

Argentina

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Buenos Aires** (p48) This is one sophisticated capital that's full of life and beauty – eat, shop, tango and party all night long.
- **The Lake District** (p125) From fishing to skiing to hiking to white-water rafting, an outdoor lover's paradise graced with gorgeous mountains and lakes.
- **Córdoba** (p91) Argentina's second-largest city and an attractive mix of historical buildings and alternative, youthful culture – all surrounded by quaint mountain villages.
- **Iguazú Falls** (p88) A must to see before you die – the world's most amazing waterfalls, stretching almost 3km long and 70m high.
- **Off the Beaten Track** (p102) Explore the lonely road from Cachi to Cafayate, a combination of rugged landscapes, scenic adobe villages, and vineyards producing *torrontés* (white-wine grape).
- **Best Journey** (p102) North of Jujuy is the lovely Quebrada de Humahuaca, a Unesco World Heritage Site of harsh yet vivid mountainsides dotted with *cardón* cacti.

FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 2.8 million sq km (roughly the size of India)
- **Budget:** US\$35 a day
- **Capital:** Buenos Aires
- **Costs:** hostel US\$10, steak dinner US\$10, five-hour bus ride US\$16
- **Country code:** ☎ 54
- **Languages:** Spanish; Quechua in the Andean northwest
- **Money:** US\$1 = AR\$3.84 (Argentine pesos)
- **Population:** 40 million
- **Seasons:** Patagonia (November to February), skiing (June to September), Buenos Aires (March to May and September to November)
- **Time:** GMT minus three hours



TRAVEL HINTS

Pack light, but bring foul-weather gear for Patagonia. Family photos bring locals closer, and MP3 players are great for long bus rides.

OVERLAND ROUTES

Argentina has three border crossings each with Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil and Uruguay, and many, many border crossings with Chile.

The secret is out: with its gorgeous landscapes, cosmopolitan cities and lively culture, Argentina is a traveler's paradise. It stretches almost 3500km from Bolivia to the tip of South America, encompasses a wide array of geography and climates, and is almost the size of India. Nature-lovers can traverse the Patagonian steppe, climb South America's highest peak, walk among thousands of penguins and witness the world's most amazing waterfalls. Hikers can sample the stunning scenery of the lush Lake District – with its glorious lakes and white-tipped mountains – and revel in Patagonia's glacier-carved landscapes and painted Andean deserts. City slickers will adore fabulous Buenos Aires, full of opportunities to learn Spanish, watch *fútbol* (soccer), dance the sexy tango and interact with dynamic and beautiful *porteños* (people from Buenos Aires). You'll be out shopping for designer clothes at affordable prices and eating the world's best steaks every day while partying at nightclubs all night long.

Argentina is safe, friendly and – compared to Europe or the US – very affordable. Now is a great time to visit, so get your spirit in gear and prepare for an unforgettable adventure!

CURRENT EVENTS

After years of boom, Argentina's inflation remains high and the economy continues to sputter. The country teeters on the edge of recession, but there is also good news for travelers – a weakening peso means that hard currency goes a long way.

Cristina Kirchner, Argentina's first elected woman president, lost much of her power during the June 2009 legislative elections. Her husband, ex-president Néstor Kirchner, later resigned as the leader of the Peronist party, soundly ending their hopes for an extended political dynasty.

In other news, Argentina will be celebrating its bicentennial in 2010, rejoicing in 200 years of independence from Spain. Expect to visit several newly renovated museums and buildings, such as the famous Teatro Colón which shut down popular tours for over two years during its facelift.

HISTORY

The Good Old Days

Before the Spanish hit the scene, nomadic hunter-gatherers roamed the wilds of ancient Argentina. The Yámana (or Yahgan) gathered shellfish in Patagonia, while on the pampas the Querandí used *boleadoras* (weights on cords) to snag rhea (ostrich-like birds) and guanaco (the llama's cousin). Up in the subtropical northeast, the Guaraní settled down long enough to cultivate maize, while in the arid northwest the Diaguita developed an irrigation system for crops.

In 1536 the Querandí were unfortunate enough to meet pushy Spaniards in search of silver. They eventually drove the explorers away to more welcoming Paraguay. (Left behind were cattle and horses, which multiplied and gave rise to the legendary *gaucho* – cowboy).

The Spanish were persistent, however, and in 1580 they returned and managed to establish Buenos Aires, though trade restrictions from Spain limited the new settlement's growth. The northern colonies of Tucumán, Córdoba and Salta, however, thrived by providing mules, cloth and foodstuffs for the booming silver mines of Bolivia. Meanwhile, Spaniards from Chile moved into the Andean Cuyo region, which produced wine and grain.

Cutting the Purse Strings

In 1776 Spain designated the bootlegger township of Buenos Aires as 'capital of the new viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata,' a nod to its strategic port location. A rogue British force, hoping to snag a piece of the trade pie, invaded in 1806 but was given the boot soon after by the rallied settlers. With newfound power, the confident colonists revolted against Spain, which they held a grudge against for the trade restrictions. Complete independence was their reward six years later in 1816.

Despite this unity, the provinces resisted Buenos Aires' authority. Argentina split allegiances between the inhabitants of Buenos Aires (Unitarists) and the country folk (Federalists). A civil war ensued, and the two parties' bloody, vindictive conflicts nearly exhausted the country.

In 1829 Juan Manuel de Rosas came into power as a Federalist, but applied his own brand of Unitarist principles to centralize control in Buenos Aires. He built a large army, created the *mazorca* (a ruthless secret police), institutionalized torture and forced overseas trade through the port city. Finally, in 1852, Justo José de Urquiza (once Rosas' supporter) led a Unitarist army that forced the dictator from power. Urquiza drew up a constitution and became Argentina's first president.