The Andean Northwest

In stark contrast with the low, flat, humid northeast, Argentina’s northwest sits lofty, dry and tough beneath the mighty Andes. Nature works its magic here with stone: weird, wonderful and tortured rockscapes are visible throughout, from the imposing formations of the Parque Nacional Talampaya in the far south to the twisted strata of the Quebrada de Cafayate; from the jagged ruggedness of the Valles Calchaquíes to the palette of colors of the Quebrada de Humahuaca. And always to the west is the brooding presence of magnificent peaks.

The area has an Andean feel with its traditional handicrafts, Quechua-speaking pockets, coca leaves, llamas, the indigenous heritage of the inhabitants, Inca ruins, and the high, arid puna (Andean highlands) stretching west to Chile and north to Bolivia. The region’s cities were Argentina’s first colonial settlements and have a special appeal. The quiet gentility of Santiago del Estero recalls bygone centuries, Salta’s beauty makes it a favorite stop for travelers, while resolutely urban Tucumán, a sugarcane capital, seems to look firmly to the future.

Several popular routes await. From Salta you can take in the cactus sentinels of Parque Nacional Los Cardones on your way to gorgeous Cachi, and then head down through the traditional weaving communities of the Valles Calchaquíes to Cafayate, home of some of Argentina’s best wines. Another route from Salta soars into the mountains to the puna mining settlement of San Antonio de los Cobres, heads north to the spectacular salt plains of the Salinas Grandes, and then down to the visually wondrous and history-filled Quebrada de Humahuaca.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wonder at nature’s palette in the Quebrada de Humahuaca (p252)
- Observe weavers at work in the memorable Valles Calchaquíes (p272)
- Cleanse your lungs in the crisp mountain air of Tafí del Valle (p286)
- Hit Wild West Chilecito (p303), the base for uplifting mountain excursions
- Soak up the colonial ambience in sophisticated Salta (p260)

- POPULATION: 4.46 MILLION
- AREA: 559,864 SQ KM
Climate
Dryness and cold characterize the extreme northwest’s weather. Drought is often a problem and many zones are virtual desert. Although the zone’s crossed by the Tropic of Capricorn, the altitudes here keep things chilly. To the south and east, however, temperatures are much warmer, and you’ll sweat it out in the steamy cloud forest of Parque Nacional Calilegua or the scorching summer of La Rioja.

National Parks
This region holds some important national parks, mostly in Jujuy and Salta provinces. Parque Nacional Calilegua (p250) preserves subtropical cloud forest and is home to an array of birdlife, as well as pumas and jaguars. The less accessible Parque Nacional El Rey (p251) is the most biologically diverse park in the country and teems with birdlife, including toucans. Far-flung Parque Nacional Baritú (p252) contains subtropical montane forest and is home to monkeys, big cats, otters and forest squirrels. Between Salta and Cachi, Parque Nacional Los Cardones (p272) is full of cactus-studded photo opportunities. Much further south, Parque Nacional Talampaya (p305) has aboriginal petroglyphs, photogenic rock formations and unique flora and fauna, while in the far east of the region, Parque Nacional Copo (p293) harbors anteaters, parrots and the fabulous quebracho colorado tree.

Getting There & Away
There are flights from Buenos Aires to Jujuy, Salta, Tucumán, Santiago del Estero, Catamarca and La Rioja, and flights from Salta to Córdoba and Iguazú. Salta has the most flights. Bus connections are generally available for destinations all over the country, particularly from the large cities of Tucumán and Salta. Slow trains from Buenos Aires make it to Tucumán.

JUJUY & SALTA PROVINCES
Intertwined like yin and yang, Argentina’s two northwestern provinces harbor an inspiring wealth of natural beauty and traditional culture, of archaeological sites and appealing urban spaces, of national parks and wineries. Bounded by Bolivia to the north and Chile to the west, the zone climbs from the sweaty cloud forests of Las Yungas westward to the puna highlands and some of the most majestic peaks of the Cordillera de los Andes.

The two capitals – comfortable Jujuy and colonial, beloved-of-travelers Salta – are launch pads for exploration of the jagged chromatic ravines of the Quebrada de Cafayate and Quebrada de Humahuaca; for the villages of the Valles Calchaquíes, rich in artisanal handicrafts; for the stark puna scenery; for nosing of the aromatic Cafayate torrontés whites; or for rough exploration in the remote national parks of El Rey or Baritú.

JUJUY
0388 / pop 278,336 / elev 1201m
Of the trinity of northwestern cities, Jujuy lacks the colonial sophistication of Salta or urban vibe of Tucumán, but nevertheless shines for its livable feel, enticing restaurants and gregarious, good-looking locals. It’s got the most indigenous feel of any of Argentina’s cities. The climate is perpetually springlike; the city is the highest provincial capital in the country.

San Salvador de Jujuy (commonly called simply Jujuy) was founded in 1593 as the most northerly Spanish colonial city in present-day Argentina. It was the third attempt to found a city in this valley, after the previous two incarnations had been razed by miffed indigenous groups who hadn’t given planning permission.

On August 23, 1812, during the wars of independence, General Belgrano ordered the evacuation of Jujuy. Its citizens complied in what is famously known as the éxodo jujeño. All possessions that could not be loaded on the mules were burned, along with the houses, in a scorched-earth retreat. Belgrano reported that most citizens were willing. They were able to return to what was left of their city in February 1813. The province of Jujuy bore the brunt of conflict during these wars, with Spain launching repeated invasions down the Quebrada de Humahuaca from Bolivia.

The city’s name is roughly pronounced huu-hui; if it sounds like an arch exclamation of surprise, you’re doing well.

Orientation
Jujuy sits above the Río Grande floodplain where the smaller Río Xibi Xibi meets it. It consists of two parts: the old city, with a
fairly regular grid pattern between the Ríos Grande and Xibi Xibi, and a newer area south of the Xibi Xibi that sprawls up the slopes of the nearby hills. All of interest is within walking distance of the main square, Plaza Belgrano.

**Information**

There are many central banks with ATMs. Call centers and internet places abound.

**ACA** (Automóvil Club Argentino; ☏ 422-2568; cnr Av Senador Pérez & Alvear) Maps and route information.

**Hospital Pablo Soria** (☎ 422-1228; cnr Patricias & cnr Av Córdoba)

**La Zona** (☎ 422-5233; Lavalle 340; per hr AR$2) Good cybercafe with extra facilities available.

**Laverap** (Belgrano 1214) Laundry.

**Municipal tourist office** (☎ 402-0254; Av Urquiza)

**Province tourist office** (☎ 422-1343; www.turismo.jujuy.gov.ar; Gorriti 295; ☏ 7am-10pm Mon-Fri, 8am-10pm Sat & Sun) Excellent office with good brochures and staff.

**Sights**

**Catedral**

Jujuy’s 1763 catedral (cathedral; Plaza Belgrano; ☏ 8am-12:30pm & 5pm-8:30pm) replaced a 17th-century predecessor destroyed by the Diaguita. The outstanding feature, salvaged from the original church, is the gold-laminated baroque pulpit, probably built by local artisans trained by a European master.
MUSEO ARQUEOLÓGICO PROVINCIAL

The Museo Arqueológico Provincial (☎ 422-1315; Lavalle 434; admission AR$2; ☏ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Sat & Sun) is definitely worth a visit. The standout exhibit is a vivid 3000-year-old fertility goddess figure, depicted with snakes for hair and in the act of giving birth. She’s a product of the advanced San Francisco culture, which existed in Las Yungas from about 1400 BC to 800 BC. There’s also a selection of skulls with cranial deformities (practiced for cosmetic reasons) and mummified bodies displayed with what might have been their typical possessions. Staff hand out a booklet that has information in English.

CABILDO & MUSEO POLICIAL

On the plaza, the attractively colonnaded cabildo (colonial town hall) houses the Museo Policial (☎ 423-7715; admission free; ☏ 8am-1pm & 4-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 6-8pm Sat & Sun). Police museums in Argentina are funny things, with grisly crime photos, indiscriminate homage to authority and the odd quirky gem, in this case the discovery that in 1876 you could expect a five peso fine if you wanted carnal knowledge of a llama.

MUSEO HISTÓRICO PROVINCIAL

During Argentina’s civil wars, a bullet pierced the imposing wooden door of this colonial house, killing General Juan Lavalle, a hero of the wars of independence. The story of Lavalle unfolds in Museo Histórico Provincial (☎ 422-1355; Lavalle 256; admission AR$2; ☏ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 4-8pm Sat & Sun). There is also religious and colonial art, as well as exhibits on the independence era, the evacuation of Jujuy and 19th-century fashion. There are some English labels, and guides on hand to answer questions.

IGLESIAS Y CONVENTO SAN FRANCISCO

While the Franciscan order has been in Jujuy since 1599, Iglesia y Convento San Francisco (cnr Belgrano & Lavalle) dates only from 1912. Nevertheless, its Museo Histórico Franciscano (☎ 423-3434; admission AR$2; ☏ 9am-3pm & 5-9pm Mon-Fri), alongside on Belgrano, retains a strong selection of colonial art from the Cuzco school, which came about when monks taught indigenous Peruvians the style of the great Spanish and Flemish masters; this school gradually developed a high-quality style of its own that still exists today.

CULTURARTE

An attractive modern space, the Culturarte (☎ 424-9539; cnr San Martín & Sarmiento; admission free; ☏ 8:30am-midnight Mon-Fri, 8:30am-1pm & 4:30pm-midnight Sat & Sun) showcases exhibitions by well-established Argentine contemporary artists. There’s also a cafe-bar with a great little balcony elevated over the street.

MERCADO DEL SUR

Jujuy’s lively market, opposite the bus terminal, is a genuine trading post where indigenous Argentines swig mazamorra (a cold maize soup) and peddle coca leaves (see boxed text, p249). Simple eateries around here serve hearty regional specialties; try chicharrón con mote (stir-fried pork with boiled maize) or spicy sopa de maní (peanut soup).

Tours

Several Jujuy operators offer trips to the Quebrada de Humahuaca, Salinas Grandes, Parque Nacional Calilegua and other provincial destinations. See the Provincial Tourist Office (opposite) for a full listing.

Festivals & Events

In August, Jujuy’s biggest event, the weeklong Semana de Jujuy, commemorates Belgrano’s evacuation of the city during the wars of independence. The next-largest gathering is the religious pilgrimage known as the Peregrinaje a la Virgen del Río Blanco on October 7.

Sleeping

BUDGET

There are lots of cheap residenciales in the chaotic streets around the bus terminal.

Club Hostel (☎ 423-7565; www.noroestevirtual.com.ar; San Martín 134; dm/s/d AR$35/70/120; ☏ 423-7565) In a new location across the road, this busy hostel has good dark dorms that have lockers, bathrooms and only four berths per room. The private rooms with bathrooms are also decent, and there’s a kitchen and tiny Jacuzzi out the back. HI (Hotel International) discount applies. Friendly staff also operate a tour agency.

Hostal Casa de Barro (☎ 422-9578; www.casadebarro.com.ar; Otero 294; s/d without bathroom AR$40/75) Light-hearted and genuinely welcoming, this original and enjoyable place has rooms that are bright and chirpy, and shared bathrooms...
that are very clean. The place is decorated throughout with rock-art motifs. There’s a comfy lounge and a kitchen, and breakfast is included.

Residencial Alvear (☎ 422-2982; restaurantechunking@arnetbiz.com.ar; Alvear 627; s/d with bathroom AR$78/95, without bathroom AR$38/76) A variety of rooms is tucked away behind the Chung King restaurant (see opposite). They’re OK for the price, but select carefully (upstairs) as some of those with shared bathroom are a little poky. The further back, the quieter it gets.

**MIDRANGE**

**Hotel Avenida** (☎ 423-6136; www.quintar.com.ar; Av 19 de Abril 427; s/d standard AR$132/216, s/d superior AR$180/264; € @) This hotel overlooks the Xibi Xibi; its rooms are a bit run-down, but worth the price for the views from their great balconies. Modernized superior rooms are better value, while the penthouse (AR$780) has the best views of all.

**Hotel Fenicia** (☎ 423-1800; www.quintar.com.ar; Av 19 de Abril 427; s/d standard AR$132/216, s/d superior AR$180/264; € @) This hotel overlooks the Xibi Xibi; its rooms are a bit run-down, but worth the price for the views from their great balconies. Modernized superior rooms are better value, while the penthouse (AR$780) has the best views of all.

**Hotel Internacional** (☎ 423-1599; www.hinternacionalsevilla.com.ar; Belgrano 501; s/d AR$150/190; €) Perched on a corner of the plaza, this high-rise has smallish but bright cream-colored rooms...
with good-looking clean bathrooms. Some have spectacular views out over the plaza, and nice touches include a morning paper put under your door. Good value.

Hotel Augustus (☎ 423-0203; www.hotelaugustus.com.ar; Belgrano 715; s/d AR$182/230; ☏) Smack on the pedestrian street (er, block), this offers personable service and value for money. The mattresses feel newish, and are draped with fleur-de-lis bedspreads. Half the rooms have pleasant balconies. You can use the pool at a hotel just a 15-minute cab ride away.

Posada El Arribo (☎ 422-2539; www.elarribo.com; Belgrano 1263; s/d AR$210/255; ☏) An oasis in the heart of Jujuy, this highly impressive family-run place is a real visual feast. The renovated 19th-century mansion is wonderful, with high ceilings and wooden floors; there’s patio space galore and a huge garden. The modern annex behind doesn’t lose much by comparison, but go for an older room if you can.

Eating
Café Le Petit (Lavalle 415; cakes AR$5-8; ☾ 9am-8pm) A stately and well-loved salon with classic, refined decor, where you can take your well-deserved break for coffee and rather tasty cake.

Manos Jujeñas (☎ 424-3270; Av Senador Pérez 381; mains AR$14-26; ☾ lunch & dinner) One of Jujuy’s best addresses for no-frills traditional slow-food cooking, this fills up with a contented buzz on weekend evenings. There are several classic northeastern dishes to choose from, but it’s the picante – chicken, tongue or mixed – that’s the pride of the house.

Chung King (☎ 422-2982; Alvear 627; mains AR$14-34; ☾ lunch & dinner) This is a popular, worthwhile restaurant with an extensive Argentine menu including good-value daily specials (AR$18 to AR$24); it has an even more popular attached pizzeria. In fact, despite the name, about the only chow you can’t get here is Chinese.

Miralejos (☎ 422-4911; Sarmiento 368; meals AR$15-32; ☾ 8am-midnight) This is plaza-side dining at its finest. Miralejos offers the full gamut of steak and pasta (with a wide choice of interesting sauces), with a few local trout dishes thrown in. The outside tables are a great place for breakfast and the eclectic music selection is interesting, to say the least.

Krysys (☎ 423-1126; Balcarce 272; mains AR$15-40; ☾ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The best parrilla (steak restaurant) option is this central, upscale place offering all your barbecued favorites in a relaxed atmosphere. But there’s plenty more on the menu, with a range of tasty sauces to go with your choice of chicken, pork or beef, and various appetizing avocado starters. Prices are fair, and you’ll get the meat the way you want it cooked.

Marazaga (☎ 424-3427; Av Senador Pérez 222; mains AR$32-45; ☾ dinner) This place offers traditional Andean plates alongside trendy new creations. The vegetarian crepe starter is filling and tasty, but the pork with honey-mustard sauce could do with a more dignified bed than crinkle-cut chips. But, as in Russian roulette, there are more positive than negative outcomes.

our pick Madre Tierra (☎ 422-9578; Belgrano 619; 4-course lunch AR$35; ☾ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat) This place is a standout. The vegetarian food – there’s a daily set menu – is excellent and the salads, crepes and soups can be washed down with fresh juice. It’s an earthy place where the simple, home-cooked food makes a welcome change. The bakery out the front does a range of wholesome breads.

Drinking & Entertainment
Jujuy’s folkloric peñas (folk music clubs) tend to be a cab ride away and open weekend nights only. One of the best is El Fogón (☎ 0388-15-588-2040; RN9; ☾ 8pm-late Sat) on the southeastern edge of town; another is La Yapa (☎ 402-0637; Mejías 426, Barrio Malvinas; ☾ 8pm-late Fri & Sat). The big boliches (nightclubs) are also out on RN9 south of town, while La Peluquería (Alvear 526; ☾ 8pm-late Thu-Sun) isn’t a hairdresser but a big, popular central pub with an elevated stage for live music.

COCOA CHEWING
Once you get seriously north, you see signs outside shops advertising coca and bica. The former refers to the leaves, mainly grown in Peru and Bolivia, which are used to produce cocaine. Bica refers to bicarbonate of soda, an alkaline that, when chewed along with the leaves (as is customary among Andean peoples), releases their mild stimulant effect and combats fatigue and hunger. Chewing coca and possessing small amounts for personal use is legal, but only in the northern provinces of Salta and Jujuy. Taking them into other provinces or into Chile is illegal, and there are plenty of searches.
Getting There & Away
AIR
Andes (431-0279; www.andesonline.com.ar; San Martín 1283) flies six times weekly to Buenos Aires (AR$712) via Salta (AR$68), with connections to Puerto Madryn and Iguazu. Aerolíneas Argentinas (422-7198; Av Senador Pérez 355) services Buenos Aires' Aeroparque Jorge Newbery (AR$827) once daily.

BUS
The old-school bus terminal (422-1375; cnr Av Dorrego & Iguazu) has provincial and long-distance services, but Salta has more alternatives.

Buses coming from Salta run to San Pedro de Atacama (AR$160) around 8:30am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday; book it in advance with Andesmar or Pullman. Geminis do the same run on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday.

There are frequent services south to Salta and north to the Quebrada de Humahuaca and the Bolivian border at La Quiaca. Sample destinations and fares:

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<th>Destination</th>
<th>Cost (AR$)</th>
<th>Duration (hr)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Catamarca</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Córdoba</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1½</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Tucumán</td>
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Getting Around
Jujuy’s El Cadillal airport is 33km east of the center. A shuttle service leaves from the Hotel Internacional at 12.30pm to coincide with flights (AR$20). Otherwise it’s AR$65 in a remise (radio taxi).

If you’re after a rental car, Avis (424-4938; www.avis.com; Güemes 864) or Hertz (422-9582; www.hertz.com.ar; Belgrano 715), in Hotel Augustus, are central choices; there are also branches at the airport.

AROUND JUJUY
Situated in a deep green valley above a mostly dry riverbed, the hot springs of Termas de Reyes are just 19km from Jujuy; the mineral-rich water emerges at a natural temperature of 50°C. They are so named (Kings’ Springs) because indigenous chiefs used to bathe in them for their magical properties.

There’s a public pool (admission AR$15; 9am-8:30pm), and free campsite here, as well as the upmarket Hotel Termas de Reyes (0388-492-2522; www.termasdereyes.com; s/d AR$210/360), with a central-European feel, very comfortable rooms (views cost more) and spa treatments. It doesn’t accept under-16s as guests.

Bus 1C runs hourly (AR$1.75, 45 minutes) from Calle Gorriti near the Jujuy tourist office.

PARQUE NACIONAL CALILEGUA
Jujuy province’s eastern portion is Las Yungas, a humid and fertile subtropical zone mostly devoted to the sugarcane industry. Here, arid, treeless altiplano gives way to the dense cloud forest of the Serranía de Calilegua, whose preservation is the goal of this accessible 760-sq-km park. At the park’s highest elevations, about 3600m, verdant Cerro Hermoso reaches above the forest for boundless views of Chaco to the east. Birdlife is abundant and colorful, but the tracks of rare mammals, such as pumas, tapirs and jaguars, are easier to see than the animals themselves.

Information
The park’s headquarters (03886 422046; calilegua@apn.gov.ar; 7am-2pm Mon-Fri) is in Calilegua village, 5km north of the town of Libertador General San Martín. It has general park information, but the ranger at the park entrance (admission free; 9am-6pm) in Aguas Negras has more information about trails and conditions.

There’s another ranger station at Mesada de las Colmenas, 13km past Aguas Negras and 600m higher. The trails are well marked.

Receiving 1000mm to 1800mm of precipitation a year, but with a defined winter dry season, Calilegua comprises a variety of ecosystems. The transitional selva (jungle), from 350m to 500m above sea level, consists of tree species common in the Gran Chaco, such as deciduous lapacho and palo amarillo. Between 550m and 1600m, the cloud forest forms a dense canopy of trees more than 30m tall, punctuated by ferns, epiphytes and lianas, often mist covered. Above 1200m, the montane forest is composed of conifers, aliso and queñoa. Above 2600m this grades
into moist grasslands, which become drier as one proceeds west toward the Quebrada de Humahuaca.

The 230 bird species at home in the park include condors, brown eagles, torrent ducks and colorful toucans. Important mammals include tapirs, pumas, jaguars, collared pecaries and otters. The presence of the road through the middle of the park, the nearby hydro-station and regular gravel harvesting in the riverbed mean that, on the trails near Aguas Negras, there’s little chance of spotting reclusive species.

**Activities**

The best places for bird and mammal watching are near the stream courses in the early morning or late afternoon. From the ranger station at Mesada de las Colmenas, follow the steep, rugged trail down to a beautiful creek marked with numerous animal tracks, including those of large cats. The descent takes an hour, the ascent twice that.

There are seven marked trails in the park, from 20-minute strolls to tough four-hour hikes. From the campground, a short Guaraní cultural trail, dotted with weird signboards, introduces you to the lower tropical forest.

For waterbirds, head to La Lagunita, about 1½ hours’ walk from Aguas Negras. The La Junta trail starts 3km up the road from Aguas Negras, and is a four-hour return walk with steepish climbs rewarded by great views over the park.

