

The writer's children crossing the river ford on foot on a day trip to Parque Nacional El Rey. The vehicle didn't fare so well when a protruding rock smashed the undercarriage.



CLOUD FORESTS

QUEBRADAS AND LLAMAS

Salta and its surrounds don't lack variety, writes **Nicholas Dall**

Local tourist authorities in Argentina try hard to promote their towns by using epithets: Mendoza is described as the cleanest city in Argentina; Tupungato and Londres vie for the title of the capital of the walnut, while El Bolson is the undisputed capital of the youngberry. Normally these nicknames are a lot more bark than bite, but there's always an exception to prove every rule.

Salta la Linda (Salta the Pretty) is a nickname which the north-eastern Argentine town fully deserves – as much for its scruffy colonial charm, as for the staggering variation of landscape in its surrounding areas.

In one, admittedly rather long, day trip we drove through semi-tropical forests where epiphytes grew from electricity pylons and fence posts; austere Andean altiplano where humans and llamas alike were forced to wear their woolliest coats even in the last throes of summer; mountain ranges known as quebradas where sedimentary layers of oxidised minerals painted the cliff-faces red and green and yellow and black; and – to top it off – seemingly endless salt pans which must have been specifically designed to create the kind of perspective-changing photographs which Microsoft uses for its Windows desktop backgrounds.

Perhaps the greatest way to pay tribute to the scenery would be to say that we spent hours passing and being passed by a lone cyclist, complete with bulging panniers, due to the fact that we were continually stopping to photograph yet another landscape which we thought would surely never repeat itself.

We stopped for lunch in the only village for miles and miles, a wholly unappealing outpost, which resembled Laingsburg not only in its uninspired low cost housing and arid windswept mountains (although these mountains were over 6 000 metres high) but also in its proud announcement of its name, written on white stones on one of the slopes.

At first sight it was hard to imagine that the effort that went into painting enough rocks to spell out the words Bienvenidos a San Antonio de los Cobres; lugging them up the mountain in the thin puna air, and finally arranging the letters in an attractive crescent shape could possibly have been worth the effort. Apart from a few shops selling local crafts – ponchos, cactus-wood abominations and the usual selection of liqueurs and preserves – the town had little to offer, so we headed straight for one of its three restaurants.

The eatery was not complicated, but it was scrupulously clean and the garish pictures and tables settings looked completely at home against the lumpy white walls. We ordered a litre bottle of beer,

and I struggled to control my head (yet another drawback of the altitude!) as I filled three glasses. The menu was, as in most Argentine restaurants of this ilk, basic and verbal. We ended up eating salad, some kind of corn pancakes served with vegetables, and a local fruit called the camote as pudding. The service was impeccable, and the open kitchen provided us with both entertainment and an interesting glimpse of family life on the altiplano.

The El Lagar hotel in Salta was the ideal elixir to long day trips on bad roads.

It had once been the home of one the area's bigger winemaking families, and the hotel is now run by one of the daughters. It is built in the shape of a horseshoe, which surrounds the simply sculpted garden and the swimming pool which must be an absolute blessing in summer.

The hotel has only eight rooms, each of which is decorated in a different style. What I remember most about my room was the strong scent of camphor wood. The hotel also boasts a selection of different communal areas, all of them cluttered with taxidermic models of exotic birds and a huge array of local art. The small staff were amazing – the owner's husband helped us change our first flat tyre; the guys who worked the nightshift never seemed to tire of bringing my parents tea; and Ramon the antique breakfast waiter made sure every day started with a lot of laughter and energy.

Salta itself is the typical Argentine contradiction of dilapidation and tradition, but its main square is one of the most attractive in the country: the pink cathedral (my mother tried to persuade us that it was a synagogue ...a taxi-driver's pidgin assurances were supposed to carry more weight than the multiple crucifixes) dominates the scene, although the scuttling bevy of shoe-shiners tries pretty hard to compete with it.

On Saturday night penas seem to emerge in every building. A pena is basically a music hall, where troupes of men of all ages don ponchos and take up guitars and bombo drums and shake the dust off the rafters with their pitch-perfect, but by no-means timid baritones.

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The park ranger asked after Mandela



The buildings are a mixture of dilapidation and tradition, with the odd piece of farm equipment thrown in.

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Parque Nacional El Rey, one of the world's few preserved cloud forests, its peaks are perpetually shrouded in cloud.

From opposite page

Most penas serve the usual range of red meat and empanadas, as well as a few more indigenous northern dishes such as tamales and humitas – meat and rice parcels, wrapped in moist mielie leaves, and every table in the place seemed to be home to at least a few bottles of knock-the-doors-down red. We finally left at 2am

On Easter Sunday we were all a bit groggy but Ramon had soon shaken the cobwebs off all of us with a much needed dose of vitaminas in the form of freshly squeezed orange juice, and after receiving elaborate directions and a mystery picnic hamper from the hotel's owner we set off for the Parque Nacional El Rey, one of the world's few preserved cloud forests, so called because of the perpetual clouds which shroud the jungly peaks.

