude map that, if I was picking up their high-speed Spanish correctly, would lead us to the best goat around.

And that is how we found ourselves at La Palmera, a clay-floored restaurant with puma and wolverine skins on the walls that has no menu and serves just one dish: *chivito*, baby goat, a tantalizingly tender meat cooked *a la parrilla* in a kitchen that is open to the elements. Our waiter, a 60-year-old with a huge smile, brought serving after serving, piled on a single plate that he refilled and dropped in the center of the table until we couldn't eat any more. Unlike adult goat, *chivito* is not gamy but has a rich, buttery »





THE VERY CHARM OF A ROAD TRIP IS IN ITS UNPREDICTABILITY. And so, sometime after lunch on day four, we made a spur-of-the-moment detour. Hanging a right off a long stretch of smooth pavement, we headed directly toward the Andean cordillera on Ruta 436. The road pointed straight at the massive peaks, which were almost completely covered in snow, and pitched into a narrow sliver between two of them. There it followed a dry river and climbed steadily upward.

Barreal is a small mountain town in the Calingasta Valley that sits in the shadow of the Andean peaks Aconcagua and Mercedario. A farming town known for its garlic, onions, lavender, and anise, it has forests, lush fields of green, and air that smells of licorice. After more than three days' driving through the red and brown semiarid deserts of northwestern Argentina, it was as if we'd opened a portal into another world. In Barreal, life was flourishing.

Posada San Eduardo, a smartly restored 19th-century farmhouse, is owned by Ricardo Zunino, a former Formula One race-car driver. When we pulled into the driveway, Zunino emerged wearing boots, a full-brimmed hat, and a quilted shirt. A cat and two dogs trotted out behind him; birds chirped from the nearby apple orchards. After inheriting the property from his parents, Zunino gave up the fast life in Europe and retired to Barreal to tend to his horses. It's not hard to see why he chose to stay.

"Here," he said, gesturing at the tiled patio and a small brick building, "is where we serve breakfast in the morning. If you like, you can also ride horses. Make yourself at home."

Maria, the resident cook, housekeeper, and hostess, lit fires in our rooms' adobe fireplaces, and we settled on the patio for some dinner. Zunino appeared with a bottle of Colón Malbec from Mendoza and pointed out the moon and two extremely bright stars that turned out not to be stars at all. Jupiter and Venus were in perfect alignment with the moon, something that happens only once every 28 years. The skies here are so clear that two major observatories have been built in the hills looming over Barreal to the east.

The region is also, we learned at breakfast, a violent seismic area. As I finished off the last of our *medialunas* (croissants), the one constant »

Hotel Views Clockwise from above: The sinuous staircase at the Park Hyatt Mendoza; a guest room at Posada San Eduardo, owned by a former Formula One race-car driver; the posada's central courtyard, where *medialunas* and coffee are served every morning.



flavor reminiscent of suckling pig. During the course of this authentic Argentinean feast—10 platters of *chivito*—silverware was never offered, and we did our best to clean off our hands with the thin, waxy paper napkins you find throughout Argentina. It hardly mattered. Sometimes the most memorable meals are the ones that you happen upon.

Three bottles of local Malbec, three empanadas, three salads, three creamy flans and untold baskets of fresh bread later, we stumbled out having spent just \$30. As we left, we danced with the handful of other patrons, posed for photos under the wolverine skins, and bought a dozen beef empanadas for the next day's car snacks. The waiter also gave us three small bottles of red wine with which to chase them down. Fortunately we had no driving ahead of us—our hotel was a few hundred yards away.

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DRIVING

of all breakfasts in Argentina, the patio began to rumble. It went on that way for 10 seconds or so, no one paying it any mind. A server smiled and refilled my coffee. Not even the dog, lying at our feet, flinched.

SOMEWHERE AROUND SAN JUAN, THE VINEYARDS begin to come fast and furious. This is Mendoza Province, the heart of Argentina's thriving wine industry, which ranks fifth in global production. Though we were tempted to turn off at one of the many wineries, we pressed on. We'd tasted many fine wines over the past few days, and we had to get to the city of Mendoza for our flight to Buenos Aires the next day. Our last hour on Ruta 40 was unremarkable, and we were feeling melancholy. Adding to the mood was the arrival of the first clouds we'd seen in days, followed by a soaking rain that rolled in fast over the semidesert south of San Juan.

They say Mendoza has more trees than people, and, as we drove into town, that seemed about right. It is a cosmopolitan city speckled with landscaped parks, boasting wide avenues lined with leafy sycamore and eucalyptus trees.

Our destination, the Park Hyatt Mendoza, faced the main square, the sprawling Plaza de la Independencia. Behind its white colonial-style front was a modern hotel with a slick, red-lit lounge, two high-end restaurants, and a beautiful palm-shaded pool that steamed in the thick, damp air.

That final night, in the hotel's bistro, we met Francis Mallman. A dashing man in a boarstooth blazer and well-worn leather boots, he is, it turned out, one of the country's most famous chefs, a man with restaurants in Mendoza; Buenos Aires; Punta del Este, Uruguay; and Westhampton, New York. Francis recommended a Familia Marguery Malbec and sat down to talk travel. When we mentioned our trip, he smiled. "Beautiful road, that one," he said; he told us of a special that he was planning for Latin American television. The idea: he would drive Ruta 40 from top to bottom, stopping in towns to sample local specialties and talk about food.

"So," he said, looking around the table. "Who wants to come along?"

Josh Dean writes for Men's Journal, Outside, and Rolling Stone.

THE FACTS ARGENTINA



WHERE TO STAY

Viñas de Cafayate Wine Resort
25 de Mayo
Camino al Divisadero, Cafayate, Salta; 54-11/4522-7754; www.tenriverstlakes.com; doubles from \$80.

Posada San Eduardo

Avda. San Martín and Los Amadores, Barreal; 54-26/4844-1046; doubles from \$50.

Park Hyatt Mendoza

1124 Chile; 54-261/441-1234; www.parkhyatt.com; doubles from \$165.

WHERE TO EAT

La Palmera
Ruta 15 (near the

intersection with Ruta 40), Villa Unión; no phone; chivito for two \$20, including wine.

1884

1188 Belgrano, between Godoy and Cruz, Mendoza; 54-261/424-2698; dinner for two \$40.

WHAT TO DO

Parque Nacional Talampaya
34 miles from Villa Unión, Ruta 76; www.talampaya.gov.ar.

Quilmes Ruins

30 miles south of Cafayate, km 1001, off Ruta 40; 54-3892/421-075.

ON THE WEB

www.turismo.gov.ar.

WHEN TO GO

Argentina's northwest is mostly high desert, and thus mild and arid. It can get very hot in summer (December to March). The best seasons are spring (September to November) and fall (March to May).

GETTING THERE

Aerolíneas Argentinas, the country's national airline, flies direct from New York and Miami to Buenos Aires, where there are several daily flights to both Salta and Mendoza.