Vehicles with clearance can get right through the 23km of park, if there’s been no rain. The road offers outstanding views of Cerro Hermoso and the nearly impenetrable forests of its steep ravines.

From Valle Grande, beyond the park boundaries to the west, it’s possible to hike in a week to Humahuaca along the Sierra de Zenta, or to Tilcara.

**Sleeping & Eating**

Camping is the only option in the park itself. The developed campground (Aguas Negras) is some 300m from the ranger station at the entrance. It is free and has bathrooms and shower, but no shop. There are simple homestay accommodations at San Francisco, 39km from Aguas Negras, beyond the western end of the park.

Nearby Libertador General San Martín is a sizable town devoted to processing sugarcane, whose sickly sweet smell pervades all corners. Places to stay include Hotel Los Lapachos (423790; Entre Ríos 400; s/d AR$80/100), which tries hard with its scalloped handbasins and wine-red carpets, a block from the plaza.

Eating, except at the upmarket Posada del Sol hotel outside town, is dire. Parador 34 (cnr Belgrano & RN 34; mains AR$9-22; 6am-midnight) on the highway in the center, is esteemed hereabouts, but offers little besides bright lights, internet, a huge TV, and overcooked steak, chicken and rabbit.

Little Calilegua, 5km north, is a much more appealing place to stay, with a tumbledown tropical feel and a deafening chorus of cicadas. Near the park office, Jardín Colonial (430334; San Lorenzo s/n; s/d without bathroom AR$25/50) is a lovely bungalow with rooms, a shady porch and a verdant, sculpture-filled garden.

**Getting There & Away**

Numerous buses between Jujuy/Salta and the Bolivian border at Salvador Mazza stop at Libertador General San Martín and Calilegua, and some will let you off on the highway at the junction for the park, 3km north of Libertador and 2km south of Calilegua. It’s 8km from here to the ranger station at Aguas Negras; there’s enough traffic to hitchhike.

A daily bus (at 8:30am) goes from Libertador General San Martín to Valle Grande (two hours) through the park. It passes the Aguas Negras ranger station at 9am. The return bus passes around 6pm; perfect for day trips to the park. It’s also easy to get a taxi from either Libertador or Calilegua to Aguas Negras (AR$20 to AR$30).

**Parque Nacional El Rey**

East of Salta, Parque Nacional El Rey (elrey@apn.gov.ar) is at the southern end of the Las Yungas subtropical corridor and protects a habitat that is the most biologically diverse in the country. The park takes its name from the estancia (ranch) that formerly occupied the area and whose expropriation led to the park’s creation.

The park’s emblem is the giant toucan, which is appropriate because of the abundant birdlife, but the mosquito might be just as appropriate (also check yourself for ticks, although they don’t carry disease). Most of the same mammals found in Calilegua and Baritú are also here.
BOLIVIA VIA SALVADOR MAZZA
RN 34 continues past Calilegua to Argentina’s northernmost settlement, Salvador Mazza (also known as Pocitos, the name of the defunct station), one of the country’s two major frontiers with Bolivia. Here you cross the frontier (24hr), and take a shared taxi 5km to the larger Bolivian settlement of Yacuiba, which has weekly flights to La Paz, and buses to Tarija (US$14, 12 hours) and Santa Cruz (US$11, 15 hours). There’s no Bolivian consulate, so get your visa in Jujuy or Salta if you need one. At the time of research, US nationals needed a visa, but citizens of the EU, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa did not. Salvador Mazza is served by numerous buses from Jujuy, Salta and other northern cities. Bolivia is one hour behind Argentina.

At the time of writing the exchange rate for bolivianos was AR$1 to B$1.80 and US$1 to B$6.90.

PARQUE NACIONAL BARITÚ
Hugging the Bolivian border, Baritú is the northernmost of the three Las Yungas parks conserving subtropical montane forest. Like Calilegua and El Rey, it harbors a large number of threatened mammals, including black howler and capuchin monkeys, southern river otters, Geoffroy’s cats, jaguars and tapirs. The park’s emblem is the forest squirrel, which inhabits the moist forest above 1300m.

There are various well-marked trails, some accessible by vehicle. Laguna Los Patitos, 2km from park headquarters, offers opportunities to observe waterbirds. Longer trails lead to moss-covered Pozo Verde, a three- to four-hour climb to an area teeming with birdlife. Two other trails are of similar day-trip length; rangers recommend a three-day stay to really get to know the park. Trails involve multiple river crossings, so bring waterproof shoes or get your feet wet.

Entry is free and the best time to visit is between April and October.

There is free camping at the park’s headquarters, with toilets, drinkable water, cold showers and power from 7pm to 10pm. There is no shop. Contact the National Parks Administration (APN; 0387-431-2683; www.parquesnacionales.gov.ar; España 366; 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) in Salta for up-to-date info or check the rangers’ blog (http://pnelrey.blogspot.com).

It’s tough to get here. The last 46km are on rough ripio (gravel) road that’s almost impassable if it’s been raining. Last fuel is at General Güemes, 160km from the park, so consider taking extra gas. If you aren’t hiring a 4WD, the easiest way to get here is via guided tour from Salta (p265). Public transportation gets as far as Lumbreras, 91km short of the park.

Admission is free and information can be obtained at park headquarters (03878-450101; baritu@apn.gov.ar) or National Parks Administration (APN; 0387-431-2683; www.parquesnacionales.gov.ar; España 366; 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) in Salta.

Here, Che Guevara’s psychopathic disciple Masetti tried to start the Argentine revolution by infiltrating from Bolivia in 1963. The only road access is through Bolivia. From RN 34, 90km beyond Calilegua, head for Orán then Aguas Blancas. Crossing into Bolivia, you hug the north bank of Río Bermejo, heading westward 113km, before crossing back into Argentina at La Mamora. A further 17km gets you to Los Toldos, and another 26km brings you to Lipeo, a hamlet at the northwest corner of the park. It has a ranger station but no other services. Los Toldos has accommodations, telephone and a supermarket. The drive to the park usually requires a 4WD.

From Lipeo, there are various trails, including to the hot springs of Cayotal, two hours away, and to the remote hamlet of Baritú, a four-hour walk each way through impressive cedar forest. You can rent horses in Lipeo for this ride. Locals in Lipeo and Baritú can offer accommodation in their homes.

QUEBRADA DE HUMAHUACA
North of Jujuy, the memorable Quebrada de Humahuaca snakes its way upward toward Bolivia. It’s a harsh but vivid landscape, a dry but river-scoured canyon overlooked by mountainsides whose sedimentary strata have been eroded into spectacular scalloped formations that reveal a spectrum of colors in undulating waves. The palette of this Unesco World Heritage–listed valley changes constantly, from shades of creamy white to rich, deep reds; the rock formations in places recall
a necklace of sharks’ teeth, in others the knobly backbone of some unspeakable beast. The canyon’s southern stretches are overlooked by cardón cactus sentinels, but these peter out beyond Humahuaca as the road rises.

Dotting the valley are dusty, picturesque, indigenous towns that have a fine variety of places to stay, plus pretty, historic adobe churches, and homey restaurants serving warming locro (a stew of maize, beans, beef, pork and sausage) and llama fillets. The region has experienced a tourism boom in recent years and gets very full in summer, when accommodation prices soar.

There are many interesting stops along this colonial post route between Potosí (Bolivia) and Buenos Aires; buses along the road run every 40 minutes or so, so it’s quite easy to jump off and on as required. The only spot to hire a car hereabouts is in Jujuy, or further south in Salta. The Quebrada de Humahuaca itself shows its best side early in the morning, when the colors are more vivid and the wind hasn’t got up.

**Purmamarca**

\[0388 / pop 510 / elev 2192m\]

Little Purmamarca, 3km west of the highway, sits under the celebrated Cerro de los Siete Colores (Hill of Seven Colors), a spectacular and jagged formation resembling the marzipan fantasy of a megalomaniac pastry chef. The village is postcard pretty, with ochre adobe houses and ancient algarrobo trees. This, and its proximity to Jujuy, has made it perhaps the northwest’s most over-touristed spot; if you’re looking for an authentic Andean village, move on. Nevertheless, Purmamarca is an excellent place to shop for woven goods; a flourishing poncho market sets up on the plaza every day.

There’s an ATM on the plaza, as well as an information office (\(8am-1pm & 2-7pm\)), with maps that include the easy but spectacular 3km walk around the cerro (hill), whose striking colors are best appreciated in the morning or evening sunlight.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Hostería Bebo Vilte** \(\(\%\) 490-8038; Salta s/n; camping per person AR$20, dm/d without bathroom AR$40/100, with bathroom AR$150/220\)

Behind the church, this is a popular place offering good motel-style rooms with bathroom, simpler interior rooms and dorms with shared bathroom and a camping area with barbecues. Prices are much more realistic outside of high summer.

**El Pequeño Inti** \(\(\%\) 490-8089; elintidepurmamarca@hotmail.com; Florida s/n; s/d AR$90/110\)

Small and enticing, this is a fine little choice just off the plaza. Offering value (for two), it has undorned rooms with comfortable beds and marine-schemed bathrooms.

**CHILE VIA SUSQUES**

The paved road climbs doggedly from Purmamarca through spectacular bleak highland scenery to a 4150m pass, then crosses a plateau partly occupied by the Salinas Grandes. You hit civilization at Susques, 130km from Purmamarca, which has gas and an ATM.

Susques is well worth a stop for its terrific village church (admission by donation; \(8am-6pm\)). Dating from 1598, it has a thatched roof, cactus-wood ceiling and beaten-earth floor, as well as charismatic, naïve paintings of saints on the whitewashed adobe walls. There’s a tourist office on the main road, and basic places to stay, including, opposite the bank, friendly La Vicuña (\(\%\) 03887-490207; atamabel@imagine.com.ar; San Martín 121; s/d with bathroom AR$30/60, r per person without bathroom AR$20), which serves up tasty meals, too.

AndesBus runs Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday from Jujuy to Susques (AR$26, four to five hours) via Purmamarca.

Beyond Susques, the road continues a further 154km (fuel up in Susques) to the Paso de Jama (4230m), a spectacular journey. This is the Chilean border, although Argentine emigration (\(8am-10pm\)) is some way before it. No fruit, vegetables or coca leaves are allowed into Chile – they check. The paved road continues toward San Pedro de Atacama, Calama and Antofagasta in Chile. Buses from Salta and Jujuy travel this route. Nationals of the USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and the EU do not need a visa to enter Chile. However, a fee is payable for US (US$131), Canadian (US$132) and Australian (US$61) citizens – that’s what Chileans pay to apply for a visa for those nations.
Huaira Huasi (☎ 490-8070; www.huairahuasi.com.ar; Ruta 52, Km 5; d/apt AR$260/500; 🛋️ 🌿 🍀) One of a handful of characterful hotels on the main road above town, this stands out for its valley views and handsome terracotta-colored adobe buildings. There are two apartments that sleep five and are just beautifully decorated with local fabrics and cardón wood; rooms are obviously smaller but still lovely. Good value.

Los Colorados (☎ 490-8182; www.loscoloradosjujuy.com.ar; Chapacal s/n; apt for 2/4 people AR$320/460; 🛋️) Looking straight out of a science-fiction movie, these strange but inviting apartments are tucked right into the cerro, and blend in with it. They are stylish and cozy; fine places to hole up for a while.

Los Morteros (☎ 490-8002; Salta s/n; mains AR$30-45; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Warmly lit and stylish, this is the town’s best restaurant, serving dishes such as local trout, or lamb stew with quinoa.

El Rincón de Claudia Vilte (Libertad s/n; admission AR$10, mains AR$12-30; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Minstrels serenade diners in nearly every eating establishment, but if you want the whole local music deal over your meal, this is the best folklore option, though the food is mediocre.

GETTING THERE & AWAY
Buses to Jujuy (AR$9, 1¼ hours) run every one to two hours; others go to Tilcara (AR$3, 30 minutes) and Humahuaca (1¼ hours, AR$8). There’s at least one bus every day (bar Monday) to Susques (AR$20, three to four hours) via Salinas Grandes.

Purmamarca has no gas station; the closest can be found 25km north, at Tilcara, or south, at Volcán. Westward, the next gas station is in Susques, a 130km steep climb away.

Tilcara
☎ 0388 / pop 4358 / elev 2461m
Picturesque Tilcara, 23km further up the valley from the Purmamarca turnoff, is many people’s choice as their Quebrada de Humahuaca base and offers a wide accommodations choice – from luxury boutique retreats to hostels. The mixture of local farmers getting on with a centuries-old way of life and arty urban refugees looking for a quieter existence has created an interesting balance on the town’s dusty streets.

Tilcara is connected by a bridge to RN 9. The main street, Belgrano, runs from the access road to the square, Plaza Prado, and on another block to the church.

INFORMATION
There are several central internet places and call centers as well as a bank with ATM just off the plaza on Lavalle.

Tourist office (☎ 495-5135; mun_tilcara@cootepal.com.ar; Belgrano 366; 🛋️ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm & 2-9pm Sat, 8am-noon Sun) Good information on walks and has a list of accommodation prices.

SIGHTS

Pucará
The reconstructed pre-Columbian fortification, the pucará (walled city; ☎ 495-5073; admission incl Museo Arqueológico AR$10, Mon free; 🛋️ 8am-6pm), is 1km south of the center across an iron bridge. Its situation is undeniably strategic, commanding the river valley both ways and, though the site was undoubtedly used before, the ruins date from the 11th to 15th centuries. The 1950s reconstruction has taken liberties; worse yet is the earlier, ridiculous monument to pioneering archaeologists bang where the plaza would have been. Nevertheless, you can get a feel of what would have been a sizable fortified community. Most interesting is the ‘church,’ a building with a short paved walkway to an altar; note the niche in the wall alongside. The site itself has great views and, seemingly, a cardón for every soul that lived and died here. For further succulent stimulation, there’s a cactus garden by the entrance.

Museo Arqueológico
The Universidad de Buenos Aires runs the well-presented Museo Arqueológico (☎ 495-5006; Belgrano 445; admission incl pucará AR$10, Mon free; 🛋️ 9am-6pm) of regional artifacts. There are some artifacts from the pucará, and exhibits give an insight into the life of people living around that time. The room dedicated to ceremonial masks is particularly impressive. The museum is in a striking colonial house on Plaza Prado.

ACTIVITIES
Of several interesting walks around Tilcara, the most popular is the two-hour hike to Garganta del Diablo, a pretty canyon and waterfall. Head toward the pucará, but turn left along the river before crossing the bridge. The path to the Garganta leaves this road to the left just after a sign that says ‘Cuide la flora y fauna.’ Swimming is best in the morning, when the sun is on the pool.
Tilcara Mountain Bike (0388-15-500-8570; tilcarabikes@hotmail.com; Belgrano s/n; 8am-7pm) is a friendly setup just past the bus terminal that hires out well-maintained mountain bikes (AR$8/40 per hour/day) and provides a helpful map of trips in the area.

There are several places for horseback riding with or without a guide. You’ll see phone numbers for cabalgatas (horseback rides) everywhere, and most accommodations can arrange it for you.

TOURS
Based in the Posada de Luz, Caravana de Llamas (495-5326; www.caravanadellamas.com) is a recommended llama-trekking operator running half-day excursions (AR$140) around Tilcara, day trips in the Salinas Grandes (AR$180) and multiday excursions, including a five-day marathon from Las Yungas lowlands to Tilcara (AR$1750 to AR$2600). The guide is personable and well informed about the area. Llamas are pack animals: you walk, they carry the bags.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS
Tilcara celebrates several festivals during the year, the most notable of which is January’s Enero Tilcareño, with sports, music and cultural activities. February’s Carnaval is equally important as in other Quebrada de Humahuaca villages, as is April’s Semana Santa (Holy Week). August’s indigenous Pachamama (Mother Earth) festival is also worthwhile.

SLEEPING
There are heaps of simple hostels; another budget option is a casa de familia (room in a private home with shared bathroom). They are invariably spotless, and you get a room to yourself for around AR$20 to AR$30 per person. One is Genara de Vargas (495-5399; Lavalle 439), whose well-kept house is opposite the hospital.

Casa los Molles (495-5410; www.casalosmolles.com.ar; Belgrano 155; dm/d without bathroom AR$38/90; ) Run with laissez-faire friendliness by a young couple, this hostel three blocks uphill from the square has a rustic feel, views and a garden to lounge around in. There’s plenty of kitchen space and a good social scene.

Hostel Malka (495-5197; www.malkahostel.com.ar; San Martín s/n, Barrio Malka; dm/s/d AR$50/150/220, d without bathroom AR$180; ) This rustic complex up a path three blocks west of the church is a special place, both hotel and hostel. The welcoming owners, secluded, shady situation, thoughtfully different dorms, and new stone-clad rooms with hammocks and deckchairs out front make it the sort of place you end up staying longer than you expected. There’s a good breakfast included and HI discount.

Hotel de Turismo (495-5720; www.hoteldeturismo.bk.com; Belgrano 590; s/d AR$150/195; ) These ACA hotels always lack character, but the facilities are good for the price. The rooms aren’t huge but some have little balconies. The central location, mountain views and pool (summer only) make it a safe bet. It’s much cheaper off-season.

Cerro Chico (495-5744; www.cerrochico.com; d/q AR$220/280; ) Two kilometers from town down a dirt road, this attractive complex of cabins climbs a hill with gorgeous Quebrada views and a remote, relaxing feel. The standard cabins are compact but handsome, and the pool area is a great little spot. Turn left straight after crossing the bridge into Tilcara and follow the signs.

Posada de Luz (495-5017; www.posadaluz.com.ar; Ambrosetti 661; r AR$240-320; ) With a nouveau-rustic charm, this little place is a fantastic spot to unwind for a few days. More expensive rooms have sitting areas, but all feature pot-bellied stoves and individual terraces with deckchairs and views out over the valley. There are just six rooms, so book ahead.

EATING
Peña de Carlitos (495-5331; Lavalle 397; dishes AR$11-18; lunch & dinner) Hit the corner of the square for this cheery longstanding local restaurant, which offers live folkloric music with no cover charge every night, more of a mix of locals and visitors than in most places, and low-priced regional dishes.
El Patio (☎ 495-5044; Lavalle 352; mains AR$15-36; lunch & dinner) Tucked away between the plaza and the church, this has a lovely shaded patio and garden seating. It offers a wide range of tasty salads, inventive llama dishes and a far-from-the-madding-crowd atmosphere.

Los Puestos (☎ 495-5100; cnr Belgrano & Padilla; meals AR$16-40; lunch & dinner) Though a little touristy – we can’t guarantee you won’t be treated to a rendition of ‘Sounds of Silence’ on the panpipes at lunchtime – this makes up ground with its decor of local stone and chunky wood. Tasty regional specialties feature heavily – barbecued llama (AR$24) is one – but it’s small touches, such as tiny bread rolls straight from the clay oven, that win friends.

Escuela Gastronómica del Norte Argentino (☎ 495-5264; Bolívar 651; mains AR$25-29; lunch Thu-Sun, dinner Wed-Sat) This hospitality school restaurant offers earnest service and a short but inventive menu of mostly local ingredients like corn lasagne and local trout.

GETTING THERE & AWAY
The bus terminal is about 500m south of the town center. There are services roughly every 45 minutes to Jujuy (AR$10, 1½ hours), and north to Humahuaca (AR$3, 45 minutes) and La Quiaca (AR$20, 3½ hours). There are several services daily to Purmamarca (AR$3, 30 minutes) and six to Salta (AR$31, four hours).

Around Tilcara
The town of Maimará, 8km south, is a typical adobe valley settlement set beneath the spectacular and aptly named Paleta del Pintor (Painter’s Palette) hill. Just off the main road, its hillside cemetery is a surprising and different sight with a picturesque backdrop. Take photos respectfully; bear in mind that locals bury their loved ones here. The town also has a worthwhile anthropological and historical museum and places to stay if you fancy overnighting.

Part of a chain that ran from Lima to Buenos Aires during viceregal times, La Posta de Hornillos (admission AR$3; 8am-6pm) is a beautifully restored staging post 11km south of Tilcara. Founded in 1772, it was the scene of several important battles during the wars of independence, and remained an important stop on the road to Bolivia until 1908, when the La Quiaca railway opened. The interesting exhibits include leather suitcases, some impressively fierce swords and a fine 19th-century carriage.

Some 15km north of Tilcara, the road crosses the Tropic of Capricorn, marked by a large sundial, artesanía (handcraft) offerings and a pair of photo-hungry alpacas.

Any of the frequent buses running north–south along the Quebrada will drop you off or pick you up at these spots.

Uquía (☎ 03887 / pop 525 / elev 2818m)
It’s not often that you imagine the heavenly hosts armed with muzzle-loading weapons, but in this roadside village’s fabulous 17th-century church (admission by donation; 10am-noon & 2-4pm) that’s just what you see. A restored collection of Cuzco school paintings – the ángeles arcabucerios (arquebus-wielding angels) – features Gabriel, Uriel et al putting their trust in God but keeping their powder dry. There’s also a gilt retablo (retable) with fine painted panels. By the church, Hostal de Uquía (☎ 490508; elportillo@cootepal.com.ar; s/tw/d AR$110/165/175; ) is a neat place with decent rooms and restaurant.

