The Perfect Trip

Argentina & Chile

Start your trip in Buenos Aires, the cultural capital of South America, then choose from Argentina's cattle country, vineyards, jungle and glaciers, before finishing at the howling ends of the earth, over the border in Chile.
Your trip mapped out

From the bravado of Buenos Aires to the vast landscapes of Torres del Paine, this easy itinerary brings you the best of Argentina and Chile.

1. **BUENOS AIRES**
   **Best for tango**
   Your journey starts in Buenos Aires and consists of a series of trips out from the city. Buenos Aires is a 17- to 24-hour flight from London, including stopover.

   With swagger and sparkle, Buenos Aires has the air of a flirtatious stranger. It seduces with the old-world appeal of neoclassical French architecture, the antiques fairs that spill over with strange curios, and the lovers who colonise nearly every park bench in the city.

   A metropolis of three million residents, the city still somehow manages to feel personal. Here, strangers compulsively strike up conversation and taxi drivers wax philosophical while changing lanes. Argentine politics and the peso may be on a rollercoaster ride but, as dusk falls and Buenos Aires convenes in worn corner bars and neighbourhood steak houses to get back to the real order of business – life itself. These are the daydreaming hours, the perfect time to reboot with a cortado (a milky coffee shot) and get ready for the night ahead.

   In a pavilion on the green fringe of Belgrano, women stand tall in stilettos or on tiptoe in flats, while around them, boys in trainers and suited gentlemen hover. Every weekend, La Glorieta gives romantic Buenos Aires the ultimate way to enjoy the city’s old-world charm and seductive attitude.

   Couples take part in the sensuous ritual of tango at one of La glorieta’s outdoor dances. **ABOVE RIGHT** The cafes surrounding Barrancas de Belgrano park are the ideal spot to watch the dancers.

2. **EL CALAFATE**
   **Best for glaciers**
   Only 185 metres above sea level, Perito Moreno glacier is one of the most accessible in the world – and its undulating, fissured surfaces are endlessly beautiful.

   **View no less than 40 impressive waterfalls, walk through jungle, swim in cool river waters and spot orchids and birds in this rainforest paradise.**

3. **LAS PAMPAS**
   **Best for cattle ranches**
   Just outside Buenos Aires, this expansive region is home to more cattle than people – the ideal space to get on horseback and get in touch with nature.

   **Take a tour of one of the many wineries in the gentle countryside around Mendoza and sample the region’s signature wine, full-bodied malbec.**

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6. **TORRES DEL PAINE**
   **Best for trekking**
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pavilion hosts public tango called milongas. These events are classic Buenos Aires, where all walks of life join hands, press and swirl. ‘We are recovering our identity with tango,’ says veteran tango singer Silvana Gregori. ‘People connect to it because, at its core, tango is a sentiment. Even if you don’t understand the words, the meaning is clear.’

Across town, La Gardia’s tango classes are held in a converted factory dressed in ruby light and art deco chandeliers. The instructor urges, ‘If nothing else, feel the dance.’ The pace is hypnotic: slow, slow, quick-quick-quick. It could be a metaphor for Buenos Aires itself.

Further Information
- For information on cultural events, tango with live music and tango lessons, visit Konex City of Culture’s Spanish-only website at ciudadculturalkonex.org.
- Find hotels at hotels.lonelyplanet.com.

Las Pampas
Best for estancias (cattle ranches)

Unfurling itself from Buenos Aires, the near-million square kilometres that make up the Pampas can feel unnervingly empty after a few nights in the city. Where Argentina’s capital ends abruptly, these massive plains take over, a colossal canvas of grassland and blue sky stretching from horizon to horizon. ‘The only place on earth where God can roam at large’, according to Argentinean poet Jorge Luis Borges, the Pampas are home to stout Argentine cattle, watched over by rugged horsemen known as gauchos.

Cattle ranching is the way to experience first hand the wide, open spaces of Argentina’s grasslands.

WHERE TO STAY
VITRUM

Cubes of coloured glass front this ultra-modern hotel in Palermo Hollywood, a fantastic neighbourhood for walking, wining and dining. Beds are deliciously oversized, while a glass elevator leads to the rooftop spa where guests receive relaxing treatments or recline in the hot tub from £169; vitrum.com.ar.
refurbish Daireaux's family estancia, El Roble, and try their hand at ranching. Generations of Daireaux have runched the Pampas, and there’s even a local railway stop bearing their name.

Totty is the daughter of a thoroughbred trainer but, for her, horse riding is not about technique. ‘There’s a sense of fewer rules here, it’s less restricting. Look at the amount of space,’ she says, surveying the 2,000-hectare estancia. ‘You can ride in any direction.’

