

Andean beauty as far as the eye can see

Chocolate-making and the construction industry in and around Bariloche in southern Argentina have taken their cue from the Alpine regions of Europe. But any imitation stops there. Argentina's own "Lake District" is home to some truly incomparable natural beauty.

Martin Steiner



Tranquil water: Llo Llo on Lake Nahuel-Huapi

"When you're in Bariloche you must sample some of the local chocolate," Leticia told us in Buenos Aires. "The chocolate there is the best in all of Latin America. As good as Swiss chocolate!"

Right she was. The chocolate bars produced in Bariloche, the legacy of emigrant confectioners from Europe's Alpine region, really do come close to matching Swiss standards.

At least we thought so. But Harald, an elderly gentleman with a Berlin accent who overhears us

speaking Swiss-German in a cafe, dismisses Bariloche chocolate as second-rate. "Buy Bernoth chocolate," he urges us. "They add cream to their praliné mix."

Harald, as it turns out, emigrated from Germany with his parents more than 50 years ago. A joiner by trade, he managed a small company that manufactured beds. Now, as he approaches his twilight years, he is fulfilling his dream of building himself a retirement home in Bariloche, at the foot of Cerro Otto, the local mountain. The undertaking has not been accomplished without a few setbacks, however.

For starters, the first piece of land he acquired had been sold twice. When the crew he had hired arrived at the property to begin work on his house, they found the building's foundations already in place. Not for Harald's house, unfortunately, but for that of the other "owner". Several years of legal proceeding ended fruitlessly, without any compensation being awarded. In the end Harald had to wait another couple of years before he was able to see his dream come true.

Unfortunately, the likeable German-born Argentinean is not the only person to have chosen to build

in Santiago de Bariloche, the full name of the city that stands along the shores of Lake Nahuel-Huapi. With no zoning regulations in place, mock alpine chalets have sprung up all over the place, even encroaching on the borders of the conservation areas, so strong is the appeal of a retirement or second home in the "St. Moritz of the South" as Bariloche is referred to. In addition to fine chocolate, numerous hotels, an active night life and a busy skiing season, the region has an abundance of natural beauty to offer. The Andean peaks above Bariloche are dotted with blue lakes reminiscent of Switzerland's Engadine region. But the vastness of Patagonia is on a scale far beyond that of Switzerland's best known mountain valley.

Untamed wilderness

Fortunately, Lake Nahuel Huapi (532 km² in area, situated 767 metres above sea level) and the surrounding area were declared a national park as early as 1903. Covering a total area of 7,850 km² the park has plenty of space for nature-loving tourists to explore untamed wilderness. But hikers beware! The narrow footpaths generally come to an abrupt end at a point where a cliff face has given way or a river has cut its course, rendering any further hiking impossible. On several occasions we found ourselves lost in the dense bush. Our return journey then became an expedition through virgin forest. What was originally intended as a two-hour hike sometimes turned into a full day's outing, with only the genu-

ineously delicious Bernoth chocolate bars for provisions.



Autumn symphony: Patagonia's forests at their most colourful

Perhaps we would have been smarter to have gone along on one of the tours organised by the Club Andino de Bariloche than to have simply wandered off on our own. Yet we only truly appreciated the raw power of this wild setting when we found ourselves alone in the forest.

There are of course simpler ways to enjoy a panoramic view of the region's scenic beauty, namely by taking one of the aerial tramways that operate on most of the nearby mountains. However, would-be visitors should note that popular viewpoints such as Cerro Otto and Cerro Campanario are extremely busy in the summer and winter peak periods. Tourists are well advised to consider the spring or fall shoulder season (i.e. September-November and March-May respectively). The region is particularly attractive during the autumn, when the colours of nature are at their most impressive. At this time of year, hotel prices are about one-third of the peak season rate.

Excursions short and long

Visitors planning to venture further south to the Perito Moreno glacier or to Tierra del Fuego are well advised to do so before the region experiences its customary early winter snowfall.

Late autumn is still an ideal time to travel to such southern locations as El Bolsón (130 kilometres south of Bariloche), Villa la Angostura or San Martín de los Andes, where visitors can take in the stunning

beauty of the southern Andes and the region's countless shimmering blue lakes. In particular, idyllic San Martín, located on the shores of Lago Lacar, offers a pleasant contrast to bustling Bariloche. San Martín has retained its village-like character, largely thanks to its hilly mountain setting. Skiing is just one attraction here. Visitors will also find San Martín in winter a tranquil destination, where they can relax amid breathtaking scenery.

Day excursions from Bariloche take you to the 3,554 meter high Cerro Tronador and some of the many surrounding lakes. Visitors interested in excursions of several days' duration will surely enjoy the trip through the volcanic landscape of the Puyehue Pass -- the adven-

turous route is often covered in snow in spring and fall -- to Puerto Montt in Chile. From there, you can sail to the picturesque island of Chiloe, where time seems to have stood still for the past few centuries. If it weren't for the fact that the island's inhabitants speak Spanish, you could easily imagine you were in Ireland. The colourful wooden houses, the gently rolling hills, and the moist green meadows offer a sharp contrast to the rather sparse vegetation and the frosty continental climate that prevails on the eastern side of the Andes.

Public transport: pros and cons

As is the case throughout Latin America travelling by public transport is a relatively slow process short on European-style comfort. On the other hand, this method of travel is a great way to experience the incredible hospitality of the local inhabitants. We were repeatedly invited to join people for meals and come along on outings around Lake Nahuel-Huapi. The hospitality of the people enabled us to gain a much better insight into local customs and traditions than was possible elsewhere. If you are visiting for a relatively short period, then renting a car or taking part on organised tours is perhaps the best way to go.

But whether you're interested in a holiday in Bariloche or a more

involved tour, Patagonia's bountiful mountains, lakes and largely intact landscape give you more than your money's worth.

National Park

Lago Nahuel Huapi National Park contains the most diverse and spectacular natural phenomena: lakes, rivers, glaciers, waterfalls, torrents, rapids, valleys, forest, bare mountains and snow-clad peaks. Many kinds of wild animals live in the region, but they are extremely shy and seldom glimpsed by the explorer. Bird life, on the other hand -- particularly swans, geese and ducks -- is seen at any time and everywhere in large flocks.

The outstanding feature of this National Park is the splendour of the lakes, of which Lago Nahuel Huapi is the largest (531 sq km, and 460 metres deep in places). The lake lies 760 metres above sea level, in full view of the snow-covered peaks of the Cordillera and of the forests covering the lower slopes. Some 96 km long and not more than 12 km wide, the lake is very irregular in shape; long arms of water, reminiscent of Norwegian fjords, stretch far into the land.

Source: South American Handbook 1994, Travellers World, Trade & Travel Publications Limited (highly informative guide book, 1,400 pages of travel tips)



Easy on the eye: picturesque Chonchi on the island of Chiloe

Lake country: water, water everywhere



Timeless town: Time appears to have stood still in Chiloe



Explosive beauty: Mt. Osorno, one of the world's most spectacular volcanoes