Humahuaca (☎ 03887 / pop 7985 / elev 2989m)
The Quebrada’s largest settlement is also its most handsome, with atmospheric cobblestoned streets, adobe houses and quaint plazas. You can feel the nearby puna here, with chilly nights, sparse air and a quiet Quechua population. Humahuaca feels less affected by tourism than the towns further south, and is the better for it. There are good handicrafts shops around town, and folk musicians strum and sing in the more popular restaurants.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION
Straddling the Río Grande east of RN 9, Humahuaca is very compact. The town center is between the highway and the river. The disused railway runs through the middle of town. The main square, Plaza Gómez, has the church and cabildo; another plaza, San Martín, is near the bus terminal.

There are two places on Corrientes a block from the plaza that have internet access and open until midnight. The tourist office (Plaza Gómez s/n; 10am-9pm Mon-Fri) is in the cabildo; there’s also an ATM on this plaza. The tourist office on the highway is usually shut, but young rascals outside sell pamphlets that the other office gives out free.
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES
Built in 1641, Humahuaca’s Iglesia de la Candelaria (Buenos Aires) faces Plaza Gómez. Nearby, the lovably knobbly cabildo is famous for its clock tower, where a life-size figure of San Francisco Solano emerges at noon to deliver a benediction. From the plaza, a staircase climbs to the Monumento a la Independencia, a vulgarity produced by local sculptor Ernesto Soto Avendaño. The sculpture exemplifies indigenismo, a widespread tendency in Latin American art that romantically but patronizingly extols the virtues of native cultures overwhelmed by colonialism.

The organization of mountain guides, Hasta las Manos ( 421075; www.nlmexpeditions.com.ar; Av Ejército del Norte s/n), is recommended for exciting multiday treks with mules to the Calilegua or Baritú national parks, with a stunning change in terrain as you descend into the subtropical forest systems. They also offer sandboarding at Abra Pampa (AR$160 for the day) and high-mountain excursions.

Ser Andino ( 421659; Jujuy 221) rents out bikes.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS
Besides Carnaval, which is celebrated throughout the Quebrada de Humahuaca in February, Humahuaca observes February 2 as the day of its patron, the Virgen de Candelaria.

SLEEPING
The boutique hotel boom hasn’t yet hit Humahuaca, which keeps it real with cheap family-run accommodations and a couple of midrange hotels. Prices given are for summer high season; they rise for Carnaval and drop for the rest of the year.

Posada El Sol ( 421466; www.posadaelsol.com.ar; Barrio Milagrosa s/n; dm AR$41, d with/without bathroom AR$180/116) In a peaceful location, signposted 800m across the river bridge, this curious, appealing adobe hostel has a variety of quirky dorm rooms with lockers, and pretty doubles under traditional cane ceilings. Some dorms are cramped, but this place is more than the sum of its parts. Kitchen use, breakfast and taxi from the bus terminal are included, and there’s H1 discounts.

Posada La Churita ( 421055; lachurita@argentina.com; Buenos Aires 456; r per person AR$45) Run by warm-hearted and motherly Olga, this is one of a few unheated cheapies on this street. In theory, the rooms are dorms, but you may well get one to yourself. The shared bathrooms are clean and hot water reliable. Guests have use of the kitchen and a common area with tables.

Inti Sayana ( 421917; www.intisyayahostal.com.ar; La Rioja 83; s/d AR$90/110) Spacious rooms with decent beds – good for families and groups – surround a little courtyard at this pleasing hostal. The guitar-playing owner is helpful and friendly, and can offer advice on what to do around town.

Naty Hostería ( 421022; www.hosterianaty.com.ar; Buenos Aires 488; s/d AR$90/120) Right in the heart of town, this has a friendly boss, photos of nearby places you want to go to, and rooms of varying shapes and sizes at a fair price. Breakfast is included.

Hostal La Soñada ( 421228; www.hostallasoniada.com; San Martín s/n; s/d AR$90/130) Just across the tracks from the center, this is run by a kindly local couple and features spotless rooms with colorful bedsprads and good bathrooms. Breakfast is served in the attractive common area, and guests feel very welcome.

EATING & DRINKING
Casa Vieja (cnr Buenos Aires & Salta; mains AR$14-30) This warm and attractive corner restaurant is hung with basketry and Toreo de la Vincha

You won’t see bullfighting in Argentina – it was banned in the 19th century – but the unusual fiestas of Casabindo feature a toro (bull) as the central participant. This tiny and remote adobe puna village celebrates the Assumption on August 15 in style, and thousands make the journey to see the main event – man against beast in a duel of agility and wits.

The bull’s horns are garlanded with a red sweatband that contains three silver coins. Promesantes (young men from the village) armed with only a red cloth then try to distract the animal’s attention and rob it of its crown. The successful torero then offers the coins to the Virgin. The bull is unharmed. The festival has its origins in similar Spanish fiestas.

Casabindo is west of the Quebrada, accessible via a rough road beyond Purmamarca. Tour operators in Jujuy (p247) and Tilcara (p255) run trips to the festival.
large dreamcatchers. It serves simple llama dishes, and also a tasty bean and quinoa stew. Portions are generous. There’s live music nightly from 9pm.

**El Portillo** (☎ 424-9000; cnr Tucumán & Corrientes; mains AR$14-30; ✉ 8am-midnight) Attractively decorated with cactus-wood furniture and booth tables, this popular restaurant has poor service and a simple menu, which mostly consists of llama in a variety of rather similar creamy sauces. There’s live music every night from 8pm.

**Aisito** (Arias s/n; ✉ 10pm-late) Head across the railway tracks from the bus terminal and turn right at the river to reach this unsigned bar. Locals gather in the attractive interior to bash out local music until rather late. A real find.

**SHOPPING**
The handicrafts market, near the train station, has woolen goods, souvenirs and atmosphere. Near the plaza, **Manos Andinas** (Buenos Aires 401) sells fair-trade artesanía.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**
The **bus terminal** (cnr Belgrano & Entre Ríos) is three blocks south of the plaza. There are regular buses to Salta (AR$36, 4½ hours) and Jujuy (AR$13, 2½ hours), and to La Quiaca (AR$15, three hours). There are three daily buses to Iruya (AR$14, three hours).

**Iruya**
☎ 03887 / pop 1070 / elev 2780m
There’s something magical about Iruya, a remote village just 50km from the main road but a world away in other respects. It makes a great destination to relax for a few days, and also allows proper appreciation of the Quebrada de Humahuaca region away from the busy barreling highway.

The journey is worth the trip in itself. Turning off RN 9, 26km north of Humahuaca, the ripio road ascends to a spectacular 4000m pass that marks the Jujuy–Salta provincial boundary. Here, there’s a massive apacheta (a cairn that accumulates stone by stone, left by travelers for luck). The plastic bottles are from liquid offerings to Pachamama.

The road then winds down into another valley, where smallholders farm potatoes, onions and beans, and reaches Iruya, with its pretty yellow-and-blue church, steep streets, adobe houses and spectacular mountainscapes (with soaring condors). It’s an indigenous community with fairly traditional values, so respect is called for. Chatting with the friendly locals is the highlight of most travelers’ experiences here. You can also hike in the surrounding hills – ask for a local guide – or visit other communities in the valley. **Pablo Harvey** (☎ 0387-15-458-8417; pharvey_ar@yahoo.com.ar) runs unusual and recommended night walks with stargazing, music and Andean legends for AR$15 per person.

Iruya has a **tourist office** (Calle San Martín), but opening hours are irregular. There’s a bank but no ATM in town.

**SLEEPING & EATING**
There are many cheap places to stay in locals’ homes. We won’t recommend any – spreading the wealth is best here – but can confirm that they are spotless and offer value for money (AR$20 to AR$30 per person in a private room).

**Federico III** (☎ 03887-15-629152; www.complejofederico.com.ar; cnr San Martín & Salta; r per person AR$100) A more upmarket option, just above the plaza at the bottom of town; pretty whitewashed rooms surround a little courtyard. Some rooms have views.

**Hostería Iruya** (☎ 482002; www.hosteriadeiruya.com.ar; s/d AR$195/235, with view AR$240/275) At the top of the town, this place has light white rooms with wide beds, a spacious common area and a picturesque stone terrace with memorable views. It’s worth the extra cash for the big-windowed rooms with valley vistas. There’s a decent restaurant here (mains AR$20 AR$30). Note that credit cards are not accepted.

Several simple comedores (basic cafeterias) serve local cuisine. At **Comedor Iruya** (cnr Lavalle & San Martín; dishes AR$5-15; ✉ 10am-9pm), genial Juan and Tina serve delicious home-style meat and salad dishes in a cozy tin-roofed atmosphere.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**
Buses from Humahuaca (AR$14, three hours) leave three times daily; there are also two daily direct buses from Tilcara (AR$19, four hours).

There is 50km of ripio road to negotiate off RN 9. In summer it often becomes impassable due to rain. You’ll often see villagers hitchhiking – it’s a good way to meet locals. A parking fee (AR$2) is sometimes charged entering Iruya.
LA QUIACA
☎ 03885  /  pop 13,761  /  elev 3442m

Truly the end of the line, La Quiaca is 5171km north of Ushuaia, and a major crossing point to Bolivia. It’s a cold, windy place that has decent places to stay and eat, but little to detain you. Once a bustling railroad terminus, La Quiaca’s main sign of life these days is weary Bolivians trudging between the border and the bus terminal toting heavy bags. Nevertheless, it’s not seedy, and noble stone buildings recall more optimistic times.

The road to La Quiaca is intriguing. After leaving the Quebrada de Humahuaca, paved RN 9 passes through Abra Pampa, a forlornly windy town 90km north of Humahuaca, and climbs through picturesque and typical altiplano landscapes. Nightly frosts make agriculture precarious, so people focus subsistence efforts on livestock (llamas, sheep, goats) that can survive on the sparse ichu grass. Look for the endangered vicuña off main routes.

La Quiaca is divided by its defunct train tracks; most services are west of them. North of town, a bridge across the river links La Quiaca with Villazón, Bolivia.

Information
Change money on the Bolivian side of the border or at the bus terminal. Call centers and internet places abound in town.

ACA (Automóvil Club Argentino; cnr Internacional & Bustamante) Maps and motorist services.

Banco Macro (Árabe Siria 445) Has an ATM.

Information kiosk (9:30am-1:30pm & 4-7pm) Run by a hostel, this offers decent information opposite the bus terminal.

Tourist office (✉ 422644; turismo@laquiaca.com.ar; ☏ 7am-7pm) Branches at the border, and at the southern entrance to town.

Sleeping & Eating
Hospedaje Frontera (☎ 422269; cnr Belgrano & Árabe Siria; s/d without bathroom AR$30/50) Nights can get a little chilly here, but the darkish, motel-style rooms are clean and proper behind a popular local restaurant. Bathrooms (shared) have hot water, and management is welcoming.

Copacabana Hostel (☎ 423875; www.hostelcopacabana.com.ar; Pellegrini 141; r per person without bathroom AR$30) Across the tracks from the center, and a block up the street with the Banco de la Nación on the corner, this place offers small, rather sweet heated pink rooms with shared bathroom and amiable staff.

Hotel de Turismo (☎ 422243; hotelmun@laquiaca.com.ar; cnr Árabe Siria & San Martín; s/d AR$95/140) A very good deal, this friendly hotel offers handsome heated rooms with parquet floors and fine bathrooms. It’s the best option in town.

Hostería Munay (☎ 423924; www.munayhotel.jujuy.com.ar; Belgrano 51; s/d AR$100/135) Set back from the pedestrian street (but you can still drive in and park), this is a reassuring option with cheery rooms decorated with artesanía and featuring small bathrooms, big beds and heating. It’s cheaper for walk-ins.

If coming from Bolivia, things get better eating-wise a few hours down the road. The Hotel de Turismo is the best bet; bife de chorizo (sirloin steak) with the works is AR$25, the set lunch AR$20. The down-home Frontera (mains AR$11-21) has meat plates, Spanish omelet and decent tallarines al pesto (noodles with pesto), plus a set lunch for AR$14.

BOLIVIA VIA VILLAZÓN

Crossing from La Quiaca to Villazón, Bolivia, walk, get a taxi or local bus to the bridge, and then walk across, clearing immigration (24hr). At the time of research, US nationals needed a visa, but citizens of the EU, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa did not. Bolivia is much nicer than Villazón promises, so head past the cut-price stalls and straight to the bus terminal or train station. A couple of cheap but reliable accommodation options are by the bus terminal and the plaza if you need them. Buses head to Tupiza (BS$10, 2¼ hours), La Paz (BS$80 to BS$120, 20 hours) via Potosí (BS$40, 10 hours), Oruro and Tarija (BS$40, eight hours). The train station is 1.5km north of the border crossing – a taxi costs BS3 per person. There are four weekly train services to Tupiza (BS$13 to BS$51, three hours), Uyuni (BS$36 to BS$152, six hours) and Oruro (BS$65 to BS$230, 13 hours). Check www.fca.com.bo for schedules. Bolivia is one hour behind northern Argentina.

At the time of writing the exchange rate for bolivianos was AR$1 to BS$1.80 and US$1 to BS$6.90.
GETTING THERE & AWAY
The chaotic bus terminal (cnr Belgrano & España) has frequent connections to Jujuy (AR$35, four to five hours), Salta (AR$65, eight hours), Buenos Aires (AR$190, 27 hours) and intermediate points. There is no transportation to Bolivia, but a few Argentine buses leave directly from Villazón’s bus station.

YAVI
☎ 03887 / pop 207 / elev 3440m
Picturesque, atmospheric, indigenous Yavi, 16km east of La Quiaca via paved RP 5, more than justifies a detour, and is a great little lazy hideaway. Apart from the tumbledown romanticism of its adobe streets, the village preserves two fascinating colonial-era buildings.

Yavi’s church (admission by donation; ♦ 9am-noon & 3-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun, 3-6pm Mon) is perhaps the most fascinating in northern Argentina. Built by the local marquis in the late 17th century, it preserves stunning altarpieces in sober baroque style, covered in gold leaf and adorned with excellent paintings and sculptures, mostly from the Cuzco school, but including one fine Flemish original. The translucent onyx windows also stand out.

Opposite, the Casa del Marqués Campero was the house of the marquis himself, a Spanish noble whose family dominated the regional economy in the 18th century. Now a museum (admission AR$3; ♦ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun), it displays beautifully restored furniture, exhibits on more recent puna life and a lovable library.

Near Yavi are several short walks in the Cerros Colorados – to rock paintings and petroglyphs at Las Cuevas or to springs at Agua de Castilla. Ask for directions at the museum or accommodations.

As well as a good free campground by the river, there are several places to stay. Hostal de Yavi (☎ 421659; www.hostaldeyavi.blogspot.com; Güemes 222; dm/d AR$25/120) offers simple, comfortable rooms and an informal atmosphere with decent meals (AR$30 a dish). Hostería Pachamá (☎ 03885-423235; www.pachamahosteria.net; cnr Pérez & Ruta 5; s/d AR$50/100) has rather charming rooms set around an adobe courtyard, and a pretty eating area, while likeable La Casona (☎ 03885-422316; mccalizaya@hotmail.com; cnr Pérez & San Martín; dm AR$20, d with/without bathroom AR$50/80) has gnarled wooden floors and rustic rooms with stoves for winter nights.

Shared taxis and pickups (AR$5, 20 minutes) run to Yavi from La Quiaca’s Mercado Municipal on Hipólito Yrigoyen; departures are frequent between 6am and 8am but slower after that. Otherwise, it’s AR$25 or so in a taxi.

MONUMENTO NATURAL LAGUNA DE LOS POZUELOS
Coots, geese, ducks, three species of flamingo and many other birds breed along the barren shores of this 160-sq-km lake, an important wetland habitat at an altitude of nearly 4000m. There’s also a large vicuña population hereabouts.

A car is the best transportation option, but fuel up: there is no gasoline available beyond Abra Pampa, midway between Humahuaca and La Quiaca. Make sure you also take plenty of drinking water. Be aware that heavy summer rains can make the unpaved routes off the main highway impassable.

There’s a ranger station at Río Cincel, south of the lake. From near here, a 7km road heads north to a parking lot near the lakeshore. Or not; you may have to walk up to 3km depending on the water levels, which are highest in April and lowest in November. Take binoculars in any event, as you’ll likely find yourself a long way from the flamingoes.

From Abra Pampa there are midmorning buses daily to Rinconada, west of the lake, where there are simple accommodations. On request, the bus will drop you off at the ranger station, but you'll have to walk from there to the lake. Camping is possible on exposed sites, with basic infrastructure, at the ranger station.

There are three main access routes to the lake: from just north of Abra Pampa; from La Quiaca west via Cieneguillas; and from La Intermedia, halfway between Abra Pampa and La Quiaca, where a road makes its way west over the hills to Pozuelos village.

SALTA
☎ 0387 / pop 468,583 / elev 1187m
Sophisticated Salta is a favorite of many travelers, smoothing ruffled psyches with its profusion of services, engaging active minds with its outstanding museums, and lighting romantic candles with its plaza-side cafes and the live música folklórica of its popular peñas. It offers the facilities of a large town, retains the comfortable vibe of a smaller place and preserves more colonial architecture than most places in Argentina.
It’s the most touristed spot in northwest Argentina, and has numerous accommodation options. The center bristles with travel and tour agents: this is the place to get things organized for onward travel. Nevertheless, there’s a poorer Salta readily visible if you venture toward the city’s outskirts, with a large population of indigenous farmfolk from the province and Bolivia searching, often in vain, for a better life in the big city.

History
Founded in 1582, Salta lies in a basin surrounded by verdant peaks. This valley’s perpetual spring attracted the Spaniards, who could pasture their animals in the surrounding countryside and produce crops that it was not possible to grow in the frigid Bolivian highlands, where the mining industry created enormous demand for hides, mules and food. When the extension of the Belgrano railroad made it feasible to market sugar to the immigrant cities of the pampas, the city recovered slightly from its 19th-century decline. In recent years, growth has been rapid as numerous families have settled here in search of work, fleeing the economic conditions in rural areas.

Orientation
Although Salta has sprawled considerably, most points of interest are within a few blocks of central Plaza 9 de Julio. North–south streets change their names on either side of the plaza, but the names of east–west streets are continuous. East of the center, Cerro 20 de Febrero and Cerro San Bernardo overlook the town.

Information
BOOKSTORES
Feria del Libro (☎ 421-0359; Buenos Aires 83) Large selection.
Librería San Francisco (☎ 431-8456; Caseros 362) Decent selection of English books, mostly classics.

IMMIGRATION
Migraciones (☎ 422-0438; Maipú 35; ☏ 7am-2pm Mon-Fri) Twelve blocks west of the plaza, near Caseros.

INTERNET ACCESS & TELEPHONE
There are dozens of internet cafes and call centers dotted throughout the town center. One central option for both is Telecentro (Alvarado 766; per hr AR$3; ☏ 10am-11pm).

LAUNDRY
Laverap (Santiago del Estero 363; service wash AR$15)
One of many. Most accommodations also have a (dearer) service.

MEDICAL SERVICES
Hospital San Bernardo (☎ 432-0445; Tobías 69)

MONEY
Cambio Dinar (B Mitre 101) Changes traveler’s checks (high commission) and cash.
Citibank (cnr España & Balcarce) Changes euros and US dollars, and has a high ATM withdrawal limit.

POST
Post office (Deán Funes 140)

TOURIST INFORMATION
ACA (Automóvil Club Argentino; ☎ 431-0551; cnr Rivadavia & B Mitre) Road maps and route advice.
Municipal tourist office (☎ 437-3340; www.saltalindia.gov.ar; Caseros 711; ☏ 9am-9pm) Efficient multilingual staff.
National Parks Administration (APN; ☎ 431-2683; www.parquesnacionales.gov.ar; España 366; ☏ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) On the 3rd floor of the Aduana building, it offers excellent information and advice on the region’s national parks. Contact this place before going to the more remote parks such as El Rey or Baritú.
Provincial tourist office (☎ 431-0950; www.turismosalta.gov.ar; Buenos Aires 93; ☏ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat & Sun) Top marks — friendly, efficient and multilingual. Ask staff about the condition of the roads if heading out in a rental car.

TRAVEL AGENCIES
There are numerous agencies along Buenos Aires, between Caseros and Alvarado, and all around the town center that can book airfares and bus tickets. See p265 for tour operators.

Sights
MUSEO DE ARQUEOLOGÍA DE ALTA MONTAÑA (MAAM)
Perhaps the premier museum in northern Argentina, MAAM (☎ 437-0499; www.maam.org.ar; B Mitre 77; Argentines/foreigners AR$10/30, ☏ 11am-7.30pm Tue-Sun) has a serious and informative exhibition focusing on Inca culture and, in particular, the child sacrifices the Inca left on some of the Andes’ most imposing peaks (see boxed text, p264).

The centerpiece of the display is the mumified body of one of the three children (rotated every six months) discovered at the peak
THE ANDEAN NORTHWEST

JUJUY & SALTA PROVINCES ••  Salta

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SALTA

To Jujuy (90km)

To Norte Trekking (3km)

To Migraciones (700m); German Consulate (1km);

La Casona del Molino (2km); Reserva del Huaico (7km)

To Mercado Artesanal (2km)

To Camping Municipal Carlos Xamena (4km); Airport (9km);

Sayta (40km); San Antonio de los Cobres (168km); Cafayate (186km)

To Hostel Salta por Siempre (200m); French Consulate (300m);

Backpacker's Home (400m)

To Portazuelo Restaurant (500m)

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To Portazuelo Restaurant (500m)
of Llullaillaco during the 1999 expedition. It was a controversial decision to display the bodies (visitors may choose to view or not) and it is a powerful experience to come face-to-face with them. The intricately plaited hair and clothes are perfectly preserved, and their faces reflect – who knows? – a distant past or a typical 21st-century Salta face; a peaceful passing or a tortured death. You decide.

