



Argentina & Chile

**From the Land of Fire to the**

**Roof of the World**

The weatherworn sign on the outskirts of Ushuaia proudly reads “Bienvenidos a la Ciudad mas austral del Mundo” – Welcome to the Southernmost City in the World. The tires of our heavily laden GS bikes bite into the freshly fallen snow as we excitedly pull on past.



Riding here is like being in a land of giants and dragon teeth.

Torres del Paine is an unforgiving but incredible landscape.

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Photography: Simon and Lisa Thomas



### El Fin Del Mundo –The End of the World

**B**y a gnarled and twisted tree line we bear left to take an undulating trail through trees and across a stream. Up on the footpegs, we ride the last mile of the coastal road that has kept us company for 2,316 miles, from Argentina's cosmopolitan capital of Buenos Aires, to this weather-tortured landscape of jagged peaks and freezing waters. We are in Tierra del Fuego, one of the most remote places on earth.

This is a rugged and unforgiving terrain, studded with glaciers and shared between Chile and Argentina at the southern tip of South America. Slowly falling rain penetrates our suits, and an icy wind bites any bits of exposed skin. It doesn't matter. We are lost in a long-imagined moment, posed for a photo aside the famous brown board that denotes the end of the Ruta 3. It's not possible to ride farther south in the world. There is nothing below this windswept place but 650 miles of treacherous seas and the icy continent of Antarctica.

North through the small Chilean port town of Porvenir, the rough concrete road to the dock is a welcome change from the mud-caked track we've ridden for the last two days. The red and rusting Melinka ferry waits to transport us across the historical Magellan Strait, the most important natural passage between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, infamously tough to navigate because of unpredictable winds and powerful currents. As we pay \$30 for the crossing, the ticket agent enthusiastically conveys today's favorable sailing conditions. Two and a half hours later the large metal door of the bow slaps the port side, spilling us onto the wide boulevards of Patagonia's third-largest city, Punta Arenas. We are still only 809 miles from the coast of Antarctica.

Swapping the busy city streets for the Ruta 9, we are making good progress. The asphalt abruptly ends as we hit washboard and plow into the "rippio," a mixture of thick gravel and large stones. We're bouncing like rag dolls and need our wits about us as our bikes squirm wildly on the track. The sweeping Chilean highway takes us past Puerto Curte, Villa Tehuelches, and inches us close to the Argentinian border before easing us past Puerto Natales, the gateway town to Torres del Paine. Past Good Hope Sound we flirt with asphalt for 20 miles before returning to the rippio. We're skirting the Patagonian Steppe, a vast



We take in the majesty of the Cuernos del Paine in the distance.

A “guanaco” stares as we cruise by.

We enjoy the smooth tar in the red landscape of the Jujuy region.



countryside comprising 260,000 square miles of barren, gravel plains and wind-tormented plateaus, where the temperature rarely exceeds 53 F and averages just 37 F. This is the largest desert in the Americas and the seventh largest desert in the world. It is truly a land of legend.

### The Teeth of the Andes

At a small wooden kiosk, we pay \$40 to ride into one of the most dramatic UNESCO reserves in the world. Riding a roller coaster dirt-track deep into the Parque Nacional Torres Del Paine, the spine of the Andes emerges dramatically from the landscape, exposing the teeth of the Paine massif. Wild horses graze by the side of the track before scattering at our approach, and bemused llamas lift their heads and stare at us as we pass. The track ahead splits a turquoise lake just before it rises and disappears. The hair on the back of my neck is standing on end as we pass close to icebergs the size of buildings, floating casually in the wind-whipped waters. These massive ice blocks have broken off from the tip of a glacier that flows directly into the lake. Pit-stopped in front of our first clear mountain view, we strain to absorb one of the most astonishing environments either of us have seen. A scuttling to the left catches our attention. We are delighted to see two wild silver foxes searching for respite from the wind. We lay on the ground in the hope that they will feel less threatened. Fifteen minutes later we are rewarded as they settle down no more than 8 feet from where we take up position.



With the temperature dropping we press on and finally pitch our tent at Camp Pehoe. We battle to drive our pegs into the frozen ground, but our location is our grand reward. Sitting in the low awning, a cup of well-deserved tea in hand, we watch as the crystalline light of the day transforms to a soft pink, bathing our incredible mountain view in shades of gold and rose.