While Jaime and gaucho Vicente Albornoz manage 800 head of cattle, Totty runs the bed and breakfast, where guests can join in the day’s activities. What they have created rings true to the essence of the Pampas: there are no staged shows, no tours around the paddock. Instead, guests leave their cast-iron beds to herd cattle on horseback at day break. The ride is pure pleasure. First light catches the lip of the plains, a broad palette of grass stretched flat in every direction.

Cantering past a still pool, water birds shriek and take flight. A filling country breakfast of hot croissant-like medialunas, coffee and farm-fresh eggs is served up only when the work is done. ‘Our idea,’ explains Totty, ‘is to get people to understand what goes on here by doing it themselves. We haven’t tried to change anything. This is what it is.’ What it is is cattle and gaucho ceremony, but it’s also the privilege of letting loose in a near-infinite space.

FURTHER INFORMATION
lasPampas tourism: turismolapampa.gov.ar.

ABOUT Gaucho Vicente Albornoz herds the cattle at El Roble ranch. OPPOSITE Expect a warm welcome at El Roble from owner Totty Pease and her dogs, as well as the chance to experience estancia life, and sample local food such as lemon cake, and meats cooked by Vicente on a traditional asado.
The Iguazú river, a dark mass of water slipping past as rapid and loud as a train, reaches the lip of 40 waterfalls. Spectators, insignificant against the scale of the falls, fill steel platforms to marvel at the roaring, misty void which manufactures rainbows all day long. Below is a dizzying brawl as falling water pounds huge basalt boulders. Iguazú Falls are less than a two-hour flight from Buenos Aires but, as natural wonders go, they’re epic. Iguazú National Park is the most biodiverse in Argentina. Stretching the seams of Brazil and Argentina, this Unesco Biosphere Reserve first opened to visitors in 1934. It’s highly accessible, with a narrow-gauge eco-train, trails and platforms that link the sights. José Calo, head ranger for the waterfall area, has worked and lived in the park for 12 years. It’s a lifestyle of waking up to the clatter of toucans, and happening upon jaguars long before the gates are opened to the public. ‘Of course, everyone comes for the waterfalls,’ he says. ‘But then they are blown away by all that surrounds them.’

This Atlantic coast rainforest is unique and greatly threatened. ‘Very little is left of this habitat,’ explains José. Yet Iguazú is home to almost half of Argentina’s species, with thousands of plants and over 80 types of orchid. The wildlife here ranges from ocelot to tapir and over 400 species of bird, including the harpy eagle. To get a good look at them, José advises arriving very early or late in the day.

With one million visitors a year, finding solitude in the park can be a challenge. One solution is visiting off-peak (skipping Easter, July or January) and getting off the beaten path. José recommends the Macuco trail, a half-day jungle walk to Arrechea Falls. Unlike in Iguazú, swimming is allowed in these cool waters, and is just the thing after a trek through the jungle.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

**WHERE TO STAY**
LA CANTERA
Part of the Iryapú Jungle Reserve, this lodge offers respite, with the sounds of the forest close at hand. Raised boardwalks lead to modern, cabin-style rooms with pale wood furniture, king-size beds and a Jacuzzi baths. Each has a private, screened terrace with prime forest views from the hammock. Lodgers can explore the reserve with a complimentary mountain bike or take a dip in the infinity pool. It’s located three and a half miles from the town of Iguazú (from US; hotelacantera.com).
MENDOZA
Best for wine

Two-hour flight from Buenos Aires

Mendoza’s shopkeepers roll down the metal shades for several hours every weekday because, they say, ‘In Mendoza, we still respect the siesta.’

A two-hour flight from Buenos Aires, Argentina’s wine capital is a mid-sized city that runs on growing seasons, not business hours. Proof is in the countryside: broad valleys resting under loud blue skies, their western slopes ringed by Andean peaks. Late-19th-century European immigrants were drawn to plant their vines here by the sunny, dry and high land. Now the region’s signature wine is malbec—a plummy, full-bodied red.

‘When you grow up in Mendoza, wine is always on the table,’ says Gabriela Furlotti, the fourth generation in a prominent winemaking family. ‘Even if you’re my 94-year-old grandmother.’

The land Gabriela inherited from her grandfather’s 1916 vineyard wasn’t really large enough for commercial winemaking, but she didn’t want to break with tradition. She converted her family home into an inn and rallied small producers to form a fairtrade cooperative, exporting their organic malbec under the label Soluna.

Bravado is central to the survival of these vineyards. Once, planting vines over 1,000 metres was considered risky, but then came Valle de Uco, a high-altitude star now deemed the future of Argentine winemaking. Hot days and cool nights make for robust grapes, which in turn create rich and ramped-up flavours.