The grave goods that accompanied the children impress by their immediacy, with colors as fresh as the day they were produced. The illas (small votive figurines of animals and humans) are of silver, gold, shell and onyx, and many are clothed in textiles. It’s difficult to imagine that a more privileged look at pre-Columbian South American culture will ever be offered us. Also exhibited is the 'Reina del Cerro,' a mummy robbed from an Inca tomb in the 1920s that finally ended up here after a turbulent history. It is a powerful experience to come face-to-face with them. The intricately plaited hair and clothes are perfectly preserved, and their faces reflect – who knows? – a distant past or a typical 21st-century Salta face; a peaceful passing or a tortured death. You decide.

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THE CHILDREN GIVEN TO THE MOUNTAIN

The phrase ‘human sacrifice’ is sensationalist, but it is a fact that the Inca culture from time to time offered the lives of high-born children to please or appease their gods. The Inca saw this as an offering to ensure the continued fertility of their people and the land. The high peaks of the Cordillera de los Andes were always considered sacred, and were chosen as sites for the sacrifices. The Inca felt that the children didn’t die as such, but were reunited with their forefathers, who watched over the communities from the highest peaks.

The children, carefully selected for the role, were taken to the ceremonial capital of Cuzco, where they were the centerpieces of a large celebration – the capacocha. Ceremonial marriages between them helped to cement diplomatic links between tribes across the Inca empire. At the end of the fiesta, they were paraded twice around the plaza, and then had to return home in a straight line – an arduous journey that could take months. Once home, they were feted and welcomed, and then taken into the mountains. They were fed, and given quantities of chicha (an alcoholic drink made from fermented maize) to drink. When they passed out, they were taken up to the peak of the mountain and entombed in their drunken sleep, presumably never to awaken.

Three such children were found in 1999 near the peak of Llullaillaco, a 6739m volcano some 480km west of Salta, on the Chilean border. It’s the highest known archaeological site in the world. The cold, low pressure and lack of oxygen and bacteria helped to preserve the bodies almost perfectly. The Doncella (Maiden) was about 15 at the time of death, and was perhaps an aclla (a ‘virgin of the sun’), a prestigious role in Inca society. The other two, a boy and girl both aged six to seven (the girl damaged by a lightning strike), had cranial deformations that indicated they came from high-ranking families. They were accompanied each by an ajuar (a selection of grave goods), which included textiles and small figurines of humanoids and camels.

The mummies’ transfer to Salta was controversial. Many felt they should have been left where they were discovered, but this, once the location was known, would have been impossible. Whatever your feelings on them, and the role of archaeology, they offer an undeniably fascinating glimpse of Inca religion and culture.

fine pulpit from Salta’s Jesuit church), and displays on Salta in the 19th and 20th centuries. The endless series of portraits of Salta’s governors wouldn’t be out of place in a beard-and-moustache museum, while the transportation collection includes a somber hearse used for children’s funerals and an enormous 1911 Renault that puts any Hummer to shame. The building itself, with cobbled patio and gallery overlooking the plaza, is lovely.

MUSEO DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO

The Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (MAC; 437-0498; Zuviría 90; admission AR$2; 9am-8pm Tue-Sat, 4-8pm Sun) has on display the work of contemporary artists from Salta, as well as other parts of Argentina and the wider world. The space itself is well lit and expertly curated. Exhibitions change regularly and are usually of high quality.

CATEDRAL

Salta’s pink catedral (cnr España & B Mitre; 7am-noon & 4:30-8pm) was consecrated in 1878 and harbors the ashes of (among other notables) General Martín Miguel de Güemes, a salteño (resident of Salta) and independence hero; even today, the gauchos of Salta province proudly flaunt their red-striped ponchos de güemes (traditional Salta ponchos). The high baroque altarpiece is the other central feature.

IGLESIA SAN FRANCISCO

Two blocks east of the plaza, the magenta-and-yellow Iglesia San Francisco (cnr Caseros & Córdoba; 7:30am-noon & 5-9pm) is Salta’s most striking landmark. The exuberant facade is topped by a slender tower; inside, the single nave is ornately painted to resemble stucco-work. There are several much-venerated images here, including the Niño Jesús de Aracoeili, a rather spooky crowned figure. There’s a lovely garden cloister, accessed via guided tour (which run on demand in Spanish; donation appropriate) that takes in a mediocre museum of religious art and treasures.

CONVENTO DE SAN BERNARDO

Only Carmelite nuns may enter 16th-century Convento de San Bernardo (cnr Caseros & Santa Fe), but visitors can approach the blindingly white-
washed adobe building (consider sunglasses) to admire the carved, 18th-century algarrobo door. The church, too, is open for visits before Mass early weekday mornings, Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings.

CERRO SAN BERNARDO
For outstanding views of Salta and its surroundings, take the teleférico (cable car; 431-0641; one way/roundtrip AR$10/20; 10am-7pm) from Parque San Martín to the top of Cerro San Bernardo. A trail that takes you up the hill begins at the Güemes monument at the top of Paseo Güemes. Atop is a confitería (cafe offering light meals), whose terrace has the best views, a watercourse and artesanía shops.

Just above the Güemes monument, on the lower slopes of Cerro San Bernardo, is the friendly Museo Antropológico (422-2960; www.anthropologico.com.ar; en Ejército del Norte & Polo Sur; admission AR$3; 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat). It has good representations of local ceramics, especially from the Tastil ruins (Argentina’s largest pre-Inca town), and some well-designed displays in its attractive, purpose-built spaces.

RESERVA DEL HUAICO
This 60-hectare cloud forest reserve (0387-15-489-0118; www.reservadelhuaico.com.ar; Mariano Moreno s/n, San Lorenzo; 4hr guided tour AR$60; 8am-noon & 2-6pm) is in San Lorenzo, 8km west of Salta, and run by a not-for-profit nature foundation. Entry is by appointment only and includes a four-hour guided walk along the reserve’s 15km of trails. Despite Salta’s proximity, the bird-watching is extraordinarily good: more than 205 species have been recorded, with 100 of those – including guans, tanagers, parrots, hummingbirds and woodpeckers – all common. A taxi from Salta costs AR$20, or you can get any San Lorenzo-bound bus (AR$1.25). Get off at the municipalidad (city hall) and it’s a 1km walk along Mariano Moreno to the reserve.

Courses

Tours
Salta is the base for a range of innovative tours, offered by many companies. For city tours (AR$60) and excursions in the Salta area, try any of the travel agencies on Buenos Aires, between Caseros and Alvarado. Other popular trips head to Cafayate (AR$120), Cachi (AR$140), San Antonio de los Cobres (the Tren a las Nubes route; AR$190), Salinas Grandes (AR$290) and Humahuaca (AR$150). Several operators offer horseback riding, rafting and kayaking; paragliding, abseiling, climbing and hiking are also available.

Some operators:
Clark Expediciones (497-1024; www.clarkeexpediciones.com) Professional agency offering trips with highly competent English-speaking guides to the region’s national parks and remote uplands. They’re serious about bird-watching; trips include a half/full day in the Reserva Huaico (US$70/140), two days to Parque Nacional El Rey (US$340) and multiday tailored itineraries. Book well ahead.

Norte Trekking (436-1844; www.nortetrekking.com; Libertador 1151, Barrio Grand Bourg) One of four agencies specifically approved for trips to Parque Nacional El Rey, it runs various multiday hikes, with some guaranteed departure dates listed on its website.

Salta Rafting (421-4114; www.saltaraiting.com; Buenos Aires 88) Runs two-hour white-water rafting trips on the Class III Río Juramento, 100km from Salta (AR$150 including a barbecue lunch; transportation to/from Salta AR$60 extra). At the same location are spectacular 400m ziplines across a canyon (four-nine-line trip AR$120/180). Also runs mountain-biking excursions.

Sayta (0387-15-683-6565; www.sayta.com.ar; Chicona) This estancia 40km from Salta runs excellent horseback-riding days, with optional asado (barbecue grill). It’s also a place you can stay to experience a taste of Argentine gaucho life. A half-day with/without lunch costs AR$170/125, and full-board accommodation for a night is AR$230 (with a day’s riding AR$345). Prices include transfers from Salta.

Tastil (431-1223; www.turismotastil.com.ar; Caseros 468) One of the operators with a variety of day trips and multiday excursions. Some use a characterful but pricey open truck (MoviTrack), while cheaper ones go in a minibus.

Turismo la Posada (421-6544; www.turismolaposada.com.ar; Buenos Aires 94) This multilingual company has a good variety of trips, and offers horseback riding, hiking and rafting.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Camping Municipal Carlos Xamena (423-1341; Av Libertador; campsites per person/tent AR$3.20/4.80) One of Argentina’s best campgrounds, this has 500 tent sites and a huge pool (it takes a week to fill). It’s typically loud in summer. Take bus 3B from Ituzaingó between San Martín and Mendoza. There’s a supermarket near the campground.
Inti Huasi (431-0167; www.intihuasihostel.com.ar; Abraham Comejo 120; dm/d AR$30/90) A short stroll from the bus terminal, this hostel has a really appealing atmosphere, with plenty of socializing in the good kitchen and grassy patio area. Dorms are spacious and comfortable, and you feel like you’re crashing at a mate’s place.

Correcaminos (422-0731; www.saltahostel.com; Vicente López 233; dm/d without bathroom AR$33/90) ‘Roadrunner’ is a cheap-and-cheerful hostel that boasts a well-used bar and pool table. Dorms are spacious if a little stuffy in summer, but the location and laid-back vibe are appealing. It runs another hostel opposite, with a more modern kitchen and fewer beds in the dorms, but without the courtyard space.

Residencial Balcarce (431-8135; www.residencialbalcarce.com.ar; Balcarce 460; s/d without bathroom AR$35/60, with bathroom AR$50/100) Just south of Plaza Güemes, a small entrance disguises a large interior at this value-packed place. In many ways, it’s a standard residencial, with unadorned rooms with decent bathrooms, but the friendly service, grapevine-shaded patio and high hygiene levels make it a sound choice.

Hostel Terra Oculta (421-8769; www.terraoculta.com; Córdoba 361; dm/d AR$35/80) Handily located between the bus terminal and town center, this laid-back, labyrinthine spot is an upbeat hostel that sensibly has its light, comfortable dorms well separated from the excellent rooftop bar, where the action can go loud and late.

Hostel Salta por Siempre (423-3230; www.saltaporsiempre.com.ar; Tucumán 464; dm/d AR$40/120) It’s eight blocks south of the plaza, but worth the trudge to this super-friendly hostel. The quiet and handsome building has glisteningly clean colorful rooms with bathroom – some dorms have beds, others bunks – a proper kitchen and attractive shared spaces. Breakfast is included.

Backpacker’s Home (423-5910; www.backpackerssalta.com; Buenos Aires 930; dm/d AR$52/170) Souvenir shops have given way to panelbeaters by the time you’ve walked the kilometer or so from the center, but this instant-social-life hostel appeals for the great backyard bar and pool area. Rates include breakfast and dinner. HI discounts apply.

Residencial Elena (421-1529; Buenos Aires 256; s/d AR$80/130) Set in a neocolonial building with a charming interior patio, this has a choice location not far south of the plaza. Though it’s on a busy central street, it’s very quiet, and the longtime Spanish owners keep it shipshape.

Hostel El Alcázar (422-3800; www.hostalelalcazar.com; Balcarce 81; s/d AR$90/125) Reliable and central, this offers clean private rooms with bathroom but also has hostel-like facilities (eg a good kitchen) and a laid-back traveler-friendly attitude. It’s a decent deal at Salta prices.

Munay Hotel (422-4936; www.munayhotel.jujuy.com; Av San Martín 656; s/d AR$100/135) With everything you could want in a budget hotel – a handy location, staff who are pleased to see you, well-furnished and clean bedrooms, shower curtains and breakfast – this is one to book ahead.

**MIDRANGE**

Provincial Plaza (432-2000; www.provincialplaza.com.ar; Caseros 786; s/d/tw AR$160/185/250) Rooms are serviceable rather than spectacular at this central four-star option, but the price is more than fair for the quality. Twin rooms are more expensive than doubles, but a lot more spacious; superior and executive rooms are higher up the building with views. The pool is outdoors, on the roof.

Aldaba Hotel (421-9455; www.aldabahotel.com; B Mitre 910; s/d AR$170/260) A block away from the peña action of Calle Balcarce, this six-room place is nevertheless superbly quiet and tranquil. Run with a personal touch, it’s decorated with restrained modern elegance, and boasts super-comfortable beds and friendly service. Rooms vary widely in size (but not price); there are plans to add a few new ones on the ground floor.

**our pick** Bloomers B&B (422-7449; www.bloomers-salta.com.ar; Vicente López 129; s AR$200, d AR$240-270) Break any or all of the Ten Commandments if need be, but make sure you get one of the five rooms at this exquisitely stylish yet relaxed and comfortable guesthouse. The second B here stands for brunch, served until noon and replete with everything you could want in a budget hotel – a handy location, staff who are pleased to see you, well-furnished and clean bedrooms, shower curtains and breakfast – this is one to book ahead.

Hotel Candela (422-4473; www.hotellacandela.com.ar; Pueyrredón 346; d AR$215-330) Decked out like a country villa with an L-shaped pool and grassy garden, this is nevertheless central and features excellent staff, good facilities and comfortable rooms, including a duplex apartment out the back. Different...
grades of room differ chiefly by size. The decor is one of easy elegance, with an eclectic range of art on the walls.  

**Hotel del Antiguo Convento** (☏ 422-7267; www.hoteldelconvento.com.ar; Caseros 113; r AR$230; ☑ ☑ ☑) There really is nothing *antiguo* (old) or conventlike about this place: rooms are modern and sunny and there’s a great little pool area out the back. A duplex apartment next to it sleeps four and goes for AR$340.  
Also recommended:  

**Bonarda Boutique Hotel** (☏ 421-5786; www.hotelbonarda.com; Urquiza 427; s/d AR$170/225; ☑ ☑ ☑) Some parts of this not-quite-convincing ‘boutique’ hotel are attractive; others feel like they’ve been done on the cheap. Rooms open inward onto a spacious interior courtyard; some are airier than others.  

**Marilían Hotel** (☏ 421-6700; www.hotelmarilían.com.ar; Buenos Aires 176; s/d AR$200/250; ☑ ☑ ☑) Nestled among the tour agencies, this hotel offers bright connection in the attractive rooms. A single with shared bathroom in the garden is small but new bathrooms.  

**TOP END**  

**Carpe Diem** (☏ 421-8736; www.carpediemsalta.com.ar; Urquiza 329; s/d AR$240/300; ☑) There’s a real home-from-home feel about this B&B that’s full of thoughtful touches, like home-baked bread at breakfast, enticing places to sit about with a book and a computer with internet connection in the attractive rooms. A single with a take-out, but has a few simple wooden tables, great views of the church and Cerro San Bernardo. Superior rooms are bigger than the compact standards, and have bathtubs.  

**Hotel Salta** (☏ 426-7500; www.hotelsalta.com; Buenos Aires 1; s/d standard AR$248/350, s/d superior AR$339/430; ☑ ☑ ☑) You pay extra for location here (but what a location) on a corner of the postcard-pretty central plaza, in a stately, traditional hotel. Facilities are good and service excellent, but the rooms are a tad disappointing. Try to grab one with a view of the church and Cerro San Bernardo. Superior rooms are bigger than the compact standards, and have bathtubs.  

**Alejandro I** (☏ 400-0000; www.alejandro1hotel.com.ar; Balcarce 252; r standard/superior/executive AR$415/478/550; ☑ ☑ ☑) Astronauts, cosmonauts or Google Earth aficionados might know whether Salta’s most upmarket hotel is visible from orbit – it certainly is, for better or worse, from the whole city. The rooms are slick and modern, and get pricier and larger as you move higher up the building. The restaurant is reader-recommended, and service is swift and efficient.  

**Design Suites** (☏ 01-15-199-7465; www.designsuites.com; Belgrano 770; r/ste AR$648/733; ☑ ☑ ☑) We’re not 100% sure whether the look of this place – all exposed concrete and urban-trendy design – works in a colonial city such as Salta, but it’s an undeniably attractive space. The excellent, quiet rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows, and the rooftop pool and Jacuzzi space offers memorable nighttime views of town. Service is willing.  

**Eating**  

It’s a toss-up between Salta and Tucumán for Argentina’s best empanadas, but they’re wickedly toothsome in both places. Locals debate the merits of fried (in an iron skillet – juicer) or baked (in a clay oven – tastier). Numerous places specialize in them, including the *peíñas*. The taxi drivers’ favorite is **Patio de la Empanada** (cnr San Martín & Islas Malvinas; ☑ 10am-midnight), where various stalls surround an indoor-outdoor eating area; a dozen will set you back AR$15.  

**Mercado Central** (cnr Florida & Av San Martín) This large, lively market is very interesting, as well as one of the cheapest places to eat in town. You can supplement inexpensive pizza, empanadas and *humitas* (stuffed corn dough) with fresh fruit and vegetables.  

**Bio’s Diet** (☏ 421-5771; Santiago del Estero 496; dishes AR$5-16; ☑ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This mostly vegetarian little restaurant mostly functions as a take-out, but has a few simple wooden tables. Daily dishes are displayed at the glass counter.  

**New Time Café** (☏ 431-6461; Caseros 602; snacks AR$8-19; ☑ 8am-late) In the race for the accolade of Salta’s best plaza cafe, this two-level corner spot wins by several lengths. It offers shady (in the afternoon) tables, great views of the *cabildo*, Cerro San Bernardo and cathedral, and wi-fi. It also serves coffee and food, though it isn’t the cheapest. Live music some nights.  

**Jovi II** (☏ 432-9438; Balcarce 601; mains AR$15-30; ☑ lunch & dinner) A long terrace overlooking the palms of Plaza Güemes is just one reason to like this popular local restaurant that does a huge range of dishes well, without frills and in generous portions. Several rabbit dishes, tasty fish and a succulent plate of the day are backed up by excellent service.  

**La Céfira** (☏ 421-4922; Córdoba 481; pasta AR$16-29; ☑ lunch Fri-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) This handsomely styled dining room a few blocks south of the center is a cut far above the usual
gnocchi-with-four-cheese-sauce joints. Delicious homemade pasta includes such temptations as squid-ink ravioli with crab, or spinach fettuccini with salmon and caper sauce. Tasty salads seal the deal.

Entre Indyas (☎ 474-3879; Buenos Aires 44; dishes AR$18-25; ✕ 10am-3pm & 6-11pm) This intimate little spot transcends its shopping-arcade location with tasty vegetarian cuisine, blending Indian and Peruvian traditions. There’s no menu as such, just three or four daily specials, which might include shiitake ceviche, stirfried vegetable chapatis, or quinoa and corn salads.

El Solar del Convento (☎ 421-5124; Caseros 444; mains AR$18-40; ✕ lunch & dinner) Warmly decorated and popular, this reliable tourist choice offers solicitous service – the free aperitif wins points – and a varied menu. It specializes in lomo (sirloin) with tasty sauces, and also has fish dishes and parrillada (mixed grill including steak) options. The wine list offers lots of (priced-up) provincial choices.

Viejo Jack (☎ 422-3911; Av Virrey Toledo 145; mains for 2 AR$22-36; ✕ lunch & dinner) Far enough out of the tourist zone to be authentic, but not so far it’s a pain in the backside to get to, this is a down-to-earth spot very popular with locals for its parrillada and pasta. The serves are huge – designed for two – but you’ll get a single portion (still a big slab of meat) for 70% of the price.

La Leñita (☎ 421-4865; cnr Balcarce & A Alsina; mains AR$28-42; ✕ lunch & dinner) This popular parrilla hits meaty heights on what is a hit-and-miss dining street. There’s fine carne (meat), with a wide range of cuts, and solicitous service whether you’re in a suit or singlet. The versatile staff serenade diners with Salta folklórica music on this street, the indie '90s–'00s mix in this trendy bar might come as a relief. Popular with locals and tourists, it keeps it lively until late.

Plaza de Almas (☎ 422-8933; Pueyrredón 6; ✕ 9am-late Mon-Sat) Offering an eclectic mix of artesanía shops, a bar, lounge, cafe and restaurant, this Tucumán classic has seamlessly moved into Salta. The most atmospheric place for a drink near the plaza.

Casa de Cultura (☎ 421-6042; Caseros 460) This cultural center near the plaza has regular live events. It runs the whole gamut here: you’re as likely to catch a Houdini-style magician as a classical ballet performance.

Cine Ópera (☎ 421-3520; Urquiza 560; tickets AR$10) This is the most central of Salta’s several cinemas, showing Hollywood standards and more offbeat fare in original version.

Teatro Provincial (☎ 422-4515; Zuviria 70) Great new theater in a '40s building on the plaza.

Shopping
An artisan’s market sets up every Sunday along Balcarce, stretching a couple of blocks south from the bus terminal.

Mercado Artesanal (☎ 439-2808; Av San Martín 2555; ✕ 8am-8:30pm) For souvenirs, this provincially sponsored market is the most noteworthy place. Articles include native handicrafts, such as hammocks, string bags, ceramics, basketry, leather work and the region’s distinctive ponchos. To get here, take bus 2, 3 or 7 from downtown.