The road was not too bad actually, and the instructions we had were good, so it was with perhaps a bit too much cockiness that we approached the first river ford.

We got through the wet bits all right, but on the way the undercarriage thumped against what must have been a protruding rock. It wasn't exactly possible to see if we were leaking oil, as the car was dripping with water, but it was fairly obvious that something was amiss from the persistent knocking which increased in frequency the faster we drove.

We took it in turns to lie in the mud and gaze at exhaust pipes and axles and sumps. We eventually came to the conclusion that what we knew to be the exhaust pipe had been squashed against what we thought was the driveshaft. At about this time a farmer arrived in his bakkie, on his way to the nearest "town" to do the Sunday shopping. He assumed the position beneath the vehicle, confirmed our diagnosis, and started rummaging around in the back of his bakkie. He emerged with a wooden block, and big rubber seal which he managed to wedge in between driveshaft and exhaust pipe. The adage about boere and planne seems to be universal.

Every so often this makeshift gadget would dislodge and we'd stop the car and I'd be forced to run back along the road, pick up the pieces, lie in the mud, and reposition them. It became less and less amusing, and I reached a particularly low ebb when I was forced to wade through massive muddy trenches formed by a care-free tractor driver who appeared to be

relishing the destructive powers of his large-gauge tyres.

When we arrived at the park ranger's office he wished us a happy Easter, asked after Mandela, and informed us that we were the first visitors to the park in over a week. He explained that the rainy season complicated access (we had noticed this) and that most visitors preferred to come in winter, many of them staying for weeks at a time. The journey had taken us a good five hours, which didn't leave us with much time to explore the park if we were to get back on the highway before nightfall. We ate our picnic which – due to it being Easter Sunday – did not contain even a smidgen of normally ubiquitous Argentine beef, and instead included olive and cheese sandwiches and tuna empanadas.

We washed it all down with a nice bottle of Cafayate Torrontes, a fruity white wine which is found everywhere in northern Argentina. We then made for a small laguna, where we were told we should have a pretty good chance of seeing tapirs.

Unfortunately the tapirs were not forthcoming, but we did find an epiphyte-infested bulldozer and even got a really nice sighting of the park's unmistakable mascot, the toucan.

The sun was already setting so we set off for home. We narrowly avoided a pair of black boar-like animals and got a few more glimpses of toucans and wild turkeys before we were flagged down by a man in a pink shirt. When we stopped we noticed some sort of settlement set-back a few yards in the forest. After exchanging pleasantries he got straight to the point.

"My niece and nephew came to spend the weekend with their grandparents and they need to go to school tomorrow."

Say no more. We had a quick family

conference, and immediately realised that karma would certainly come back to bite us if we did anything other than offer them a lift.

"How many are there?" I asked.

"We slaughtered a cow today." His side-step was nimble. "We could give you some meat."

"We have nowhere to keep it cold."

"A pumpkin at least?"

"Don't worry we'll give them a lift. How many of them are there?"

"At least come and look at my jabali."

Only the tone of the conversation reassured us that this invitation was not perverse and we followed him into the yard – the washing line draped with the constituent parts of what had just been a living cow – and he led us to a morose, tethered version of the vicious porkers we had almost run over. At least we now knew what their real name was.

When we got back to the car there were three kids – two girls and a boy, and they explained that there was another girl who would also like to come, but that she was very thin. They were nice, shy and very polite. So polite in fact that they almost didn't tell us that the boy was feeling really carsick. We stopped just in time.

Between vomit-stops the kids explained that when they wanted to speak to their grandparents they phoned the Parks Board in Salta, asked them to radio a message through to the ranger's office in the Parque El Rey, and that the message was finally delivered in person.

We had experienced two very different, but equally appealing, worlds in one day. Salta offers a degree of contrast – contrast of landscape, contrast of lifestyle, contrast of cuisine – that I don't think I have encountered anywhere else.

IF YOU GO

Malaysia Airlines flies direct from Cape Town to Buenos Aires on Wednesdays and Sundays

Aerolineas Argentinas offers daily flights to most major Argentine centres from Buenos Aires

Buenos Aires has two airports; one domestic and one international. Ezeiza, the international airport is about an hour out of town. Aeroparque is downtown

One of the biggest and most reliable bus companies, Andesmar, has a reliable online ticketing service at www.andesmar.com It's all in Spanish, but nothing that a bit of common sense can't get around

Taxis are more numerous than sirloin steaks in most Argentine cities, and they're very cheap. You're unlikely to pay more than R20 for a longish urban journey

Hotel El Lagar can be contacted on (00 54) 387 431 9439.

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