A one-hour drive from Mendoza, Uco divides its alliances between gumption and grandeur. There are no crumbling chateaux; winemaking here feels more like mad science. In a cramped warehouse, visitors squeeze between barrels and arrays of test tubes and the winemaker himself asks, ‘What do you think?’

Mendoza may well be onto something. Good things seem to come to those who dally. Or, as Gabriela says, ‘Live like the locals. Relax, sip, eat.’
Standing beneath the massive towers of craggy blue ice that is the Perito Moreno glacier, it’s impossible not to feel like a speck on the face of the planet. It’s a view that rallying guide and former park ranger Marcelo Jannes, even after 28 years. ‘It’s one of the few places in the world where reality surpasses expectations,’ he says.

Less than an hour from the gateway town of El Calafate, Perito Moreno is located in Los Glaciares National Park and is part of the Southern Patagonian Ice Field. It’s the third largest ice sheet in the world, slightly smaller than Wales, and with 350 glaciers. Rather than a single unchanging surface of ice, the sheet contains undulating shapes, rippled and sculpted, with hues ranging from crystal blue to burnished steel.

In the world of glaciers, Perito Moreno is unique. While most are actively receding, this one is stable and accessible. ‘To see glaciers, you normally have to go to a polar extreme or a high alpine setting,’ says Marcelo. ‘But here we are, only 185 metres above sea level and at the same latitude as London but in the south. It’s marvellous.’

Marcelo leads excursions through the icy landscape with trekking company Hielo y Aventura. A trip is about exploring all angles of nature’s ice sculpture. Viewing platforms are assembled from the shore of Lago Argentino to a hilltop, each offering a new vista. Then, without warning, the glacier splits – building-sized blocks of ice crash into the lake with a mighty crack.

The core of the Southern Patagonian Ice Field is 1,000m thick. Some of that millennial ice makes it into the tumblers of whisky that Marcelo pours for his guests at the end of a trek. And, as Marcelo insists, it tastes much better than regular ice.

FURTHER INFORMATION
- Find hotels at hotels.lonelyplanet.com.

WHERE TO STAY

Los Notros lodge serves up high-end comfort in glorious sight of the glacier. Rooms are decorated in modern country style, with iron chandeliers and worn wooden tables, but the real draw is the exclusive national park setting. Coveted sunset and sunrise views are guests’ alone, since the park closes at 6pm. Snuggle up with binoculars and a blanket: it would be hard to find a better backdrop for romance (from £364; open from mid-Sept to mid-April; losnotros.com).
A walk through the Torres del Paine National Park brings one surreal landscape after another: a shock of turquoise lake floats beneath an emerald forest; chiselled rock towers soar nearly 2,000 metres out of the barren steppe. Just 50 years ago, only sheep enjoyed these privileged views. Today, the former estancia is Chile's premier national park.

Patagonia native Viviana Bauk works for nonprofit AMA Torres del Paine (ama translates as love), a group that educates visitors on conservation issues. For her, the draw is simple: ‘It’s about incredible landscapes. Where else can you walk through steppe, forest, Andean desert and shrubland, one right after the next?’

Torres del Paine ranks among South America’s most accessible parks, with clearly marked trails and a glut of well-regarded outfitters, such as adventure tourism company Antares Patagonia, which is happy to smooth out the logistics and guide you. Day walks from the park entrance offer a taste of the magic, but there are richer rewards for those who strap on their hiking boots for longer. Refugios, or trekkers’ huts, placed at five-hour trail intervals, mean that days end in a hot meal, warm shower and comfy bed. For many, the four- to five-day W circuit is a rite of passage. Named after the shape it traces on a map, the trek covers many of the park’s highlights, such as Glacier Grey, the French valley and the towers of rock after which the national park is named. The sun lingers until 10pm during the summer, providing plenty of daylight to take in the steep rock formations or observe guanacos prancing across the steppe.

Even the climate here is unique. Banked between the tip of the continent and the Southern Patagonian Ice Field, the weather is frequently moody and powerful. ‘People learn to walk differently in Patagonia,’ says Viviana. ‘So, the wind tries to pick you up? Just lean into it.’

WHERE TO STAY

INDIGO

In the park gateway town of Puerto Natales, Indigo is the perfect place to wind down after a walk. Restful spaces abound, from the rooftop Jacuzzi and spa to plush rooms with down duvets and candles lit for your return. Service is attentive, but the main star here is the Patagonian fjord, which even captures your gaze in the shower (from £172; indigopatagonia.com).

Carolyn McCarthy is the co-author of Lonely Planet’s Argentina guide, and Trekking in the Patagonian Andes.