Getting There & Away
AIR
Salta’s airport (SLA; ☎ 424-3115) is 9.5km south-west of town on RP 51. Andes (☎ 437-3514; www.andesonline.com; España 478) flies six times weekly to Buenos Aires (AR$660), and also services...
PEÑAS OF SALTA

Salta is famous Argentina-wide for its folklore (folk music), which is far more national in scope than tango. A peña is a bar or social club where people eat, drink and gather to play and listen to folklore, which often traditionally took the form of an impromptu jam session.

These days, the Salta peña is quite a touristy experience, with scheduled performances, CD sales, tour groups and high prices, and it’s difficult to find an authentic spot. There are a couple (ask around) where folk musicians hang out in their spare time, and you may catch a spontaneous performance. Nevertheless, the standard Salta peña is a great deal of fun. Traditional fare is empanadas and red wine – delicious, but most of the places offer a wider menu including parrillada (mixed grill including steak) and ‘Andean cuisine’, with llama meat and quinoa featuring.

Peña heartland is Calle Balcarce, between Alsina and the train station. There are several here, along with other restaurants, bars and boliche (nightclubs) – it’s Salta’s main nightlife zone. Things typically get moving at 9.30pm, but go on till late, especially at weekends.

Some peñas to get you started:

- **La Vieja Estación** （421-7727; www.viejaestacion-salta.com.ar; Balcarce 885; show AR$12-15, mains AR$18-45; h 8pm-3am Tue-Sun）The best established of the Balcarce peñas, with a stage, wooden tables and three live shows per night. Tasty empanadas and locro (a stew of maize, beans, beef, pork and sausage), and a wide range of other choices.

- **La Casona del Molino** （434-2835; Luis Burela 1; mains AR$18-35; h lunch & 9pm-5am Tue-Sun）This former mansion, about 20 blocks west of Plaza 9 de Julio, is a Salta classic that goes sinefally late at weekends. It has several spacious rooms, each with different performers who work around the tables rather than on a stage.

- **Peña Boliche Balderrama** （421-1542; www.boliche-balderrama.com.ar; Av San Martín 1126; show AR$20; h 9pm-1.30am）With cheap but unremarkable food, this is Salta’s most touristy peña. It can be a lot of fun, but feels contrived these days.

- **La Casa de Güemes** （422-8978; España 730, mains AR$13-28; h lunch & 9pm-late）This central historic house was once occupied by Güemes, a salteño (resident of Salta) independence hero who looms large in gaucho and folklore culture hereabouts. Decent, fairly priced food – with some worthwhile lunch specials – and good local music.

Córdoba (AR$402), Puerto Iguazú (AR$602) and Jujuy (AR$68). Through Buenos Aires you can connect to its other destination, Puerto Madryn. **Aerolíneas Argentinas** （431-1331; Caseros 475）flies three times daily to Buenos Aires’ Aeroparque Jorge Newbery (AR$813). **LAN** （421-7330; www.lan.com; Buenos Aires 88）flies the same route twice daily.

**Aerosur** （432-0149; www.aerosur.com; Buenos Aires 88）flies three times weekly to Santa Cruz, Bolivia (AR$537).

Flights are heavily oversubscribed, so try to book well ahead.

**BUS**

Salta’s bus terminal （401-1248; Av Hipólito Yrigoyen）, southeast of downtown, has frequent services to all parts of the country. The information desk is in the middle of the concourse.

Two companies, Andesmar and Pullman, do the run to San Pedro de Atacama, Chile, at around 7am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Geminis, an inferior service, does it on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. It goes via Jujuy and the Paso de Jama, takes 10 to 11 hours and costs AR$180. It’s worth reserving a few days before. The buses go on to service Calama, Antofagasta, Iquique and Arica.

**Ale Hermanos** （427-1127）goes daily to San Antonio de los Cobres (AR$25, 5½ hours), while **Marcos Rueda** （421-4447）serves Cachi (AR$37, 4½ hours), departing daily at 7am and also at 1.30pm Tuesday and Saturday, at 3.30pm Thursday and at 5pm Sunday.

Sample fares to other destinations:

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CAR
Many travelers choose to rent a car for a few days in Salta in order to see the surrounding highlands and valleys. There are many agencies; cruise around getting quotes, as there are often special offers available. Most will do airport or city pick-ups. Typically, companies charge AR$170 to AR$220 per day for a week’s hire, or triple that for a 4WD. The stretches between San Antonio de los Cobres and La Poma (en route to Cachi), and north of Salinas Grandes toward Abra Pampa are usually 4WD only, but the ripio road between San Antonio and Salinas Grandes is normally passable in a standard car. Always check with the provincial tourist office for current conditions.

You can’t take rental cars into Bolivia, but it is possible to take them into Chile. Companies require a few days’ notice of this to process the paperwork, which will cost you an extra AR$300 or so.

Some companies:
AndarSalta (☎ 431-0720; www.andarsalta.com.ar; Buenos Aires 88) Decent prices; cheaper if you pay cash.
Europcar (☎ 421-8848; Córdoba 20; www.europcar.com.ar) Good weekly deals.
Noa (☎ 431-7080; www.noarentacar.com; Buenos Aires 1) In the Hotel Salta.

TRAIN
Salta no longer has train services, except the Tren a las Nubes (see below).

Getting Around
Bus 6 from San Martín near Buenos Aires runs to the airport (AR$1.25), otherwise it’s a AR$17 remise (taxi ride). There are also bookable shuttle buses that do hotel pickups (AR$15).

Local bus 5 (AR$1.25) connects the train station and downtown with the bus terminal.

TREN A LAS NUBES
Argentina’s most famous train ride is up and running again, after an uncertain start to the century. From Salta, the Tren a las Nubes (Train to the Clouds) leaves the Lerma Valley to ascend the multicolored Quebrada del Toro, continuing past Tastil ruins and San Antonio de los Cobres, before continuing a little further to the trip’s highlight – a stunning viaduct 64m high and 224m long. It spans an enormous desert canyon at La Polvorienta, 4220m above sea level, and is a magnificent engineering achievement unjustifiable on any reasonable economic grounds. Though it seems underwhelming at first glimpse, it’s very impressive once you get up close. This is the train’s last stop, but the track actually continues to the high Paso de Socompa on the Chilean border, 571km west of Salta.

The trip is a touristy one, with folklore performances, karaoke and multilingual commentary. It’s a long day – leaving Salta at 7am, and not getting back until 11pm. Some people choose to get off in San Antonio, spend the night there and make their own way back. The train runs only on Saturday, and the return trip costs US$120, which includes breakfast and snacks, but not lunch or dinner; you can eat in the dining car or take a picnic.

There’s an office (☎ 422-3033; www.trenalasnubes.com.ar; 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, from 6am Sat) at Salta station where you can book tickets; most travel agents along Calle Buenos Aires can also do this for you.

Many tour operators in Salta (see p265) run trips along the road that parallels the train’s route, which is also a spectacular ascent; they include the viaduct and cost around AR$190.

SAN ANTONIO DE LOS COBRES
☎ 0387 / pop 4274 / elev 3775m
This dusty little mining town is on the puna 168km west of Salta, and over 2600m above it. It’s suffered greatly since the deterioration of the region’s mining and associated railway, and relies heavily on tourism and the Tren a las Nubes for income. It’s a very typical highland settlement, with adobe houses, almost deserted streets and a serious drop in temperature as soon as the sun goes down. It’s not the place for cutting-edge nightlife or street art, but is worth stopping in to get the feel of this facet of Argentine and South American life. You can head north from here to the Quebrada de Humahuaca via the Salinas Grandes and Purmamarca, and, some of the year, south to Cachi (see p274).

In colonial times, transportation from northwestern Argentina depended on pack trains; one route passed through here, crossing the rugged elevations of the Puna de Atacama to the Pacific and then on to Lima. It was a rugged journey, taking 20 days to cover the 800km.

There’s a tourist office near the bridge in the center of town, and a little kiosk at the
eastern entrance to town. In theory they are open 8am to 8pm, but it’s a fiction; try your luck.

**Sights**

There’s little to see in town – though the sunsets are spectacular – but 16km to the west is the viaduct at La Polvorilla, the last stop of the *Tren a las Nubes* (opposite). From the parking lot, which has a couple of *artesanía* shops, you can climb up a zigzag path to the top of the viaduct and walk across it. *Remises* in San Antonio charge about AR$30 for the return journey.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Hostal del Cielo** (☎ 490-9912; www.vivirenloscobres.org.ar; Belgrano s/n; dm AR$35) This basic but very friendly hostel is on the edge of town, heading toward the viaduct. Buses from Salta will drop you here if you ask, otherwise it’s about 1km from the center. There are two spotless, comfortable dorms; bathrooms are also mighty clean; HI members get breakfast included. There’s a small anthropological museum next door.

**El Palenque** (☎ 490-9019; hostalelpalenque@hotmail.com; Belgrano s/n; d without bathroom AR$60, tr/q with bathroom AR$90/120) Welcoming and tidy, this is a fine choice a few blocks from the center, past the church. It looks closed from outside, but it’s not. The rooms are insulated and (comparatively) warm, there’s hot water and sound family ownership.

**Hostería de las Nubes** (☎ 490-9059; www.maresur.com; Caseros 441; s/d AR$160/200; 🌟) The best place to stay and eat in town, this has attractively simple decoration in its comfortable rooms, which boast double glazing and heating. Book ahead. The restaurant (mains AR$15 to AR$25; open noon to 2pm and 7pm to 9.30pm) serves a short menu of local dishes; all are well prepared and nourishing. Simple restaurants are dotted along Belgrano; these are good bets for *empanadas*, *milanesas* (breaded cutlets) and local staples.

**Getting There & Away**

There are daily buses from Salta (AR$25, 5½ hours) with Ale Hermanos. See also the *Tren a las Nubes* (opposite). There’s precious little transportation running over the Paso de Sico to Chile these days; if you are trying to hitchhike, ask around town for trucks due to leave. From San Antonio, a good *ripio* road runs 97km north, skirting the Salinas Grandes to intersect with the paved RP52.

**SALINAS GRANDES**

Bring sunglasses for this spectacular salt plain in a remote part of the puna, at some 3350m above sea level. Once a lake dried up in the Holocene this is now a 525-sq-km crust of salt up to a meter thick. On a clear day, the blinding contrast between the bright blue sky and the cracked and crusty expanse of white is spellbinding.

The *salinas* (salt plains) are in Salta province, but are most easily reached by heading west along the paved RP 52 from Purmamarca in Jujuy province. About 5km west of the intersection of RP52 and RN40 (the good *ripio* road that heads north 97km from San Antonio de los Cobres), there’s a saltmining building; opposite, you can drive onto the salt pan to check out the rectangular basins from which the salt is periodically dug out. A few vehicles are often on the pan.

**WESTERN SALTA PROVINCE**

If you thought San Antonio de los Cobres was remote, think again. Hundreds of kilometers of Salta province stretch west of here, and include two passes to Chile: the barren *Paso de Sico* and the remote rail and road crossing at *Socompa*. Sixty kilometers west of Salta, Olacapato is Argentina’s highest village, at 4090m above sea level. All the area’s settlements are mining camps or grew up around the railway that serviced the mines; many are abandoned now.

From Olacapato you can continue west to the Paso de Sico, or head southwest across *salar*es (salt flats) to *Tolar Grande*, where there are accommodations in private homes. Beyond here it’s 139km to the Paso de Socompa, or 131km southward to the abandoned mine of *La Casualidad*, the end of the road and one of Argentina’s most remote spots. Needless to say, it’s a trip only possible in summer, and an arduous one. Take all your fuel needs from San Antonio, where you can buy 200L drums, and inform police of your plans. Don’t wander off-road around Mina La Casualidad, as some landmines from a 1970s dispute with Chile are still around.
artisans sell decent stone carvings and llamas made from salt here. A couple of places to buy drinks and food are on the road nearby.

The inevitable ‘salt hotel’ hasn’t appeared yet. The closest places to stay are San Antonio and Susques. The only way of reaching the salinas by public transportation is to jump off a Susques-bound bus from Jujuy or Purmamarca. Check the timetables carefully before doing this; on some days it’s possible to catch a bus back to Purmamarca a couple of hours later, but on other days it’s not. This road has enough traffic to hitchhike.

Otherwise, hire a car, grab a remise from Purmamarca, or take a tour from Jujuy or Salta. From the latter, it’s a hellishly long day, unless you opt to overnight in Purmamarca.

The salinas are spectacular, but the otherworldly salares (salt flats) in southwestern Bolivia are even more so; if you’re heading that way (or have already been), you might want to prioritize other attractions.

**VALLES CALCHAQUÍES**

The Valles Calchaquíes is one of Argentina’s most seductive off-the-beaten-track zones: a winning combination of rugged landscapes, traditional workshops, strikingly attractive adobe villages and some of Argentina’s best wines. Small but sophisticated Cafayate, with its wineries and paved highway, presents quite a contrast to more remote settlements such as Angastaco or Molinos, while Cachi, accessible from Salta via a spectacular road that crosses the Parque Nacional Los Cardones, is another peaceful and popular base. The vernacular architecture in these valleys merits special attention – even modest adobe houses might have neoclassical columns or Moorish arches.

In these valleys, indigenous Diaguita (Calchaquí) put up some of the stiffest resistance to Spanish rule. In the 17th century, plagued by labor shortages, the Spaniards twice tried to impose forced labor obligations on the Diaguita, but found themselves having to maintain armed forces to prevent the Diaguita from sowing their own crops and attacking pack trains.

Military domination did not solve Spanish labor problems, since their only solution was to relocate the Diaguita as far away as Buenos Aires, whose suburb of Quilmes bears the name of one group of these displaced people. The last descendants of the 270 families transported to the viceregal capital had died or had dispersed by the time of Argentine independence. The productive land that had sustained the Diaguita for centuries was formed by the Spaniards into large rural estates, the haciendas of the Andes.

**Parque Nacional Los Cardones**

Occupying some 650 sq km on both sides of the winding RP 33 from Salta to Cachi across the Cuesta del Obispo, Parque Nacional Los Cardones takes its name from the candelabra cactus known as the cardón, the park’s most striking plant species.

In the treeless Andean foothills and puna, the cardón has long been an important source of timber for rafters, doors, window frames and similar uses. You see it often in vernacular buildings and the region’s colonial churches. According to Argentine writer Federico Kirbus, clusters of cardones can be indicators of archaeological sites: the indigenous people of the puna ate its sweet black seed, which, after passing through the intestinal tract, readily sprouted around their latrines. Certainly, many a pucará in the region bristles with these otherworldly sentinels.

Los Cardones is free to enter and still has no services – though a visitor center on the main road is gradually being renovated – but there is a ranger office (%03868-496005; San Martín s/n) in Payogasta, 11km north of Cachi. Take plenty of water and protection from the sun. Buses between Salta and Cachi will stop for you, but verify times. Most people disembark at Valle Encantada, which is the most accessible, picturesque part of the park.

**Cachi**

%03868 / pop 2189 / elev 2280m

The biggest place by some distance hereabouts, enchanting Cachi is nevertheless little more than a village, albeit one surrounded by stunning scenery. Overlooked by noble mountains, it boasts fresh highland air, sunny days and crisp nights. The cobblestones, adobe houses, tranquil plaza and opportunities to explore the surrounds mean that it’s the sort of place that eats extra days out of your carefully planned itinerary.

On the west side of the plaza, the Mercado Artesanal (% 491902; oficinadeturismo.cachi@gmail.com; Güemes s/n; ☏ 8am-8pm) is both a handicraft shop and the tourist office.

Opposite, the simple but attractive Iglesia San José (1796) has graceful arches and a
barrel-vaulted ceiling of cardón wood. The confessional and other features are also made of cardón, while the holy water lives in a large tinaja (a big clay vessel for storing oil).

Next door, Cachi’s Museo Arqueológico (☎ 491080; admission AR$5 or AR$10 donation; ☐ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) is a well-presented and professionally arranged account of the surrounding area’s cultural evolution, with good background information on archaeological methods, all in Spanish. Don’t miss the wall in the secondary patio, composed of stones with petroglyphs.

Two kilometers southwest of the center, on the edge of town, Todo lo Nuestro (☏ 0387-15-458-5668; jorgeafpark@hotmail.com; admission AR$10; ☐ 9am-7pm) is a labor of love that features replica buildings from several phases of the valley’s history. It’s a fascinating project; in some of the buildings it really feels as if the occupants have just stepped out for a minute. There’s a rustically styled restaurant here, too.

**ACTIVITIES**

A short walk from Cachi’s plaza brings you to a viewpoint and then its picturesque hilltop cemetery; nearby is a rather unlikely airstrip. A longer walk (an hour and a bit) takes you to Cachi Adentro, a tiny village where there’s not a great deal to do save swing on the seats and right by the bus stop, this is a decent budget choice with rooms around a patio. Beds are comfortable, and bathrooms – both shared and private – work well enough. Prices are a bit negotiable and vary slightly by room; try for the upstairs double round the back.

Hotel Nevado de Cachi (☎ 491105; www.soldelvalle.com.ar; Av ACA s/n; s/d AR$203/302; ☏ ☑ ☐) With its hilltop position, this family-friendly hotel has the best views in town, and there are worse ways to spend your day than relaxing poolside checking them out. Rooms are comfortable and unexciting but picturesquely surround a patio; there’s even a little zoo.

El Cortijo (☎ 491034; www.elcortijohotel.com; Av ACA s/n; s/d from AR$250/295; ☏ ☑ ☐) Opposite the ACA Hosteria Cachi entrance, this stylish small hotel offers rooms that aren’t large but are decorated with finesse, and some – particularly ‘Los Padres’, with its own private terrace with loungers (doubles AR$380) – have fabulous views of the sierra. There’s an original-looking restaurant and various further improvements in the works.

La Merced del Alto (☎ 490020; www.lamerceddelalto.com; s/d AR$599/701; ☏ ☑ ☐) Built of traditional whitewashed adobe with ceramic floors and cane ceilings, this hotel across the river from town is designed to look like an historic monastery. It offers excellent facilities and great peace and quiet, with cool, restrained rooms looking over either the hills beyond (slightly more expensive) or the interior patio. Public areas include a most inviting lounge, a good restaurant, and a rustic spa area offering massage treatments, a pool and Jacuzzi with sierra views. Service is multilingual and top-notch.

El Molino de Cachi (☎ 491094; www.bodegaelmolino.com.ar; d AR$610; ☏ ☑ ☐) With just six rooms, this converted mill makes a highly relaxing rural base for exploring the area. Four kilometers from the center of Cachi, it’s also a winery. It doesn’t take walk-ins, so book ahead. No children or credit cards.

SLEEPING

Camping Municipal (☎ 491902; cachi@salnet.com.ar; campsites AR$15-20; ☑) On a hill southwest of the plaza, this offers shaded campsites with individual barbecues surrounded by hedges; the municipal pool is here. There’s also a hostel with basic dorms (with/without bathroom AR$20/12) and a couple of cabins (AR$125); reservations must be made at the tourist office.
Other options:  
**La Mamama** (☎ 491305; Suárez 590; dm/r without bathroom AR$20/40) A welcoming spot on the bus stop street, with simple rooms with saggy mattresses and a Cachi-casual feel.  
**Hostal del Inkañan** (☎ 491135; luisreicolque@hotmail.com; Güemes s/n; dm/d without bathroom AR$30/80) Decent rooms around a grassy patio uphill from the plaza.

**EATING**

For local dishes such as *locro* and *humitas*, best are the various no-frills *confiterías* and *comedores* around the plaza and across from the Hotel Nevado de Cachi.  
**Platos y Diseño** (☎ 0387-15-513-3861; Güemes s/n; dishes AR$10-25;  for lunch & dinner) Uphill from the plaza, this has a relaxing dining area with local art and photos on the walls, slow but amiable service and decent for-the-tourists traditional dishes.  
**Ashpamanta** (☎ 0387-15-451-4267; Bustamante s/n; dishes AR$15-35;  for lunch & dinner) Compact and snug, this likable little place has a short but tasty menu of pasta, salads and a couple of more elaborate mains – quinoa risotto or pan-fried fillets with vegetables – that are prepared in an open kitchen behind the bar.  
**Oliver** (☎ 491903; Ruiz de los Llanos 160; mains AR$15-40;  8am-midnight) On the plaza, this homey, multilevel, wooden-tabled restaurant is a reliable choice for tasty pizza, bruschetta and a couple of creative meaty mains. The terrace on the plaza is also a fine place for a sundowner. Wine prices are mostly over the odds.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Marcos Rueda (☎ 491063) buses run between Salta and Cachi. It’s a spectacular ride, winding up to the Cuesta del Obispo pass, then traveling through the cactus-studded Parque Nacional Los Cardones. Buses to Salta (AR$37, 4½ hours) leave at 9.05am Monday to Saturday. There’s a 3pm service on Monday, Thursday and Friday, and a 3.30pm service Saturday. There’s a 3pm service on Monday, Thursday and Friday, and a 3.30pm service Saturday. There’s a daily bus from Cachi to Seclantás (AR$12, 1¼ hours, two on Saturday); it continues to Molinos some days.

It’s only passable in a non-4WD vehicle at certain times of year (normally September to December); phone the police (☎ 0387-490-9051) for advice. Otherwise, you’ll have to approach San Antonio the long way round.

**Seclantás**

AR$3868 / pop 306 / elev 2100m  
Charming Seclantás is a quiet little place that’s the spiritual home of the Salta poncho. There are many weavers’ workshops in town, and north of here, along the road to Cachi, artisans’ homes are marked with a sign indicating that you can drop in and peruse their wares; the stretch of road has been dubbed the *Route of the Artisans*. One of them, Señor Tero, is well known hereabouts for having woven a poncho worn by Pope John Paul II.