In the morning we struggle to pack away our ice-covered tent, but we are soon bobbing along the pot-holed dirt track to the main park junction, where we pick up the sign for El Calafate. The day's cold drizzle is making the track slippery as we find our way to the small border crossing, where we ride back into Argentina.

Three miles east of the tiny border crossing our progress is halted as we are ordered to stop at a small army checkpoint. We are questioned about our route and our reasons for entering Argentina. “Seguridad!” the official barks, demanding proof of motorcycle insurance. We confidently hand over our “World Motor Vehicle” insurance cards. The officer looks disappointed that once again he will have no stories to share around the table, and with a grunt accepts the cards and dismisses us to continue our journey.



## Dragon Scales and Falling Giants

We arrive in El Calafate by dusk. Swinging a quick U-turn we park outside the Hostel del Glacier, almost falling from the bikes in our desperate bid to reach the warmth inside. We find firm beds, a small but clean bathroom, and, best of all, radiant floor heating. We simply lay on the floor for 10 minutes, soaking up the heat passing from the shiny ceramic tiles.

The next morning we head west on the Ruta 11. Skirting the vast Largo Argentina, we are on route to a prehistoric miracle. The snow-topped peaks in the horizon set a perfect backdrop as I chase Lisa in and out of the repeating curves. Our temporarily luggage-free bikes seem as giddy as we are to be flying through the landscape. Taking full advantage of the dry asphalt surface we quicken the pace, soon arriving at the Perito Moreno park entrance, where we swap 60 pesos for two visitors passes. We still have 18 miles to ride to the glacier itself, which flirts with us in our side view as we hug the mountain through the twisting pass.

We park under the cover of an ancient cedar, walking to get our first impression of the glacier. It leaves us absolutely breathless. The sheer size and shape of this prehistoric ice field has our minds



We take a look at Paso de Jama, our route to the Atacama Desert.

A water break is welcome between bouts of punishment on the Ruta 40.

## TOURS

reeling as we grapple with its proportions: Three miles of horizontal distance are fronted by a massive 200-hundred-foot panoramic wall of cobalt blue ice. The sun does its best to pierce the heavy cloud base, occasionally winning when a contrasting finger of white light breaches the gray and highlights the dragon-like scales of the glacier's upper surface. Incredibly, unlike nearly every other glacier on the planet, which recede over time, the Perito Moreno Glacier is in constant flux, continuously groaning, creaking and moving forward at a rate of up to 8 feet a day. As we watch, the glacier's moans are amplified by the towering mountains on all sides. This stunning vista epitomizes the natural beauty and splendor of Argentina.

Then it happens, the moment we'd hoped so desperately to witness. We watch in awe as one of the vast ice towers at the glacier's leading edge pulls itself free, and a thunderous, cracking sound echoes around the valley, announcing the event. Telltale powder ice erupts from the fracture. We frantically click the camera as thousands of tons of ancient ice launch from the cliff face, plummeting in slow motion into the milky blue water. The rupture hits the surface with incredible force, sending water shooting high into the air and pushing a mini tsunami toward the shore. Then it's gone, impossibly swallowed into the depths.

### The Ruta 40

Three days after the astounding moment at the glacier we find ourselves doing battle with the most legendary route in Argentina, the Ruta Quaranta, or as it's more commonly referred, the Ruta 40. It's a Mad Max style dirt road that rubs shoulders with the Andes for

3,209 miles. A wide-eyed ride, running from Cabo Vírgenes to La Quiaca that goes from sea level to 16,404 feet, this brute of a road connects 27 Andean passes, crosses 236 bridges, and in summer, 80 mph winds are considered the norm. In spite of Argentina's efforts to tame her, the 40 remains a truly wild experience.

Passing Tres Largo we are hit by punishing gusts that threaten to knock us off our bikes. Instinctively our feet stab at the ground, looking for purchase. The 40 is already earning its reputation. The relentless wind, hail storms, and mud all work together to transform this mythical landscape into a Tolkien-like Mordor nightmare. In second gear we slide forward, our route vanishing into the bleak and barren steep ahead. It's been hours since we've seen any sign of life. Not a single building, light or car obstructs our view for mile upon mile. Out here it's just us, the llamas, and the occasional armadillo that scurries by as tumbleweeds roll across our path, serving only to emphasize our isolation.

