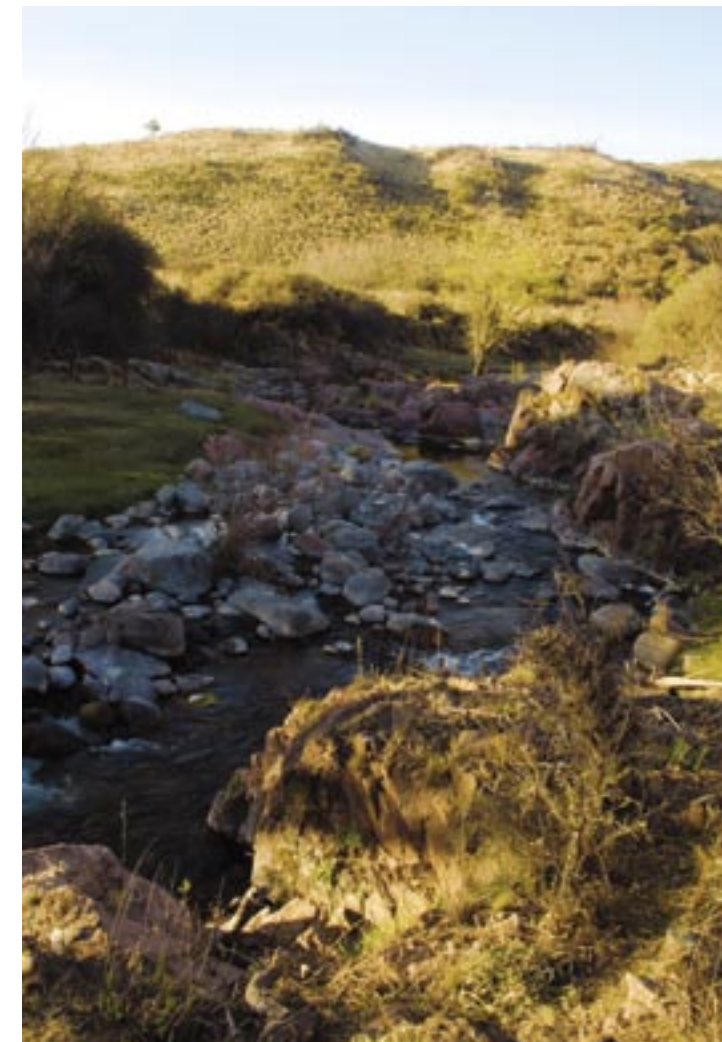


# A ride through ARGENTINA

FORGET THE TRADITIONAL TOURIST HOTSPOTS OF PATAGONIA OR BUENOS AIRES, **ED STOCKER** HEADS TO THE ARGENTINIAN INTERIOR TO EXPLORE THE UNDISCOVERED PLAINS OF THE CENTRAL SIERRAS



## WRITER PROFILE

**NAME** ED STOCKER

**AGE** 28

**INFO** Ed lives and works in Buenos Aires where he's been eating too much meat and not doing enough exercise. His recent travels include Rio for New Year, the Atlantic rainforest of southern Brazil and Uruguay's coastline.

**M**y heightened state of disorientation isn't helped by the gnomes. From their fixed vantage point on the shop windowsill they stare at me with a sort of gleeful amusement, revelling in my confusion. The store in question – one of those gift shops that sells everything you've never wanted to buy – feels part Hollywood film set, part über-kitsch theme park. Nothing, though, prepares you for what's inside, where the chintz factor reaches new heights. Stumbling my way through the bizarre assortment of goods, I pass more miniature bearded folk frozen in time and every conceivable type of wooden cuckoo clock.

This all seems doubly bizarre, as I'm currently several thousand miles away from the Alps. Several thousand miles away from *lederhosen*, fondu and *steins* of lager. Still, that doesn't seem to be stopping the local Swiss restaurant, which is doing a roaring trade in Black Forest strudel. This is Argentina, and it's meant to be in a

land of well-worn clichés: gauchos, red wine, steak and tango. However, this might be Argentina, but it's not as we know it...