Seclantás’ church, pretty in yellow, dates from 1835; the evocative cemetery is at the top of town.

Places to stay in Seclantás are clustered around the plaza. Among them, **Hostería La Rueda** (☎ 498041; cnr Cornejo & Ferreyra; s/d with bathroom AR$50/70) is hospitable and spotless, and features comfortable, pretty, common areas and decent rooms. The campground is just behind the church, and has a pool that’s open to the public.

There’s a daily bus from Cachi to Seclantás (AR$12, 1¼ hours, two on Saturday); it continues to Molinos some days.

**Molinos**

AR$3868 / pop 927 / elev 2020m  
If you thought Cachi was laid-back, wait until you see Molinos, a lovely little backwater with a collection of striking adobe buildings in gentle decline; a stroll through the streets will reveal some real gems. Its picturesque appeal is augmented by shady streets and good accommodations. There’s an ATM on the plaza.

Molinos takes its name from the still-operational flour mill on the Río Calchaquí. The town’s restored 18th-century Iglesia de San Pedro de Nolasco, in the Cuzco style, features twin bell towers and a traditional tiled roof. Like Angastaco, Molinos was a waystation on the trans-Andean route to Chile and Peru. Well into the 20th century, pack trains passed here with skins, wool and wood for sale in Salta and subsequent shipment to Buenos Aires.

About 1.5km west is the *Criadero Coquera* (☎ 0387-15-407-1259) where the government’s agricultural research arm raises vicuñas and...
manages to shear them without damaging their health; alongside is the Casa de Entre Ríos, part of the former Estancia Luracatao, where there’s a fine artisans’ market with spectacular ponchos de güemes for sale. There are two simple rooms (AR$30 per person) here.

The hospedajes (family homes) scattered around town are more like homestays than anything. Los Cardones de Molinos (494061; car
donesmolinos@hotmail.com; cnr Sarmiento & San Martín; r per person with/without bathroom AR$50/40) is an excellent choice, with comfortable rooms with cactus furniture. You’re treated as one of the family and can use the kitchen; the exceptionally welcoming and accommodating owner is a good source of local advice. Breakfast is included.

Across from the church, adobe Hacienda de Molinos (494094; www.haciendademolinos.com.ar; Cornejo s/n; s/d standard AR$300/380, r superior AR$450-510; h 10am-6pm) is also known as the Casa de Isasmendi, after Salta’s last colonial governor, who was born, lived and died in this sprawling residence in a town that was a stronghold of royalist resistance. It’s been picturesquely restored, with sober, handsome rooms with inviting beds, antique furniture, cane ceilings and great bathrooms, set around lovely patio spaces. It’s on the edge of the village and utterly peaceful. There’s a good restaurant.

There’s a daily bus to Molinos from Cachi (AR$17, two hours) on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. It returns from Molinos at 7am Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and 2pm on Sunday.

Angastaco
03868 / pop 881 / elev 1955m
Tiny Angastaco sits among some of the most dramatically tortuous rockscapes of the valley route. Forty kilometers south of Molinos and 54km north of San Carlos, it resembles other oasis settlements placed at regular intervals in the Valles Calchaquies, with vineyards, fields of anise and cumin, and the ruins of an ancient pucará.

Angastaco has a gas station but no bank. There is a tourist office on the square, as well as an archaeological museum in the municipal building. Both are open irregular hours, but ask around in the municipalidad or police station and someone will help. Horseback riding is easily arranged via the Hostería Angastaco.

Angastaco’s major fiesta is on December 8, the day of the Virgin of the Valley, the village’s patron. On February 17 and 18, the grape vintage and making of foot-trodden vino patero is celebrated with a festival.

FINCA COLOMÉ
Some of Argentina’s finest wines are produced at this ecological bodega (03868-494044; www.bodegacolome.com; tasting AR$30-50; h 10:30am-6pm), which is set (as they say hereabouts) ‘where the devil lost his poncho,’ some 20km down a spectacular gravel road west from Molinos. The vineyards (including some ancient pre-phylloxera European vines) and hotel enjoy a stunning natural setting, surrounded by hills and mountains that seem to change color hourly. Forward thinking on environmental, social and cultural fronts is also in evidence: the complex is electrically self-sufficient, has funded substantial infrastructural improvements in the local community and now boasts a stunning museum (admission free; h 2-6pm) designed by artist James Turrell, with a permanent exhibition of nine of his works. These are utterly memorable installations involving light and the strange frontiers of our own perception; it’s a remarkable place. Both bodega and museum visits should be booked ahead by phone or email (museo@colomeargentina.com). The bodega also serves salads and baguettes (AR$27 to AR$29) for a light lunch.

The hotel (www.estanciacolome.com; d AR$1486; h 10:30am-6pm) features chic and relaxing rooms accompanied by excellent multilingual service and a raft of facilities, including a picturesque pool surrounded by the grapevines and beds of lavender. Apart from lolling about reading novels and enjoying the wine, you could also head off on some of the impressive criollo horses – really trained by whispering rather than the lash – to explore the surrounding hills. The restaurant (book ahead) is open to visitors, with a short changing menu of just two mains (AR$45 to AR$60), one of which is vegetarian.

Not far from Colomé, Bodega El Humanao is also worth a visit for its beautifully balanced cabernet-malbec blend, among others.
Hospedaje El Cardón (☎️ 0387-15-459-0021; r per person with/without bathroom AR$30/20) is a decent budget choice. It’s 50m to your right (the one with the fancy porch) if you’re standing facing the church. Hostería Angastaco (☎️ 491123; s/d AR$40/70; 🛋️) feels a bit abandoned but offers excellent value for its rooms with artisanal throws on the beds and cardón chests. There’s a restaurant and summer-only pool.

At research time, the only public transportation was one bus that headed south to San Carlos and Cafayate at 6am Monday to Friday and 4pm Sunday (no Saturday service). Transport options to Molinos, 40km north, are limited. Moisés López (☎️ 0387-15-410-2130) and Miguel Pastrana (☎️ 0387-15-4819-0146) will run the route in a car or truck for AR$120 total. There’s also a transport that takes kids from the boarding school in Molinos home to Angastaco at around 5pm on Friday, and returns them to Molinos at around 6am on Monday; they’ll take tourists for free if there’s room. Otherwise, it’s a hitchhike or long walk. Hitchhiking is very slow hereabouts; take water.

San Carlos
☎️ 03868 / pop 1887
A sizable traditional village, San Carlos, 22km north of Cafayate, is connected to it by paved road, a pleasant shock if you’re arriving from the north. Most visitors push on through to Cafayate or Angastaco, but there’s a special place to stay here in La Casa de los Vientos (☎️ 495073; Barrio Cermetigre; r AR$120), which is signposted off the main road at the Cachi end of town. Built in the traditional manner of adobe, with terracotta tiles and cane ceilings, it incorporates some ingenious environmental innovations. The owners are potters, and the rooms (all different) are decorated with rustic flair and beauty.

Cafayate
☎️ 03868 / pop 10,714 / elev 1683m
Argentina’s second center for quality wine production, Cafayate is a popular tourist destination but still has a tranquil small-town feel. It’s easily reached from Salta via the spectacular Quebrada de Cafayate, and is also the southern terminus of the Valles Calchaquíes route. With a selection of excellent accommodations for every budget, and several wineries to visit in and around town, Cafayate invites laying up for a while to explore the surrounding area. It also has many young artists and craftspeople, so check out the artesanía.

Cafayate is famous for its torrontés, a grape producing aromatic dry white wine, but the bodegas hereabouts also produce some fine reds from cabernet sauvignon, malbec and tannat.

Orientation
Cafayate sits at the foot of the Valles Calchaquies, near the junction between RN 40, which goes northwest to Molinos and Cachi, and RN 68, which goes to Salta through the Quebrada de Cafayate. Through town, RN 40 is Av General Güemes.

Information
Banco de la Nación (Plaza San Martín) ATM on the plaza; also changes money.
La Red (Toscano 79; per hr AR$3) Internet access on the plaza.
Locutorio (Av General Güemes & Belgrano) Tourist information kiosk (☎️ 422442; Plaza San Martín; ☎️ 8am-9pm) On the northeast corner of the plaza.

Sights & Activities
MUSEUMS
The private Museo Arqueológico (☎️ 421054; cnr Colón & Calchaquí; admission by donation; ⏰ 11:30am-9pm Mon-Fri, 11:30am-3pm Sat) is the collection left by enthusiastic archaeologist Rodolfo Bravo and well worth a visit. Sourced mostly from grave sites in a 30km radius from Cafayate, the collection consists of an excellent array of ceramics, from the black and gray wares of the Candelaria and Aguada cultures to late Diaguita and Inca pottery, all well displayed across two rooms. While there’s not much explanation, the material speaks for itself.

The Museo de Vitivinicultura (Av General Güemes; admission AR$2; ⏰ 8am-8pm) details the history of local wine production and displays a range of antiquated winemaking equipment. It’s pretty dry, but ambitious plans for new, interactive wings might just have transformed it by the time you visit.

RíO COLORADO
A 6km walk southwest of town leads you to the Río Colorado. Follow the river upstream for about 1½ hours to get to a 10m waterfall, where you can swim. There’s a second waterfall further up. Look out for hidden rock paintings on the way (for about AR$10, local
children will guide you). If you want to ride out to the trailhead, you can leave your bike at the nearby house for a few pesos. You could combine this walk with a visit to Bodega de las Nubes (right). Note: if the river is high after rains in January and February, the route to the waterfall becomes strenuous and dangerous.

WINERIES
Several wineries offer tours and tastings in and around the town. Some are small, easy-going and friendly, while others are larger, with a cooler welcome.

The tour and tastings are short and bright at Bodega Nanni (☎ 421527; www.bodegananni.com; Chavarría 151; tours with tasting AR$5; ☎ 9:30am-1pm & 2:30-6:30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-1pm & 3-6pm Sun), a small, central winery with a lovely grass patio. Its wines are organic, uncomplicated and drinkable.

Tiny Salvador Figueroa (☎ 421289; Pje 20 de Junio 25; tasting AR$5; ☎ 9:30am-12:30pm & 3-7pm) is a friendly family winery in town that produce sonly 5000 bottles of torrontés and malbec per year with small hand-operated equipment. Nearby, El Porvenir (☎ 422007; www.bodegaselporvenir.com; Córdoba 32) focuses on quality wine production. The tour is free, but tastings cost AR$30, AR$60 or AR$90 depending on which wines you want to try.

Diageo-owned Bodega El Esteco (☎ 421283; www.elesteco.com.ar; tours AR$20; ☎ tours 10am, 11am, noon, 2:30pm, 3:30pm, 4:30pm & 5:30pm Mon-Fri, 10am, 11am & noon Sat) on the northern edge of town, is a smart and attractive winery producing some of the region’s best wines and offering upmarket accommodations.

Three kilometers south of town, Bodega Etchart (☎ 421310; www.pernodricard.com.ar; RN 40; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) offers a cheerful free tour including tasting. It produces some six million bottles of quality torrontés, cabernet and malbec per year.

Five kilometers west of town along the road to Rio Colorado (it’s signposted ‘Mounier’), small, organic and friendly Bodega de las Nubes (☎ 422129; ☎ 9:30am-5:30pm Mon-Sat) has a fabulous position at the foot of the jagged hills. The short tour and tasting nominally costs AR$15, but if you buy wine it’s not charged. It also does tasty picadas here. Ring ahead to check it is open and if you want to eat. Grape-picking day in March is lots of fun, with volunteers welcomed.
Tours
The standard minibus tour of the Quebrada leaves in the afternoon, when the colors are more vivid, and costs around AR$60. Three-to-four-hour treks in the Quebrada (AR$120) and Río Colorado (AR$80) are also popular. Day-long trips to Cachi (AR$225) are tiring, while Quilmes (AR$75) can be visited more cheaply in a taxi if you’re two or more. Horseback rides range from a couple of hours (AR$125) to all day (AR$250). Many places hire out bikes (around AR$35 for a full day).

The main tour operators have their offices on the plaza. Readers aren’t usually blown away by the service offered – check with other travelers before choosing – but the Quebrada scenery speaks for itself.

Festivals & Events
La Serenata de Cafayate, in late February, is a very worthwhile three-day folklore festival. The Fiesta de la Virgen del Rosario, on October 4, is the town fiesta and gets lively.

Sleeping
Cafayate has numerous places to stay, with new boutique hotels popping up like mushrooms and simple hospedajes on every street.

BUDGET
Camping Lorohuasi (422292; www.campinglorohuasi.com.ar; Catamarca 15; s/d AR$5/6) This municipal campground 10 minutes’ walk from the center along Av General Güemes can get dusty when the wind blows. Facilities are OK, and there’s a small grocery store.

ñusta Hospedaje (421852; nusta.hospedaje@arnet.com.ar; San Martín 243; s/d AR$124/186) Excellent value is to be had at this warm-hearted family guesthouse with a variety of simple, comfortable rooms and a generous spirit. There’s an annex with more rooms a block further down the road.

Hostel del Valle (421039; www.welcameargentina.com/hostaldelvalle; San Martín 243; s/d AR$124/186) This enticing place offers myriad flowering pot plants, and pretty rooms with large, inviting beds and excellent bathrooms. There are a couple of smaller, darker rooms that are a little cheaper but still worthwhile. Breakfast is served in a rooftop conservatory with privileged views.

Hotel Tinkunaku (421148; www.tinkunaku.com.ar; Nuestra Señora del Rosario 155; d AR$140) An upgrade has taken this out of the ultrabudget category, but it’s still a charming spot. Highlights are the courteous and genuine personal welcome from the interesting owner, the central location and general tranquility. The rooms, with terracotta-tiled floors and spacious bathrooms, are set around a vine-shaded courtyard.

MIDRANGE & TOP END
Hostal del Valle (www.welcameargentina.com/hostaldelvalle; San Martín 243; s/d AR$124/186) This well-priced if not rather stylish option has clean, modern rooms and an excellent attitude make this Cafayate’s budget gem. Book ahead, though: there are only five dorm beds.

Hostel Ruta 40 (www.hostel-ruta40.com; Av General Güemes 178; dm/d AR$40/140) Dorms are darkish and can be a little stuffy, but facilities and atmosphere are good at this central hostel. Private rooms with bathroom are a decent deal, breakfast is included and there’s a kitchen. HI discount applies.

El Portal de las Viñas (421098; www.portalvinias.com.ar; Nuestra Señora del Rosario 155; d AR$140) An upgrade has taken this out of the ultrabudget category, but it’s still a charming spot. Highlights are the courteous and genuine personal welcome from the interesting owner, the central location and general tranquility. The rooms, with terracotta-tiled floors and spacious bathrooms, are set around a vine-shaded courtyard.

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Peacefully set around twin patios, this offers an intimate retreat with beautiful, spotless rooms with big beds and reproduction antique furniture. Service and breakfast are good, and you can lose hours deciphering the offbeat mural sculpting in the courtyard.

Portal del Santo (422400; www.portaldelsanto.com.ar; Chavarría 250; s/d AR$220/280) Cool white elegance is the stock in trade of this hospitable hotel that resembles a colonial palace with its arched arcades. The lower rooms open onto the front porch and also the inviting back garden and pool area; the rooms on the top floor (double/suite AR$320/500) have mountain views and a little more space. The suites sleep four.
Killa (422254; www.killacafayate.com.ar; Colón 47; s/d/ste AR$303/355/396; Wi-Fi) Classy, comfortable and well run, this handsome and recommendable hotel has colonial style given warmth by its creative use of natural wood, stone and local artesanía. The gorgeous rooms – not a TV in sight – have great bathrooms, and the upstairs suites – worth the small extra investment – have cracking views and private balcony spaces. There’s a pretty pool area and impeccable hospitality.

Eating
Heladería Miranda (Av General Güeme; ice cream from AR$4; 10am-10pm) A frequent dilemma in Argentina is whether to go for a rich red cabernet or a dry white torrontés, but it doesn’t usually occur in ice-cream parlors. It does here: the Miranda’s wine ice creams are Cafayate’s pride and joy.

Casa de las Empanadas (454111; Mitre 24; dishes AR$2-24; lunch & dinner) No-frills and pretty tasty local dishes are the reason to come to this friendly spot off the plaza. There are empanadas beyond the usual chicken or meat range, as well as humitas, locro and tamales.

El Rancho (421256; www.elranchocafayate.com.ar; V Toscano 4; mains AR$13-25; lunch & dinner) A cut above the string of hit-and-miss places around the plaza, this has a short, simple menu, including locro and some good chicken dishes. It’s owned by a bodega, so competition wines are overpriced. It appeals on winter nights, with a crackling fire, and the nights when a blind guitarist plays unobtrusive folklórica.

La de Martín (03868-15-455836; Mitre 25; mains AR$15-30; lunch & dinner) Goat stew, local dishes and the odd llama special sit alongside reliable parrillada at this not-too-touristy place, with helpful waiters and fair prices.

Colorado (421280; Belgrano 26; mains AR$24-42; lunch & dinner) Microbrewed beers, Mexican dishes, spinach and blue cheese salad, and a Thai red curry are among the things that make this welcoming bar-restaurant a break from the norm in these parts.

El Terruño (422460; Av General Güemes 30; mains AR$30-45; lunch & dinner) Plaza-side seating and polite service are backed up by the food at this restaurant, which curiously has two menus, one of which is less traditional, with dishes like salmon and avocado salad, and boned lamb fillets.

Drinking
Chato’s Wine Bar (Nuestra Señora del Rosario 132; 7pm-midnight) Run by a cordial English-speaking boss, this unpretentious place is Cafayate’s only true wine bar and a great place to try fairly priced local drops by the glass and have a chat.

Shopping
There are numerous artesanía shops on and around the central plaza. The Mercado Artesanal (Av General Güemes; 9am-10pm) cooperative features many locals’ work. For fine silver, check out the workshop of Jorge Barraco (421244; Colón 157).

Getting There & Away
El Indio (Belgrano s/n) has three to four buses daily to Salta (AR$35, four hours). There are also three to four daily services to San Carlos (AR$5, 40 minutes), and a bus to Angastaco (AR$14, two hours) leaving at 11am Monday through Friday and 6.30pm on Sunday (no Saturday service). Aconquija (cnr Av General Güemes & Alvarado) leaves three to four times daily for Tucumán (AR$44, five to 6½ hours) via Amaicha del Valle and Tafi del Valle (AR$24.50, four hours); three buses go to Santa María (AR$13, two hours).

Getting Around
Taxis congregate around the plaza and can be useful for reaching out-of-town bodegas. If there’s none around, call 422128.

QUEBRADA DE CAFAYATE
North of Cafayate, the Salta road heads through the barren and spectacular Quebrada de Cafayate, a wild landscape of richly colored sandstone and unearthly rock formations. Carved out by the Río de las Conchas, the canyon’s twisted sedimentary strata exhibit a stunning array of tones, from rich red ochre to ethereal green. While you get a visual feast from the road itself – it’s one of the country’s more memorable drives or rides – it’s worth taking the time to explore parts of the canyon. The best time to appreciate the canyon is in the late afternoon, when the low sun brings out the most vivid colors.

A short way north of Cafayate, Los Médanos is an extensive dune field that gives way to the canyon proper, where a series of distinctive landforms are named and signposted from the road. Some, such as El Sapo (the...
Toad) are fairly underwhelming, but around the Km 49 mark, the adjacent Garganta del Diablo (Devil’s Throat) and Anfiteatro (Amphitheatre) are much more impressive. Gashes in the rock wall let you enter and appreciate the tortured stone, whose clearly visible layers have been twisted by tectonic upheavals into extraordinary configurations.

These landmarks are heavily visited, and you may be followed by locals hoping for some pesos for a bit of guiding. Artesanía sellers and musicians hover around these landmarks, but there’s no reliable place to buy food or water.

**Getting There & Away**

There are several ways to see and explore the canyon. Tours from Salta are brief and regimented; it’s much better to take a tour from closer Cafayate (p278). Renting a car is possible in Salta but not Cafayate, where bikes are easily hired instead; you could also combine the bus, hitchhiking and walking.

Here’s the lowdown for those without a private vehicle: disembark from any El Indio bus (with your rental bike or by foot), tour around for a while and then flag another bus later on. Be aware of the schedules between Salta and Cafayate, and carry food and plenty of water in this hot, dry environment. A good place to start your exploration is the Garganta del Diablo; several other attractions are within easy walking distance of here.

**TUCUMÁN & AROUND**

Though it’s the country’s second-smallest province, Tucumán has played a significant role in Argentina’s story. It was here that independence was first declared, and the massive sugar industry is of great economic importance. While this monoculture has enabled the province to develop secondary industry, it has also created tremendous inequities in wealth and land distribution, as well as ecological problems.

The city of Tucumán is full of heat and energy, in complete contrast to the lung-cleansing air of Tafi del Valle, up in the hills to the west. Beyond, Argentina’s most important pre-Columbian site is Quilmes, on the Cafayate road. South of Tucumán, Santiago del Estero province is a backwater with an enjoyably sleepy feel.

**TUCUMÁN**

☎ 0381 / pop 738,479 / elev 420m

With night on all three-quarters of a million souls in its greater urban area, Tucumán, the cradle of Argentine independence, is the nation’s fifth-largest city and feels like it, with a metropolitan bustle that can come as quite a shock after the more genteel provincial capitals elsewhere in the northwest. You may not like it at first, but don’t be put off. This isn’t the usual patter: Tucumán really rewards time spent getting to know it. You may find you prefer it at night, when the fumes and heat of the day have lulled, and the cafes and bars come to life.