### Frozen Mud and Barren Lands

"Nothing is happening! I've got no steering!" Lisa yells. My face is frozen as I lift my visor to answer, and the airborne ice stings my eyes. The problem, as in so many remote locations, is mud. This mud is a particular breed of clay, sand and constant precipitation. It's the stuff that drags you to your knees and threatens to suck the life out of you. Wedged between our tires and engine cases, the quagmire is so powerful that our wheels stick fast, unable to turn. With numb and clumsy hands, we pull enough of the wheels clear to once again move the bikes.



As the last of our energy deserts us a small sign for Estancia La Siberia offers us a glimmer of hope. A few minutes later we are sliding down the short track. Our host, Estaban, has heard the bikes and is waiting to greet us. Sanctuary for the night costs about \$12.

We are 3,421 miles north of our first meeting with the 40. Our rough beginnings having eased dramatically over the weeks to become a love affair, the road's capricious turns revealing the real Argentina. It's true that we are a little battered, but we are all the richer for the privilege of riding her.

### Riding Into the Sky

Northwest bound we are climbing into the sky, clicking through the gears, ascending the endless switchbacks of the Paso de Jama pass and across the roof of the Andes. Tonight we will sleep in the Chilean town of San Pedro de Atacama, an oasis on the periphery of the driest place on earth, the Atacama Desert. Certain areas in this Antofagasta region of Chile haven't seen a drop of rain since records began. Cresting the Andes at 15,830 feet we begin our long descent, and the elongated shadow of the Licancabur volcano shelters us from the setting sun's heat. We ride the last few miles into town while all around us the orange, dusty canvas of the Atacama stretches out. **RR**

Printable tankbag maps are available in each digital issue purchased or included in your subscription. Log in at [www.roadrunner.travel](http://www.roadrunner.travel).



Freezing rain and clay mud take a toll on us on the notorious Ruta 40.

The growing giant that is the Perito Moreno Glacier is a stunning site.



# Facts & Information

Total Mileage  
Approximately 5,638 miles.



We enjoy the spectacular views from the Ruta 40.

## In General

Argentina is the world's largest Spanish-speaking country and the second largest country in South America. The currency is the peso, and currently \$1 U.S. equals 4 pesos. ATMs are abundant in cities and towns; in more rural areas rely on cash. Argentina is in the Southern Hemisphere so its seasons are reversed. The best time for travel is between November and March.

## How to Get There

U.S. citizens do not require a visa for visits of up to 90 days. Major airlines have daily flights from most major cities in the U.S. into Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires.

## Food & Lodging

From a hammock in the tropics to rooms in private homes, prices start at \$6, including breakfast. There are hostels, small guest homes, and a good range of hotels in all major towns and cities. There are many set camping areas, but there are more opportunities for wild camping. Know that ranches cover huge areas, and it's always polite to ask permission of the landowner before camping on their property.

The on-the-go snack is the empanada, a pastry filled with meat and vegetables. Argentines love "asado," or barbecue, "chorizo," a spicy sausage, and "morcilla," blood sausage. These items are always on the menu. If you have a sweet tooth try "dulce de leche," and for drinks try "mate," an infusion of dry leaves and twigs, and be sure to sample the wines.

## Roads & Biking

U.S. citizens require an international driving license. Argentina is about 2,400 miles long, and it's possible to ride the entire length on a variety of dirt, gravel and asphalt roads. In southern Patagonia strong winds can blow for hours, gusting up to 75 mph, which can make staying upright difficult.



Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.

## Contact Information

- Up-to-date information on visa requirements and travel advice:  
[www.travel.state.gov/travel](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel)
- Argentina Ministry of Tourism  
[www.turismo.gov.ar/](http://www.turismo.gov.ar/)

## Books & Maps

- *Lonely Planet Argentina*; 7th edition by Sandra Bao, Gregor Clark, et al, ISBN 978-1741794649, \$25.99
- *Argentina (EYEWITNESS TRAVEL GUIDE)* by DK Publishing, ISBN 978-0756661939, \$25
- *Michelin Map Argentina 762*, ISBN 978-2067150652, \$11.95

## Motorcycles & Gear

1999 BMW R 1100 GS

2002 BMW F 650 GS

Jacket and Pants: BMW Rally 1

Helmets: BMW System 4 carbon fiber

Boots: MX boots – Alpine Star Tech 6 and Gearne SG10

Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega