



INSIDE
AMERICA

Broad sweep: the
Paraná River flows
through Corrientes
as a capybara takes
plunge (below left)

LAND OF THE YACARE

The provinces of Corrientes and Misiones in northern Argentina have more in common with their sub-tropical neighbours than with Eurocentric Buenos Aires. **Ed Stocker** journeys into a wildlife paradise



The distance from Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires, to the northern state of Corrientes is admittedly huge. But the nearly 1,000-kilometre trip is more than an epic journey – it's like travelling to a different world. Corrientes is where Argentina surrenders to the sub-tropics, where the earth is a bright orange hue and grassy wetlands that look like they belong to southern Africa stretch on and on. At the farthest reaches of the province, the Paraná, one of the world's great rivers, widens into a watery frontier with Paraguay.

You know you're somewhere different when the names of the local animal population are impossible to pronounce. The *yacaré* is a breed of caiman that grows up to three metres in length. It's harmless unless

provoked, but looks fierce nonetheless. It's found in the murky waters of Corrientes and across the border in Paraguay and the southern states of Brazil.

There would be plenty of opportunities over the next few days to see the beast up close and personal. And maybe, just maybe, the *aguará guazú*, an endangered maned wolf.

The plan is to visit Corrientes before heading northwards into Misiones, a state that juts out like a jagged rock face between Paraguay and Brazil. The two states, while attracting tourists, are nowhere near the big ticket destinations of Patagonia, Mendoza and Salta. People head *en masse* for Iguazú Falls in Misiones, but either head straight back to Buenos Aires or northwards into Brazil, generally without exploring the thick rainforest that is a hallmark of the area. ➤



Toucan play at that game: a colourful occupant of Corrientes' forests (above). Gauchos relax (right), the region still guards many of the cowboys' traditions

Corrientes, too, is an impressive combination of fertile farmland, flat plains, flooded wetlands and vast *yerba mate* plantations – the plant used to make *mate* tea, the ubiquitous Argentine drink sipped out of a gourd through a metal straw known as a *bambilla*.

Buenos Aires province is famed as the birthplace of the *gaucho*, the legendary South American cowboy who had his heyday in the 19th century, worked on the *estancia* during the day and then heading off to the bar every night to love, laugh and fight – not necessarily in that order.

Yet arriving in the Corrientes town of Mercedes as dawn is breaking feels far more authentic than anything Buenos Aires has to offer, despite what the guidebooks might say. Crumbling turn-of-the-century buildings frame small squares and rugged locals sporting *boinas* (berets) – a fashion accessory all adult men seem to wear – lean on battered pick-up trucks, sipping, yes, you guessed it, *mate*.

Hostería Rincón del Socorro is located an hour's drive in a 4x4 from Mercedes, near the town of Carlos Pellegrini. It's a breathtaking position right on the edge of the Esteros de Iberá, a vast area of wetlands

for which the region is famous. As some indication of its size, it's about two and a half times bigger than the Florida Everglades. The hotel is owned by American entrepreneur and founder of the North Face clothing company, Douglas Tompkins.

As the car pulls into the hotel drive, several grey rheas known locally as *ñandú*, strut around the lawn. They look like well-groomed, domesticated birds, brought in to add a touch of class to the surroundings. My driver, Fermín, explains that they are in reality completely wild – because the hotel is so near to the wetlands they simply wander in when they feel like it.

Moments later, a trio of giant furry brown creatures, rigid on the grass as if they're playing a game of musical statues, comes into view, completely oblivious to us. They are *carpinchos* (capybaras), the iconic animal of the Esteros that look like giant guinea pigs, and they waddle back towards the surrounding vegetation as we pass, their ample bottoms swinging behind them.

Tompkins has turned his attention to philanthropic activities in recent years, making it his mission to restore endangered ecosystems in many of the world's remotest spots.

In fact, the hotel is almost a side project – set within 31,000 hectares of wetlands and woods – to the real business of conservation.

Tompkins has set up an NGO called Conservation Land Trust (CLT), which has started to reintroduce endangered and locally extinct species, including anteaters and deer. I ask employee Carina Grandoli what their overall goal is.

'In the long term the aim is to return the purchased land to the states they belong to so that they can be incorporated into state-run protected areas,' she says. 'We've already donated land on two occasions: the current national parks in Monte León in Argentina and Corcovado in Chile.'

One of the highlights of staying at the hotel – where wildlife wanders around without a care in the world – is going on a night safari with amiable guide Leslie Cook who, despite a name that seems to suggest otherwise, is Argentine through and through. A Correntino of Scottish descent, his job is to man the clapped-out Land Rover and light up the *pampas* grass surrounding the roadside with a powerful torch. The chances of seeing giant storks or foxes viciously tearing apart the carcass of a capybara are pretty high. ➤

The chances of seeing giant storks or foxes viciously tearing apart a capybara are pretty high.



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'You lookin' at me?': the yacaré, a type of caiman, is harmless unless provoked but looks pretty fierce. It's found in the waters of Corrientes and can grow to a size of three metres

No stay at Rincón del Socorro would be complete without taking a boat out to the Laguna de Iberá. What makes this flat, extraordinary landscape so good for spotting birds and animals is the lack of tall trees blocking the horizon.

Weaving between narrow inlets of palm trees and purple and yellow flowers, we cruise through the lagoon (Iberá means shimmering water in the indigenous Guaraní language) full of yacaré keeping perfectly still to maintain their body temperature and hundreds of different birds, including the red-crested federal.

We get the chance to see the yacaré in very different surroundings at Puerto Valle, northern Corrientes, not far from the frontier with Misiones. The hotel runs a farm next to the main complex and it's full of caimans of all shapes and sizes. The farm raises them for their skin and sells the leather to Europe, where it's made into everything from handbags to boots. But, keen to ensure the local habitat isn't affected, it reintroduces a percentage of the reptiles back into the wild so that natural stocks are not significantly depleted.

Corrientes is one of Argentina's breadbaskets and a major source of much of its agricultural wealth. Sadly, a lot of the rainforest has been cleared to make

way for farm plots. For the true jungle experience, Misiones is the place to head to. Up to 10,000 visitors a day flock to the billowing waters of Iguazú Falls but they miss out on the rest of the province. Even *porteños* – with their trendy clothes and European ways – look out of place here, an area of Argentina that has more in common with its northern neighbours than the capital.

About half an hour's drive south of the Falls, in the middle of the rainforest, is the Posada Puerto Bemberg. It's a wonderfully tranquil setting: toucans flutter outside the wooden decking area where tables are set up for breakfast, showing off their colourful crests; in the gardens nearby every conceivable type of tropical fruit and vegetable is grown for the kitchen.

The enthusiastic caretaker, Roberto, points out a potato-like plant that grows on a tree and is used by the Guaraní people to treat medical ailments.

The indigenous Guaraní population of around 20,000 remain marginalised in Argentina, their

WHERE TO STAY

Rincón del Socorro

A superb estancia dating back to 1896, set within thousands of hectares of savannah and with more than 300 bird species. Rooms have antique furniture and activities include night safaris, horse riding and nature-spotting boat trips on the nearby lagoon. Doubles from \$220 (high season). www.rincondelosocorro.com

Puerto Valle

Another beautiful setting at the northern tip of Esteros de Iberá. Rooms are spacious, there's a lovely swimming pool and the restaurant serves innovative regional cuisine. Doubles from \$95 (all year). www.hotelpuertovalle.com

Posada Puerto Bemberg

Set in the middle of 300 hectares of private subtropical rainforest this is one of the finest hotels in Argentina. There's a beautiful communal dining/sitting room with a huge fireplace and well-stocked bookshelves. Doubles from \$300 (high season). www.puertobemberg.com

HOW TO GET THERE

British Airways flies daily from London Heathrow to Buenos Aires Pista 1 www.ba.com

Aerolíneas Argentinas flies to Posadas in Misiones and Iguazú in Corrientes City from Buenos Aires. www.aerolineas.com.ar

lives complicated by legislation that stops them living off the land, forcing them to rely on hand-outs and cash to buy food.

Living in poverty on the margins of society, they speak their own language and keep largely to themselves.

The community of Fortín Mbororé opened its doors to tourism around 10 years ago. At first, some of the elders objected but they've grown to accept it as an important source of income.

On our visit, guide Roberto shows us round and we are presented to the chief, Silvino.

Roberto himself cannot read or write, because he never went to school. But, thanks to the money from tourism, he can afford to send his children.

Would he change the way things had worked out?

'All I really want,' he says, slowly, 'is for people around the world to care about nature and look after the environment.' After spending time in Argentina's northeast, it's easy to understand why. ■