Tucumán (San Miguel de Tucumán is its full name) is baking hot, energetic and brash, with a blue-collar feel and a down-to-earth quality. It also has a lively cultural scene, and its stylish cafe-bars, great bookstores, art exhibitions and traditional peñas make its serene neighbors seem a bit provincial. Less advanced is the courtship behavior of the average tucumano (inhabitant of Tucumán) – women can expect higher-than-usual numbers of piropos (flirtatious remarks) here.

**History**

Founded in 1565, Tucumán only distinguished itself from the rest of the region in the culmination of the early-19th-century ferment, when it hosted the congress that declared Argentine independence in 1816. Dominated by Unitarist merchants, lawyers, soldiers and clergy, the congress accomplished little else; despite a virtual boycott by Federalist factions, it failed to agree on a constitution that would have institutionalized a constitutional monarchy in hopes of attracting European support.

Unlike other colonial cities of the northwest, Tucumán successfully reoriented its economy after independence. Modern Tucumán dates from the late 19th century and owes its importance to location; at the southern end of the frost-free zone of sugarcane production, it was close enough to Buenos Aires to take advantage of the capital’s growing market. By 1874 the railway reached the city, permitting easy transportation of sugar, and local and British capital contributed to the industry’s growth. Economic crises in the 1960s and the early years of the 21st century hit Tucumán hard, but sugarcane’s growing use as a fuel source means there’s plenty of optimism about the future.
Orientation
Tucumán’s geographical focus is the rectangular Plaza Independencia, site of major public buildings such as the cathedral and Casa de Gobierno, which are spectacularly floodlit at night. Street names change north and south of Av 24 de Septiembre, west of Av Alem/Mitre and east of Av Avellaneda/Av Sáenz Peña.

Information
Tucumán is bristling with internet cafes and call centers. Many downtown banks have ATMs.

ACA (Automóvil Club Argentino; 431-1522; Crisóstomo Álvarez 901) Argentina’s auto club; good source for provincial road maps.

Eagle Ciber (Crisóstomo Álvarez 381; per hr AR$2) Cybercave.

El Ateneo (25 de Mayo 182) Excellent bookshop. Also maps, a small selection of airport novels in English, and a cafe.

Hospital Padilla (429-0969; Alberdi 550) Laundry.

Maguitur (431-0032; San Martín 765; 8:30am-2pm & 4:30-6:30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) Cashes traveler’s checks and changes money.

Patsa Turismo (421-6806; Chacabuco 38) The Amex representative.

Tourist office (430-3644; www.tucumanturismo.gov.ar; 24 de Septiembre 484; 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-9pm Sat & Sun) On the plaza, staff are helpful and knowledgeable. There’s another office at the bus terminal, opposite platform 12, open the same hours.

Sights
CASA PADILLA
Alongside the Casa de Gobierno, this partly restored mid-19th-century house first belonged to provincial governor José Frías (1792–1874), then to his mayor son-in-law Ángel Padilla. A display of European art, Chinese porcelain and period furniture make up the collection housed by the museum (25 de Mayo 36; admission free; 9am-1pm Tue-Sun).

CATEDRAL
Tucumán’s neoclassical cathedral (8:30am-1pm & 4:30-10pm) is a handsome presence on Plaza Independencia, and has a Doric facade with a pediment depicting the Exodus. Curiously, Moses is receiving bunches of grapes in the desert; a reference to the fertility of Tucumán’s surrounding area. The interior has a petite wooden choir, cheerily alive ceiling paintings, and a canvas of the Annunciation behind the altar.

CASA DE LA INDEPENDENCIA
(Unitarist lawyers and clerics (Federalists boycotted the meeting) declared Argentina’s independence from Spain on July 9, 1816, in the dazzlingly whitewashed late-colonial Casa de la Independencia (431-0826; Congreso 151; admission AR$5; 10am-6pm). Portraits of the signatories line the walls of the room where the declaration was signed, the only actual original part of the structure – the rest has been rebuilt. There’s plenty of information in Spanish on the lead-up to these seismic events, but you can also get a guided tour (free) in English.

There’s a sound-and-light show nightly except Thursday at around 8:30pm; entry is AR$10/5 per adult/child. The ticket office opens 15 minutes before the show.

Next to the building is an open area with various artesanía stalls and stands selling traditional foods like locro and humitas.

MUSEO FOLCLÓRICO MANUEL BELGRANO
Occupying a colonial house, pleasant Museo Folclórico Manuel Belgrano (421-8250; Av 24 de Septiembre 565; admission free; 9am-1pm & 3-8pm Tue-Sun) features a good collection of traditional gaucho gear, indigenous musical instruments (check out the charangos made from an armadillo shell) and weavings, as well as some indigenous pottery.

CASA DEL OBISPO COLOMBRES
In the center of Parque 9 de Julio (formerly Bishop Colombres’ El Bajo plantation), handsome 18th-century Casa del Obispo Colombres (452-2332; admission free; 8am-1pm & 3-8pm) is a museum dedicated to the sugar industry, which the active cleric (an important figure in the independence movement) effectively set up. The information panels are translated into English.

Tours
Tucumán province is hitching its horse firmly to the tourism wagon, and any number of tour operators offer excursions from sedate city strolls to canoeing, challenging hikes and paragliding; the city has hosted the Paragliding World Cup. The tourist office can supply a fuller list. One worthwhile hikes is the beautiful, accessible, four-day hike from Tucumán to Tafi del Valle.
Some companies offering tours:
Canoas y Aventuras (485-0814; canoasyaventuras@yahoo.com.ar) Offers canoeing excursions and a long day-hike through subtropical forest to some pretty waterfalls (AR$90 per person).
Montañas Tucumanas (0381-15-609-3336; www.montanastucumanas.com; Laprida 196) A cordial and professional setup, this offers hiking, climbing, canyoning, rappelling and more, both in locations near Tucumán and further afield.
Tucumán Parapente (0381-15-444-7508; www.tucumanparapente.com.ar) Excellent tandem paragliding flights over the Yungas forests, as well as instruction.
Turismo del Tucumán (422-7636; tucumantur@sinecistis.com.ar; Cristósmo Álvarez 435) Guided trips to spots of interest around the province, including Tafi del Valle and Quilmes (AR$210), or a circuit in Las Yungas (AR$100).
Walter ‘Paco’ Castro (pacolfight@hotmail.com) Reader-recommended hang-gliding instructor who offers tandem flights (AR$250 per person).

Festivals & Events
Celebrations of the Día de la Independencia (Argentina’s Independence Day) on July 9 are vigorous in Tucumán, the cradle of the country’s independence. Tucumanos also celebrate the Batalla de Tucumán (Battle of Tucumán) on September 24.

Sleeping
Most of Tucumán’s hotels are overpriced, but you can negotiate substantial discounts, particularly if paying cash.

BUDGET
Tucumán Hostel (420-1584; www.tucumanhostel.com.ar; Buenos Aires 669; dm AR$35, d with/without bathroom AR$95/85; 4 2) It’s easy to like this breezy hostel seven blocks south of the plaza; with solid dorm beds and enthusiastic staff, it makes a fine base. The bathrooms are very clean, as is the kitchen, and there’s also a bar. If lounging around the pool at the back, be careful not to get brained by falling fruit from the avocado tree.
Backpacker’s Tucumán (430-2716; www.backpackertucuman.com; Laprida 456; dm AR$45, s with/without bathroom AR$100/110, d with/without bathroom AR$120/130; 4 2) This reliable hostel is a short walk away from the lively 25 de Mayo eating scene, and has a relaxed, airy charm allied to plenty of facilities. The dorms are spacious, with fans and high ceilings, the rooms tight but comfortable and the cool patio spaces make attractive common areas. HI discount applies.

Casa Calchaquí (425-6974; www.casacalchaqui.com; Lola Mora 92, Yerba Buena; dm/s/d AR$45/100/140; 4 2 2) Six kilometers west of the center in the upmarket barrio of Yerba Buena, this is a welcome retreat from the sweaty city. Hammocks, a wide green lawn, bar service and a minipool make it a top spot to relax. Add to that comfortable bunks and doubles, a kitchen and parrilla, and friendly multilingual hosts. Yerba Buena also has many good restaurants and nightlife choices. Grab a taxi (AR$15) or bus 102 or 118 from opposite the bus terminal. Casa Calchaquí also hires out bikes.

Hotel La Vasca (421-1828; www.redcarlosv.com.ar; Mendoza 289; s with/without bathroom AR$76/63, d with/without bathroom AR$100/83; 4 2) Everyone deserves to have 3m-high doors to their room, and you can in this central budget choice. Rooms are around two courtyards – go for an upstairs room at the back if you can – and decorated with original oils by the owner. Staff are welcoming.

King Hotel (431-0211; Chacabuco 18; s/d AR$85/100; 4 2) Traveling salespeople keep returning to this hotel because it’s comfortable, clean and in the heart of things. Prices are very fair by Tucumán standards. It often fills up by midafternoon, so you might want to book ahead.

MIDRANGE & TOP END
Dallas Hotel (421-8500; www.dallashotel.com.ar; Corrientes 985; s/d AR$180/235; 4 2) Run with a smile, this likable place has padded doors that give way softly to reveal sizable rooms with decent beds. There are plenty of popular bar-restaurants nearby; make sure you also check out the beautiful train station around the corner. It’s 10% off if you pay cash.

Hotel Francia (431-0781; www.franciahotel.com; Cristósomo Álvarez 467; s/d AR$190/239; 4 2) A block from the plaza, this features decent modern-ish rooms with French prints on the walls and good bathrooms. It will usually lower the above rate for walk-ins.

Hotel Versailles (422-9760; www.hotelversaillestucuman.com.ar; Cristósomo Álvarez 481; s/d AR$209/256; 4 2) There is indeed a certain French elegance to this understated, old-fashioned hotel. The rooms are compact and look a little tired for the price, but the public areas have a worn stately appeal. It often will heavily discount prices if you ask; it’s not worth the cash otherwise.
Hotel Carlos V (0 431-1666; www.redcarlosv.com; 25 de Mayo 330; s/d AR$215/265; 柑橘(柑橘)) There’s something rather charming about the rooms here – it must be the parchment-colored walls and bright bedspreads, if they certainly aren’t huge. Offering a fine central location and fairly classic ambience, as well as a busy café-restaurant, this is a decent Tucumán address.

Swiss Hotel Metropol (0 431-1180; www.swisshotelmetropol.com.ar; 24 de Septiembre 524; s/d AR$346/438; 柑橘(柑橘)柑橘) The modern rooms and spacious bathrooms on offer here are perhaps slightly offset by the tiny balconies (standing room only). The fantastic rooftop pool makes up for a lot though, as does the very central location.

Tucumán Center (0 452-5555; www.tucumancenterhotel.com.ar; 25 de Mayo 230; s/d AR$396/449, ste for 4 AR$1040; 柑橘柑橘柑橘) It’s hard to fault this up-market, business-class hotel bang in the center of town. Service and facilities – including a small gym and outdoor pool – are first-rate, and the huge beds are mighty comfortable. Suites come with space to spare and a bathtub with bubbles. It offers big discounts in summer; check the website for specials.

Catalinas Park (0 450-2250; www.catalinaspark.com; Av Soldati 380; s/d standard AR$420/480, s/d superior AR$492/548; 柑橘柑橘) Several Tucumán hotels charge this sort of price for what is barely three-star comfort. Not so at this spot by the large Parque 9 de Julio. Offering commodious (if not huge) rooms with great views, and a range of comforts that include a pleasant outdoor pool, babysitting service, sauna and anticipatory staff, this is as it should be. There’s even a chopper should you fancy an aerial excursion.

Eating

Tucumán is very famous for its excellent eggy empanadas, which you’ll find everywhere. Calle 25 de Mayo is eat street, studded with modern cafe-bars offering a variety of traditional and international cuisines. If you want to blend in here, you’d better have an ice cream in your hand at all times; there are several ice-creameries around the plaza that can sort you out.

Our pick El Portal (0 422-6024; Av 24 de Septiembre 351; dishes AR$2-50-26; 柑橘10am-11pm) Half a block east of Plaza Independencia, this rustic indoor/outdoor eatery has a tiny but perfectly formed menu, based around empanadas, locro and the like. Delicious and authentic.

Il Postino (0 421-0440; cnr 25 de Mayo & Córdoba; pizza & pasta AR$10-25; 柑橘7am-2am) Pizza and pasta are served with panache in this atmospheric brick warehouse eatery. It’s popular with all, and you often have to wait for a table. It’s worth it: the standard (of the pizza especially) is sky-high. It also serves various tapas-sized portions. There’s another branch nearby at Junín 86.

Peña El Cardón (0 497-8235; Las Heras 50; dishes AR$10-24; 柑橘lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) This historical and traditional peña gives a good idea of what these places were like before they started putting on touristy shows. There are regular cultural events, a pretty patio and delicious empanadas. Live folklore music on Fridays and Saturdays starts about 10pm, goes very late and gets rowdy.

El Alto de la Lechuza (0 0381-15-477-9527; Av 24 de Septiembre 1199; dishes AR$12-26; 柑橘8pm-late Thu-Sat) Founded in 1939 and billing itself as Argentina’s oldest peña, this place offers standard parrilla and pasta fare, plus a few regional specialities. The real reason to come here, though, is the music: the venue has hosted many Argentine luminaries.

Fon Restaurante (0 421-8715; Maipú 435; all-you-can-eat AR$15; 柑橘lunch Mon-Sat) The lunchtime buffet at this vegetarian restaurant has mostly Chinese dishes, with a few local favorites such as ensalada rusa (Russian salad) and empanadas thrown in. It’s not gourmet, but it does the job.

La Sirio-Libanesa (Maipú 575; set menus AR$19-28; 柑橘lunch & dinner) This place offers tasty Levantine cuisine that makes a welcome change of scene. Mashed eggplant, tasty kipe naye (marinated raw mincemeat) and tabouleh salad all feature; the set lunch is AR$19 and there are several other set menus, as well as à la carte.

La Leñita (0 422-9196; 25 de Mayo 377; mains AR$28-39; 柑橘lunch & dinner) One of the best parrilla restaurants around in this part of the world, this wins few points for interior design (who thought the sports bar look was a good idea?), but stands out for service and the sheer quality of the meat. Try picanha (rump steak) or the delicious mollejitas (sweetbreads). Sit strategically to avoid the air-con’s arctic wind.

Síntimo (0 431-2792; Santa Fe 512; dishes AR$28-45; 柑橘7:30pm-1:30am Mon-Sat) Wall-to-wall wine bottles decorate this smart wine shop and restaurant, whose short menu features a pair of posh salads, chicken stirfry, crusted salmon...
and other toothsome delights. Several wines are available by the glass, and you can pick any of the several hundred bottles from the shelves for a AR$6 corkage fee.

Also recommended:

**Bamboo** (497-8555; Junín 81; smoothies AR$6; 7am–8pm Mon–Sat) Cheery in apple green, this place does tasty breakfasts, sandwiches, iced fruit smoothies and salads to eat in or takeout – there’s a little patio space, too.

**Los Hornos** (422-6066; San Juan 526; mains AR$13–26; lunch & dinner) Round the corner from the main eating drag, this does family-friendly minutas (quick meals), as well as tasty empanadas and parrilla choices at a good price.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

From Thursday to Saturday nights, most of the action is in the Abasto region, on Calle Lillo. Follow San Lorenzo west from the town center, and you’ll hit the middle of the zone three blocks west of our map. There are dozens of bars and nightclubs to choose from – take your pick. Other popular boliche can be found in Yerba Buena, 6km west of the town center.

**Künstner** (497-5597; Crisóstomo Álvarez 456; lunch & 8pm-late) A blessed relief it is to step off this noisy, fume-filled street into the gentle aromas of malt and hops. Four tasty beers are brewed in this convivial spot, which also serves fine cheap food such as milanesas, pasta and pizza.

**Harris** (cnr Laprida & Mendoza; 8am-late) On a busy corner, this is a popular hangout for smartly-dressed tucumanos. The interior is padded seats and elegant dark wood; outside, the tables and chairs are at the very top of the Coca-Cola range. Excellent mixed drinks and good coffee; the food is also more than passable.

**Filipo** (421-9687; Mendoza 501; licuados AR$8; 7am–1am) Glasses gleaming on the gantry, outdoor tables and bow-tied waiters make this a great cafe. The espresso is superlative, and the apple licuados (blended fruit drinks) deserve a prize.

**Plaza de Almas** (Maipú 791; mains AR$11–22; 8pm-late) This intimate and engaging multilevel place is popular with bohemian young tucumanos and is one of the best of Tucumán’s many combination cafe-bar-restaurant-cultural centers. The short but interesting menu offers a range of kebabs and salads, among other choices.

**Costumbres Argentinas** (0381-15-643-9576; San Juan 666; 9:30pm–4am Wed–Sun) Though the address seems like a contradiction in terms, this unusual, popular and welcoming bar has an art bohemian vibe and sometimes puts on live music. There’s a big two-level beer garden out the back, which is the place to be on summer nights. Simple food is also available.

**Centro Cultural Universidad Nacional de Tucumán** (421-6024; 25 de Mayo 265) Art exhibitions, crafts for sale, a cafe, and regular theatrical and musical performances.

**Cine Atlas** (422-0825; Monteagudo 250) The last remaining central cinema.

**Teatro Álberdi** (422-9118; cnr Jujuy & Cristósmo Álvarez) The principal one of several Tucumán theaters.

**Getting There & Away**

**AIR**

**Aerolíneas Argentinas** (15-1030; 9 de Julio 110) has three to four daily flights to Buenos Aires’ Aeroparque Jorge Newbery (AR$760). **LAN** (422-0606; Laprida 176) has two daily flights to Buenos Aires (AR$743), **Sol** (www.sol.com.ar) links Tucumán with Rosario, and **Aerosur** (453-9162; Rivadavia 137) flies three times weekly to Santa Cruz in Bolivia (AR$537).

**BUS**

Tucumán’s **bus terminal** (Brígido Terán 350) is a major project with 60 platforms and plenty of shops and services. The bus **information booth** (430-6400) is outside, by the supermarket. A handy tourist office is opposite platform 12.

Sample destinations and fares:

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<th>Destination</th>
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TRAIN
Argentina’s trains aren’t what they used to be, but Tucumán is still connected to Buenos Aires (via Santiago del Estero and Rosario) twice a week from the beautiful Estación Mitre (430-9220; www.ferrocentralsa.com.ar) in the northwest of town. Services frequently take hours longer than advertised, but it’s an experience a little like stepping back in time and might appeal to those in no hurry or on a strict budget.

At time of research, trains were leaving Buenos Aires’ Retiro station at 10.40am on Monday and Friday, arriving in Tucumán at around noon the next day. From Tucumán, trains left at 6pm on Wednesday (arriving at 7pm Thursday) and 8.50pm on Saturday, arriving at 10pm on Sunday.

The trip costs AR$45/70/130 in turista (2nd class)/1st class/Pullman (reclinable seats) or AR$400 for two in a sleeper.

Getting Around
Aeropuerto Benjamín Matienzo (TUC; 426-4906) is 8km east of downtown. It’s tricky to get there by public transport; a remise costs around AR$22 from the town center.

For getting around the city, local buses (AR$1.50) clearly mark their major destinations on the front.

There are several car-rental places. A reliable choice is Móvil Renta (431-0550; www.movilrenta.com.ar; San Lorenzo 370).

AROUND TUCUMÁN
Until 1767 the ruins of San José de Lules, 20km south of Tucumán, was a Jesuit reducción (Indian settlement created by Spanish missionaries) among the region’s Lule Indians. After the Jesuits’ expulsion, the Dominicans assumed control of the complex, whose present ruins date from the 1880s and once served as a school. The small museum has replicas of colonial documents and a plethora of busts of various Argentine independence heroes. Buses to Lules, a pleasant site for an outing, depart from Tucumán’s bus terminal.

The fertile, hilly area northwest of Tucumán is known as Las Yungas, and offers plenty of appealing day trips that get you out of the hot, busy city. The tourist offices offer good information on destinations, which include the reservoir of El Cadillal (Dique Celestino Gelsi) offering camping, swimming and windsurfing, or the Parque Sierra de San Javier, a university-operated reserve offering guided walks, including one to the small but pretty Río Noque waterfall. San Pedro (go to ticket booth No 69) runs regular buses from Tucumán’s bus terminal to El Cadillal (AR$5.20, one hour), while San Javier (no ticket booth, leaves from platforms 57 to 58) runs to San Javier (where there are a few places to stay) and the reserve. Tucumán tour operators also run trips out here.

TAFÍ DEL VALLE
03867 / pop 3300 / elev 2100m
The lovely hilltown of Tafi is where the folk of Tucumán traditionally head to take refuge from the summer heat. The journey from the city is a spectacular one: about 100km northwest of Tucumán, the narrow gorge of the Río de los Sosas – with its dense, verdant subtropical forest on all sides – opens onto a misty valley beneath the snowy peaks of the Sierra del Aconquija. The precipitous mountain road is a spectacular trip; grab a window seat on the bus.

Tafi makes a fine spot to hang out for a few days, with crisp mountain air, many budget accommodations and a laid-back scene. There are also a couple of memorable historic ranches to stay at.

Orientation
Tafi’s center is a triangle of three streets. Av Miguel Critto is the main street running east to west. If you turn left out of the bus terminal, you soon join it. Off it, Av Perón is the center of activity, and Belgrano climbs from Perón past the church. Most public services are near the unusual semicircular plaza.

