

Living The Good Life In Northwest Argentina

By Don Mankin



Photos for this article: Don Mankin

Rugged red rock gorges, steep winding roads and regiments of giant cacti standing guard over vast, dusty planes—I could have been in Utah, except for the alcohol.

Salta Province in NW Argentina is known for its wine. I had ample opportunity to confirm this fact in a recent three-day small group tour of Salta's scenic Calchaqui Valley hosted by Socampo Adventure Travel (socompa.com).

The tour started with a drive through Quebrada de las Conchas (Canyon of the Shells). The canyon derives its name from the thousands of shells embedded in the rock walls, the remains of the ancient sedimentary sea bed pushed up by geologic forces millions of years ago.

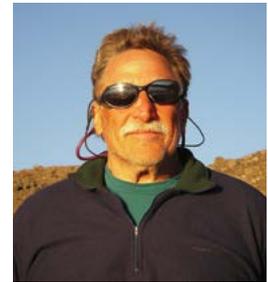
We stopped at several viewpoints and popular tourist sites along the way. "Popular" in this part of the world means, for example, that you share the hushed acoustics of a natural amphitheater with a dozen or so people, not the hordes that swarm similar sites along the main highways in Utah.

We ate lunch—barbequed goat, roasted vegetables, juicy empanadas and excellent red wine—at the El Porvenir Winery in a Spanish Colonial mansion surrounded by vineyards that stretch for miles. After lunch, we spent a balmy hour or so hanging out in the town square of Cafayate, a spitting image of the town square in Sonoma, looking at the flowers and listening to the birds.

Then it was time for more wine. After a tour of the vineyards at the El Esteco winery, we sampled their Torrontes and Malbec, semi-arid, high-altitude wines (the elevation is about a mile) made from grapes typically unavailable outside of Argentina.

We spent the night at the Vines El Cafayate Wine Resort. My room was huge with double French doors that opened onto a large deck with views of vineyards that seemed to fill the valley all the way to the distant foothills of the Andes.

The next morning we saw why the trip is described as "overlanding by 4X4." For several hours, we drove on dirt roads through a craggy desert that was only occasionally



broken up by a house, small farm or cluster of buildings that might generously be called a village. We barely saw any other vehicles the entire day.

After a lunch of empanadas and cold beer at Hacienda de Molinos we headed for the cozy and remote Casa de Campo La Paya for our last night.





bedroom apartment) in the adobe style Los Colorados at the foot of Jujuy's famed 7 color mountain.

As the sun came up the next morning, I saw how the mountain earned its name. I'm not sure I saw all seven colors but the different shades of red and orange, contrasting with a few greys and black, made for quite a show.

To describe the region as Utah with alcohol is an oversimplification but it does hint at the melding of scenery and the good life you will find in this remote corner of Argentina. If you like desert scenery -- deep canyons, tall cactus, surreal landscapes, hills that glow red at sunset—but also an excellent glass of wine in a picaresque setting at the end of the day, this is the place.

For more information on the Adventure Geezer, visit his website and blog at adventuretransformations.com.

The next morning on our return drive to the town of Salta, our starting point, we stopped at Los Cordones National Park, my favorite attraction of the trip. Tall human-like cacti with upraised arms spread over the vast, open landscape. Best of all, we had this sweeping panorama all to ourselves.

After a few days chilling out in Salta, I embarked on a second adventure, exploring the province of Jujuy (pronounced hoo-hoey), an even more remote region in northwest Argentina.

The two-day trip, hosted by Argentinian tour company Say Hueque (sayhueque.com), began by following the route of the historic Train to the Clouds, a high altitude railroad (almost 14,000 feet at its highest point) built in 1948 to connect Salta with the region near the borders with Bolivia and Chile. The road took us through high desert scenery that was just as dramatic but even wilder than the Calchaqui Valley—desert, gorges, hills and cacti plus windy frontier towns and tilted sedimentary layers colored by a variety of minerals.

The highlight was the Great Salt Flats near the border. The almost infinite expanse was made even more surreal by the distant silhouettes of people walking mysteriously across the blazing white salt flats. I felt like I was on another planet or in a scene from a Fellini movie.

From there we drove over a 14,000 foot pass, then made our way via one hairpin turn after another down a steep, sphincter-challenging road through a gorge of red rock. The views were spectacular when I dared to look.

We ended up in Purmamarca, a quaint, sleepy town as colorful as the mineral rich hills that surround it. I settled for the night into my spacious "room" (more like a one-

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