I've come to the central sierras – mountainous countryside that juts up dramatically around the nation's second largest city, Córdoba – in a bid to discover a different side to this vast land that stretches from the sub-tropical jungles of the north to the Arctic fringes of the south. Many of Argentina's visitors journey to these farthest of frontiers. They head to the border with Brazil to see Iguazú Falls; they journey to Patagonia, the land of glaciers and fjords, to go hiking; but for the most part they ignore the vast swathes of Argentina's interior – relatively undiscovered by international travellers. Located around a ten-hour bus ride west of Buenos Aires, the beautiful peaks, which culminate nearly 3,000m above sea level at Cerro Champaquí, are most popular with local tourists, who flock en masse during the summer months to sample the cool microclimate and escape the intense heat of the cities.

The rolling hills, pebble-fringed streams and rugged scrubland have proved a seductive draw. And I'm not the only one to have been won over by the picture-postcard scenery. The British, shipped over to help construct Argentina's railways at a time when their industrial might was the envy of the world, liked what they saw. Many decided to stay and make Argentina their home, building faux-Tudor houses and settling in small towns like La Cumbre. Hanging onto the traditions of the motherland – and praying to king and country at meal times – perhaps there was something in the windswept, sunny plains that reminded them of an idealised England. The Germans, too, were love-struck (possibly due to the area's uncanny similarity to Central Europe), and began settling in the region in both the 1930s, and again in the aftermath of World War II following the renowned Battle of the River Plate.

This is where all the beer-swilling, tart-munching tradition comes in. In my two weeks travelling around the sierras, I visited two German towns:





» La Cumbrecita and Villa General Belgrano, the latter famed for its annual Oktoberfest. Despite their twee, wannabe European vibe, it's the raw natural beauty of the surrounding scenery that leaves the largest impression. La Cumbrecita, 130km north of Córdoba, is just a hamlet of a few restaurants, homes and hotels. In fact, the winding roads that lead uphill to the mountains above it are unsealed dirt tracks with cars forbidden from circulating during the daytime. Whilst the village can heave with visitors in January and February, outside peak season it's an excellent place to come and unwind, with warm temperatures and long hours of sunshine in spring (October and November) and autumn (March and April). The hotels are also great value at this time of year, and often half what they would cost in summer. And best of all, there's hardly a soul about.

Follow the trails from the centre of town in La Cumbrecita and you can work your way towards trout-rich fresh water swimming lakes – known as *balnearios* – or tackle one of the town's several peaks that peer down on top of it. Wandering across the rocky terrain and yellow-green shrub grass, you feel utterly alone. The noise of the wind gently blowing the surrounding vegetation is broken only by a trio

of sheep that totters past us, bleating vocally as they pass. In the distance a lone gaucho rides up a meandering path. But he isn't the sort of cowboy you see in the postcards dressed up in his finest gear. Modestly clothed in a shirt, trousers and a black beret, his

## “IN THE DISTANCE A LONE GAUCHO RIDES UP A MEANDERING PATH. BUT HE ISN'T THE SORT OF COWBOY YOU SEE IN POSTCARDS”

cheeks are red and peeling from the sun, and his clothes tattered. Tucked into his belted trousers, a silver hunting knife glints in the sun as he speeds past.

And that was about as close as we came to making friends on our trip. Human ones anyway. That's not to say Argentines are unfriendly – far from it – but in these tranquil spots you don't come across many people. Even larger towns in the sierras, like Mina Clavero, border picturesque countryside where you can walk for only a few minutes out of town and feel truly at one with nature. It's from this particular town that we visited the Parque Nacional de la Quebrada del Condorito, a national park that is one of the country's major breeding grounds for condors. It's not the easiest place in the world to get to – you have to get a local bus that drops you at the

park entrance by the main road, but it's a further 1.5km walk to the welcome centre from there – although it's well worth the effort. Be warned, though, there's no food or drink on sale within the park boundaries, so bring grub and ample protection from the powerful

sun, as there's little shade. The area itself is a wonderfully barren, dramatic stretch of land. Dotted with yellow pampas grasses and rocky boulders that lend the whole park a lunar atmosphere, you wander about feeling thoroughly insignificant as giant condors swoop and soar majestically in the blue sky above.

But the vastest wilderness we visited was Cerro Colorado, six hours by bus from Córdoba, a city

that makes a useful springboard for seeing all the weird and wonderful environs nearby. Colorado is best known for its ancient cave paintings – naive but beautiful motifs scrawled on rock faces with white, black and brown paints – dating from between 1,000 and 1,600AD. Arriving in the valley at sunset was beautiful, as the orange sun descended behind the rocky landscape with thousands of palms fanning out into the distance. Cerro Colorado really does feel like the last place on earth. It's only made up of a handful of houses and, in the evenings, the village's youths hang out at the lone *bodega*, chatting and sipping Quilmes beer. There's no internet here; no phone connections either. In fact, the only people with communications rely on a satellite. We were staying at a basic *posada* costing around £15 a night, run by a friendly but rustic elderly owner. Though both my partner and I speak Spanish, his







## info box.

### TRAVEL DETAILS

Several airlines fly from the UK to Buenos Aires, including British Airways and LAN. There are often cheap flights with Mexicana (via Mexico City) or TAM (via São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro), and Opodo and Expedia often have good deals.

### BUENOS AIRES TO CÓRDOBA

Aerolíneas Argentinas operates flights between Buenos Aires and Córdoba (flight time just over an hour), but internal flights within Argentina are generally expensive. Long-distance buses are comfortable and good value, however, departing from Retiro terminal in the capital. Journey time is around 10-11 hours with tickets from £22 one way. There are three types of tariff: *semi-cama*, *cama* and the most expensive *ejecutivo* that often includes an onboard meal (aeroplane style). Several different companies run between the two cities, including Chevallier – visit [www.nuevachevallier.com](http://www.nuevachevallier.com)

### BUSES IN THE SIERRAS

The local transport around the sierras is generally good, although Córdoba city is the main hub for getting north and south into the mountains. Make sure you plan in advance as buses aren't always regular and getting from one place to another might involve getting a couple of buses. Sometimes it may be easier to get a local remise taxi.

### EATING OUT

Argentina remains fantastically good value for eating out and the peso remains weak (around six to the pound). As with the rest of the country, local food is all about steak, steak and more steak (admittedly with a few central European variations) and most restaurants are *parrillas* focused on red meat. You should be able to get a decent *bife de chorizo* and chips for around £6 in the sierras. Remember, Argentines like it well done so if you like a bit of blood ask for your beef *jugoso* (literally 'juicy').

### VISAS

British passport holders don't require a visa for stays of up to 90 days.

### HEALTH

Vaccinations against hepatitis A+B, rabies, tetanus, TB and typhoid should be considered. There is a risk of dengue fever in Argentina, and malaria and yellow fever are a risk if travelling to the northern border areas with Bolivia and Brazil, though not in the central sierras.

» accent was like nothing we'd heard before and, despite his best efforts, it felt like he was speaking a completely different language. Maybe he was. But somehow we communicated as he cooked for us the local delicacy of *chivito* (a whole baby goat) on his barbeque, eagerly watching us as we tucked into the chewy but flavoursome meat.

Whilst we were struggling with relationships of the human kind, animals were far more forgiving – Puccini and Rita, quite possibly the craziest pair of canines this side of the Atlantic, in particular. The owners of the *posada* we stayed at in La Cumbre – basically a family house with a couple of bedrooms for guests at around £20 a night – had a very laissez-faire attitude to their dogs, often shutting them outside and leaving them to wander round the neighbourhood. Puccini was the young, energetic one while Rita was the world weary, dark-haired older partner in the friendship. But they took an instant

shine to us as we set off towards the golf course before deciding to take a leisurely stroll into the nearby hillocks and get a view of the area. Perhaps they sussed two suckers who were prepared to give them a free walk. These dogs were about as far away from urban, pampered pets as you could get, and they didn't have collars. Yet, they insisted on escorting us throughout the couple of hours we were walking, loyally trotting ahead and pausing every time we stopped to look at the countryside, or protectively growling at other dogs they encountered. Whilst we worried that they'd get injured crossing the road, they were having the time of their lives. And, while we were relieved to get them home in one piece, the owners didn't even raise an eyebrow at the fact their dogs had been untraceable for the last couple of hours.

Around ten days into our trip we decided to treat ourselves by staying in an *estancia* – a working farm that often double as a guesthouse for travellers, usually

## “THE AIR HERE IS SO CRISP, THE SUN SO BRIGHT AND THE NATURAL BEAUTY SO PRONOUNCED. IT'S THE PERFECT PLACE TO UNWIND”

with full board and several activities included. We'd been staying in good value *posadas*, ranging from around £15 to £30 a night, but we wanted to try a bit of rustic luxury. Estancia Los Potreros was certainly the place for it. Nestled in the Sierra Chica, an hour northwest of Córdoba near Santa Teresa, it's a 6,500-acre estate run by Kevin Begg and his jolly wife Louisa. While Kevin is by no means the last Anglo-Argentine in the region, he is one of a dying breed of Brits that have either been

absorbed into the castellano-speaking populace or have returned to Blighty. Kevin can trace his family back to their arrival from Scotland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

seeking fortune in the New World, and one of his ancestors worked on the Argentine railways.

Los Potreros is the place to come if you want to do some riding. Now, I'm no pro on horses – in fact, I haven't ridden since I hopped onto a lazy stallion in Burkina Faso, West Africa (see *Real Travel* issue 43), who only wanted to sleep and urinate – but let's just say there was no comparison here. Never have I encountered such good natured, calm horses – all impeccably

groomed and trained. Each visitor gets a horse that fits their standard: everyone from professional polo players to novices is made to feel at home. My beautiful horse was called Lady and she was obedient but stubborn – quite on purpose so that I wouldn't be tempted to ride into the sunset at speed and cause myself an injury. Both Kevin and Louisa are polo players and they regularly organise mini-tournaments for guests. After a quick lesson about how to “follow the line” (don't worry, you'll soon pick it up) and a few essential tips about how to play safely, we were off. Thanks to Lady's nifty manoeuvres, I felt like a pro – ok, sort of – but I know most other horses would have made me look distinctly below average.

The Los Potreros countryside is a stunning, vast emptiness with horses and their young foals grazing on the land. The *estancia* is still very much a working farm,

rearing cows to be sold to fattening stations, and boasts a large population of thoroughbred horses, including a rare Peruvian breed said to have been a favourite of Napoleon. Rooms are comfy huts with antique beds and log fires that are stoked for you every evening so you arrive to a toasty room – especially nice given that the temperatures outside can dramatically drop after sundown. The food is particularly good and every mealtime all the guests are summoned round the table as Kevin plays host, drinking delicious red wine bottled especially for the *estancia* and tucking into everything from tender steak to spaghetti. The *estancia* is expensive – around US\$300 per person with a minimum stay of three days – but it's like nowhere I've been before. It's here that two worlds collide: rustic Argentinean gaucho life and traditional English hospitality. And it makes for a fascinating experience.

Tearing ourselves away is hard. Not just from Los Potreros, but from the magnetic pull of the sierras themselves. The air here is so crisp, the sun so bright and the natural beauty so pronounced. It's far removed from the more touristy parts of the country and, for me, it's been a perfect place to unwind and get away from the pace of urban life. Here Argentina and all its Eurocentric oddities are firmly on display: a fascinating mix of British, German and Latin cultures. Where else but the sierras can you sample a fine Germanic artisan beer, play golf on an exclusive course and then gallop around a working farm with authentic cow-ranching gauchos? I even think the Teutonic tweeness and sickly sweet cakes are beginning to rub off on me – or maybe a couple of weeks' exposure has weakened my reserves. Perhaps I'm having an odd turn but, hey, maybe a naff cuckoo clock doesn't seem such a bad idea after all... ■