Information
There’s a locutorio at the bus terminal, one of several places offering phone calls and internet access.

Banco Tucumán (Av Miguel Critto) in the municipalidad building. Changes US dollars and has an ATM.

Tourist office (Av Miguel Critto; 8am-9pm) Tourist information at the junction of the pedestrian street.

Sights & Activities
CAPILLA LA BANDA
This 18th-century Jesuit chapel (421685; Av José Friás Silva; admission AR$2; 8am-6pm), acquired by the Frias Silva family of Tucumán on the Jesuits’ expulsion and then expanded in the 1830s, was restored to its original configura-
tion in the 1970s. Note the escape tunnel in the chapel. A small archaeological collection – consisting mostly of funerary urns, but also religious art of the Cuzco school, ecclesiastical vestments and period furniture that once belonged to the Frías Silvas – is on display in the 

The chapel is a short walk from downtown. Cross the river bridge and follow the road; you’ll see it on your left after 750m.

HIKING
Several nearby peaks and destinations make hiking in the mountains around Tafí del Valle an attractive prospect; try 3000m Cerro El Matadero, a four- to five-hour climb; 3600m Cerro Pabellón (six hours); and 4500m Cerro El Negrito, reached from the statue of Cristo Redentor on RN 307 to Acheral. The trails are badly marked, and no trail maps are available; you can hire a guide for about AR$10 an hour. Ask for more information at the tourist office. An easier hike climbs Cerro Pelado for views over the town. The path starts on the left as soon as you’ve crossed the bridge. It takes about 1½ hours to climb, and less to come down.

HORSEBACK-RIDING
Several people around town hire out horses (look for ‘alquilo caballos’ or ‘cabalgatas’) for rides in the valley. These start at about 10 pesos for half an hour. Readers have recommended the setup opposite the bus terminal, which also hires out quad bikes.

Tours
La Cumbre (☎ 421768; www.lacumbretafari.valle.com; Perón 120) offers various two- to three-hour trips around the valley on 4WD tracks or taking in sights such as the menhir park near El Mollar and a traditional cheese factory (AR$70 to AR$90 per person). It also organizes more rigorous full-day trips and excursions to the Quilmes ruins.

Sleeping
There are many choices, including several budget places charging AR$30 per person for dorm rooms without bathroom. Prices rise about 25% in January, Easter and July when Tafi gets packed. Unheated rooms can get distinctly chilly at any time of year.

Hospedaje Celia (☎ 421170; Belgrano 443; r per person AR$28) Set back from the road 100m uphill from the church, this place offers bright, white and comfortable enough rooms with private bathroom. There are minor inconveniences – no sockets in the rooms, for example – but the price is right.

Nomade Hostel (☎ 420179; www.nomadehostel.unlugar.com; Los Palenques s/n; dm/d AR$30/80; ) Rustic, comfortable dorms with bathroom surround a courtyard with sierra views and artistic stone pillars and cartwheels. It’s very friendly, breakfast is included and there’s an H1 discount. From the bus terminal, follow Critto past the tourist office and take the first left; the hostel’s about 400m up this road.

Hostel la Cumbre (☎ 421768; www.lacumbretafari.valle.com; Perón 120; dm/d without bathroom AR$40/80) The happy orange and ochre color of the courtyard and views from the roof terrace make this a good choice. The rooms are cramped but clean, and there’s a decent kitchen and welcoming staff.

our pick Estancia Los Cuartos (☎ 0381-15-587-4230; www.estancialoscuartos.com; Critto s/n; s/d AR$125/189) Oozing character from every pore, this lovely spot with grazing llamas lies between the bus terminal and the town center. Two centuries old, it feels like a museum, with venerable books lining antique shelves, and authentic rooms redolent with the smell of aged wood and woolen blankets. There are rooms in a new annex that offer more comfortable beds but less history, although they remain true to the feel of the place. Traditional cheeses are also made here.

Hotel Tafi (☎ 421007; www.hoteltafiweb.com.ar; Belgrano 177; s/d AR$135/170; ) Despair not when you see it from the street, for things improve once you get inside, with a ski-lodge feel and helpful staff. The medium-sized rooms have gleaming bathrooms, wood-tile floors, mountain views and tiny TVs. There’s a pleasant rocky garden, and the huge fireplace makes the comfortable lounge area the place to be on a chilly night.

Hostería Lunahuana (☎ 421330; www.hosterielunahuana.com.ar; Av Miguel Critto 540; s/d AR$250/330; ) This stylish and popular hotel has rooms decorated with flair – some have mezzanines accessed by spiral staircases. The whole place is decked out with interesting and tasteful decorations, and service is professional and friendly.

Las Tacanas (☎ 421821; www.estancialastacanas.com; Perón 372; s/d AR$280/310; ) Impeccably preserved and decorated, this fabulous historic
complex was once a Jesuit estancia and is a most memorable place to stay. The adobe buildings, more than three centuries old, house a variety of tasteful, rustic rooms with noble furniture and beamed ceilings. Though it’s in the center of town, it feels like you’re in a country retreat, and there’s a warm welcome from the family that has owned it for generations.

Other options:
**Camping Sauzales** (421880; Los Palenques s/n; per tent & per car AR$10) Riverside campsite about 1km west of the plaza.
**La Posada** (421841; jjmiaposada@hotmail.com; Av Belgrano s/n; s/d AR$50/100) Small but comfy rooms opposite the church, some with balcony access. Good price, and warmly family run. Don’t confuse with nearby Rosada.

**Eating & Drinking**

**Bar El Paraíso** (0381-15-587-5179; Perón 175; light meals AR$10-20; lunch & dinner) This cozy bar is where locals congregate to dine cheaply and watch football or martial arts films. There is a pleasant terrace overlooking the street.

**Don Pepito** (421764; Perón 193; mains AR$11-28; lunch & dinner) It looks touristy, the level of service varies, and it charges too much for extras, but the meat is truly excellent. Bypass the set parrillada (for one/two AR$23/45) and order off the menu. Kidneys, bife de chorizo or chivito (goat) are all fine choices and are served in generous portions. There’s often live entertainment (AR$2 extra).

**El Rancho de Félix** (421022; cnr Belgrano & Juan de Perón; mains AR$15-25; lunch & dinner) This big, warm thatched barn of a place is incredibly popular for lunch. Regional specialties such as locro and humitas feature heavily on the menu, but parrilla and pasta are also on offer. It doesn’t open evenings when things are quiet.

**Kkechuwa** (Perón s/n; 10am-midnight) Mediocre food options but a nice terrace where you can try the local artisanal beer range.

The bar-restaurant at the bus terminal is an unexpectedly smart place, and locals head down there to socialize even if they’ve no intention to travel.

**Getting There & Away**

Tafí’s impressive bus terminal (421031; Av Miguel Critto) is 400m east of the town center. Empresa Aconquija has six to nine buses a day to Tucumán (AR$22, three hours). Buses head the other way to Santa María (AR$24.50, four hours, three to four daily) and Cafayate (via Amaicha del Valle and the Quilmes ruins turnoff). The road from Tucumán is beautiful, and the road to Santa María, Quilmes and Cafayate is spectacular, crossing the 3050m pass known as Abra del Infiernillo (Little Hell Pass).

**Getting Around**

Hourly in summer (every three hours in winter), local Aconquija buses do most of the circuit around Cerro El Pelado, in the middle of the valley. One goes on the north side, another on the south side, so it’s possible to make a circuit of the valley by walking the link between them.

**AROUND TAFÍ DEL VALLE**

There are several attractions in the valley around Tafí, including **Parque de los Menhires** (admission AR$5; 8am-6pm), a collection of more than 100 carved standing stones found in the surrounding area. They were produced by the Tafí culture some 2000 years ago, but they have been somehow stripped of dignity by being removed from their original locations. The site lies 12km south of Tafí, near the village of El Mollar.

**Santa María**

This seductive little town lies on the route between Tafí del Valle and Cafayate, and is a handy base for exploring the ruins at Quilmes. It actually sits within Catamarca province and makes a fine stopover.

The plaza is the center of town, and lies nine blocks north of the bus terminal. A remarkably helpful **tourist office** (421083; 7am-11pm Mon-Fri, 8am-10pm Sat & Sun), with heroic opening hours, is located under the trees in the square itself. On one corner of the plaza, the recommended **Museo Arqueológico** (cnr Belgrano & Sarmiento; 9am-7:30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) has a worthwhile collection of ceramics and gold and silver grave jewelry from this important archaeological zone. Ask to see the back room, where a whole lot more elaborately decorated funerary urns are stored. Next door is an **artesanía cooperative**, selling woven goods and other handicrafts at more-than-fair prices. On the edge of town, **Cabra Marca** (8am-5pm Mon-Sat) makes traditional goat’s cheese, and is worth visiting for...
the free guided tour, which includes a chance to meet the horned beasts themselves.

There are many places to stay in town, including the welcoming Residencial Pérez (☎ 420257; hotelperez@hotmail.com; San Martín 94; s/d AR$50/80), with spotless rooms set around a viney courtyard behind a cafe near the plaza (no sign), and the somewhat surreal Caasama (☎ 421627; www.hotelcaasama.com.ar; cnr 9 de Julio & 25 de Agosto; s/d AR$135/160; ✓ ✓) by the bus terminal, which offers comfortable and very unusual accommodations in a colorful provincial government complex that includes a big pool, floodlit tennis court and pumping summertime boliche. You’ll need to book ahead in summer months.

Eating options on the plaza include El Colonial del Valle (☎ 420897; cnr Esquiú & San Martín; meals AR$7-20; ✓ lunch & dinner), a traditional and attractive confitería that serves good coffee and tamales, a set lunch for AR$13 and fuller meals in the upstairs dining room.

There are several buses daily to Tucumán (AR$32, five hours) via Tafí del Valle (AR$17, 1½ hours) and two daily to Cafayate (AR$13, two hours) via Quilmes. Three buses a week go to Belén (AR$20, five hours) via Hualfin. A remise from the terminal to the town center is AR$2.50.

Amaicha del Valle ☎ 03892 / pop 3214
On the main road between Tafí del Valle and Cafayate, this dusty settlement has a notable indigenous feel and, indeed, is famous for its Pachamama festival in February, which includes music, dancing and a llama sacrifice to bless the harvest. On the main road, the ornate and unusual Museo de Pachamama (☎ 421004; admission AR$10; 8am-6pm) is a picturesque if locally controversial collection of indigenous art and artifacts in a sizable indoor-outdoor setting.

Amaicha is useful for getting to the ruins at Quilmes, and has several places to stay, including hostels and campgrounds. Buses between Tafí (AR$14, 1½ hours) and Cafayate (AR$14, 1½ to 2½ hours) stop here.

Quilmes ☎ 03892
Dating from about AD 1000, Quilmes (☎ 0381-15-443-6805; Argentines/foreigners AR$5/10; ✓ 8am-7pm) was a complex indigenous urban settlement that occupied about 30 hectares and housed as many as 5000 people. The Quilmes locals sur-

vied contact with the Inca, which occurred from about AD 1480 onward, but could not outlast the siege of the Spaniards, who in 1667 deported the last 2000 inhabitants to Buenos Aires.

Quilmes’ thick walls underscore its defensive purpose, but clearly this was more than just a pucará. Dense construction sprawls both north and south from the central nucleus, where the outlines of buildings, in a variety of shapes, are obvious even to the casual observer. For revealing views of the extent of the ruins, climb the trails up either flank of the nucleus, which offer vistas of the valley once only glimpsed by the city’s defenders. Be prepared for intense sun with no shade, and a large fly population keen on exploring your facial orifices.

In theory, there is a beautiful hotel and confitería at the site, as well as a museum. However, at the time of research, the government, local Diaguita community and concession holder were embroiled in a prolonged legal battle, so it was all closed. If it’s open, friendly folk selling local ceramics will look after your bags and sell cold drinks.

GETTING THERE & AWAY
Buses from Cafayate to Santa María or Tafí del Valle will drop passengers at the junction, but from there you’ll have to walk or hitchhike 5km to the ruins. Easier is to get off the bus at Amaicha del Valle, where jeeps will charge around AR$40 to the ruins, including waiting time. Often a few people are wanting to go, so you may end up paying less. Remises charge AR$40 for the half-hour journey from Santa María to Quilmes, more with waiting time. From Cafayate think AR$70.

SANTIAGO DEL ESTERO ☎ 0385 / pop 327,974 / elev 200m
Placid Santiago del Estero enjoys the distinction of the title ‘Madre de Ciudades’ (Mother of Cities) for this, founded in 1553, was the first Spanish urban settlement in what is now Argentina. Sadly, it boasts no architectural heritage from that period, but still makes a pleasant stopover.

Santiagueños (residents of Santiago del Estero) enjoy a nationwide reputation for valuing rest and relaxation over work. A popular Argentine joke claims that they are world hammer-throwing champions, for they prefer to be as far away from anything
work related as possible. Nevertheless, there’s plenty of bustle around the town center, particularly in the evenings when life orbits around the pretty plaza and its adjoining pedestrian streets.

Orientation & information
The town center is Plaza Libertad, from which Av Libertad, trending southwest to northeast, bisects the city. Street names change either side of Avs Libertad and Belgrano. The Río Dulce runs to the northeast of the town center. On the other side of the river, connected by bridges, is the twin town of La Banda.

Several downtown banks have ATMs, and internet places are widespread. There’s free wi-fi in the plaza.

Municipal tourist office (422-9800; Plaza Libertad s/n; 8am-1pm & 5-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 5-9pm Sat) In a kiosk in the plaza itself.

Provincial tourist office (421-3253; www.turismosantiago.gov.ar; Av Libertad 417; 7am-2pm & 3-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat & Sun) On the plaza. Displays work by local artists.

Sleeping
The glitzy new development of Complejo Cultural Santiago del Estero is due to open on the plaza in late 2010 or early 2011. As well as performance spaces and a bridge linking it to the market, it will house three museums – the city historical museum, an art gallery and the Museo de Ciencias Antropológicas y Naturales (421-1380; Avellaneda 355; admission free; 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat). An excellent collection founded by two French archaeologist brothers, it is by far the most interesting thing to see in town. There’s a stunning array of indigenous ceramics – mostly sizable, noble funerary urns used for secondary burial (the remains were put in the pot after decomposition) – as well as jewelry, flutes and a large case filled with ornate loom weights. There are also some impressive fossils of glyptodonts, an extinct family of creatures that somewhat resembled large armadillos.

Named for the city’s founder and only 10 blocks from Plaza Libertad, the enormous eucalypt- and casuarina-filled Parque Aguirre has a small zoo, camping areas, a swimming pool and, on the far side, a new costanera (riverside road) along the erratic Río Dulce. It’s a fine place for a wander, and has a few confiterías and bars that get lively on weekend evenings.

Tours
A competent and professional setup, Sumaq (421-3055; www.sumaqturismo.com.ar; Tucumán 39) is currently the only operator offering tours to the remote Parque Nacional Copo; it also offers good trips to other parts of northwestern Argentina. The office is in the same building as the Hotel Savoy – to get there, go through the restaurant and up a narrow spiral staircase.

Festivals & Events
Santiago’s chaotic Carnaval, in February, resembles celebrations in the Quebrada de Humahuaca. During the entire last week of July, santiagueños celebrate the founding of the city. The centerpiece of this is the Marcha de los Bombs, a boisterous procession into the center of the city by some 2000 locals banging all manner of drums.

Sleeping
Campamento las Casuarinas (421-1390; Parque Aguirre; per person/tent/car AR$13/3/1) This municipal campground is normally a pleasant, shady and secure area, less than 1km from Plaza Libertad, but it can be oppressively crowded and deafeningly noisy on weekends.

Hotel Avenida (421-5887; avenidahotelesgo@yahoo.com.ar; Pedro León Gallo 405; s/d AR$135/200; without bathroom AR$40/60; 7am-2pm & 3-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat & Sun) On the plaza. Displays work by local artists.

Hotel Carlos V (424-0303; hotelcarlosv@arnet.com.ar; Independencia 110; s/d standard AR$250/340, d superior AR$450; 7am-2pm & 3-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat & Sun) By far the most luxuri-
Superior rooms are larger and have a table to really enjoy the city views. Some rooms could do with a color change. Some rooms have a balcony to enjoy the city views. Superior rooms are larger and have a table and chairs. There’s a gym and sauna as well as the indoor pool.

Also recommended:
- **Residencial Emaus** (☎️ 421-5893; Av Moreno Sur 675; s/d AR$55/90) Light and airy rooms with TV and benevolent management.
- **Nuevo Hotel Santiago** (☎️ 421-4949; nuevohotel santiago@arnet.com.ar; Buenos Aires 60; s/d AR$120/170; 🌐 📧 📞) Smart impersonal place with good rooms, a block from the plaza.
Eating & Drinking

Mercado Armonía (Tucumán) Santiago’s art deco market has food stalls, cheap eateries and a few artesanía shops upstairs.

Heladería Cerecett (Av Libertad 525; ice cream from AR$3; 11am-11pm) This heladería (ice-creamery) has some of the best ice cream in Santiago del Estero, served in no-nonsense surroundings.

Mía Mamma (429-9715; 24 de Septiembre 15; mains AR$15-34; lunch & dinner) Set back from the plaza, this is a discreet and reliable restaurant with well-dressed waiters who see to your every need. There’s a fine salad bar with plenty of vegetables (AR$18, or AR$11 with a main) and a wide choice of food that includes enormous parrilla options as well as a tasty arroz a la valenciana (similar to paella).

Jockey Club (421-7518; Independencia 68; mains AR$18-34; lunch & dinner) Strangely empty of pint-sized horse riders, the staid atmosphere of the Jockey Club belongs to another era but belies the quality and welcome variety of its cuisine. Elaborate and tasty creations with a Spanish touch are accompanied by cordially formal service.

La Casa (421-0433; Av General Roca 475; mains AR$22-45; dinner daily, lunch Sat & Sun) This attractive conversion of stately house to restaurant also has streetside seating. It has many different interesting wines (you can also buy to take out) and, as well as fairly-priced parrilla offerings, has more imaginative specials like pork on a bed of mustard mash, sundried tomatoes and spinach.

Chester (422-4972; cnr Pellegrini & Av General Roca; mains AR$15-36; noon-3:30pm & 7pm-1am) Everyone likes the booths, polished brass and dark wood of a British-style pub, but it doesn’t transmit quite the same coziness when the bar is the size of a tractor warehouse. Nevertheless, this place is popular and offers decent-quality but very overpriced meals and drinks. It gets busy and lively on Friday nights.

Getting There & Away

Aerolíneas Argentinas (422-4335; 24 de Septiembre 547) flies daily to Buenos Aires (AR$689).

BUS

Santiago’s shiny new bus terminal (422-7091; cnr Perú & Chacabuco) is six blocks northwest of Plaza Libertad. There’s no convenient local bus into town, but it’s only AR$4 in a taxi. Sample destinations and fares:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Cost (AR$)</th>
<th>Duration (hr)</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Catamarca</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4½</td>
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<td>Córdoba</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>Jujuy</td>
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<tr>
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<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tucumán</td>
<td>23</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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TRAIN

Santiago del Estero (actually, the adjacent twin town of La Banda) is on the Buenos Aires–Tucumán train line, which runs twice weekly. Trains run from La Banda station (427-3918) to Tucumán (4½ hours) twice weekly. They also leave twice weekly to Buenos Aires’ Retiro station (22 hours). The station is in the heart of La Banda; bus 17 does a circuit of Santiago’s center before heading across the river to there.

Getting Around

Bus 15 (AR$1.25) goes to Aeropuerto Mal Paso (SDE; 434-3651; Av Madre de Cudades), 6km northwest of downtown. A taxi from the city center costs AR$10. A taxi just about anywhere around town should cost AR$4 to AR$6.

AROUND SANTIAGO DEL ESTERO

Termas de Río Hondo 03858 / pop 27,838

Termas de Río Hondo, 70km northwest of its provincial capital Santiago del Estero, is famous for its thermal waters, and its nearly 200 hotels all have hot mineral baths. While it’s very well known as a winter vacation destination for Argentines, it’s of little interest unless you plan a spa treatment. The town has two unusual features: it has a triangular plaza (San Martín) as well as one of the
country’s few public monuments to Juan and Evita Perón. There are numerous shops selling tasty chocolates and alfajores (filled sandwich cookies).

The town has many banks, internet places and other tourist facilities. There’s a tourist office (☎ 421571; www.lastemaderihondo.com; Alberdi 245; 7am-9pm) on the main street.

There are numerous hotels and hospedajes strung out along the main street; most close from November to April, when those that remain open slash their prices. There’s a huge quantity (if not variety) of restaurants.

The bus terminal (☎ 421513; Las Heras) is six blocks west of the plaza (where all buses also stop). Buses run regularly to Santiago del Estero (AR$8, one hour) and Tucumán (AR$15, one hour), as well as destinations further afield.

Parque Nacional Copo
Right in the northeast corner of Santiago del Estero province, on the edge of the Chaco, this 1150-sq-km national park was created in 2000. Like the Parque Nacional Chaco it is an important last redoubt of the quebracho colorado tree, of which there are some huge and noble examples in the park. Among the rich birdlife are several species of parrot, and unusual creatures include endangered tatu carretas (a large species of armadillo), anteaters and jaguars. When visiting the park, it’s a sobering thought that this type of forest covered 80% of the province as recently as 1907. Less than a quarter remains.

Before entering the park, head first to the ranger office (☎ 03841-15-669206; dmoa@apn.gov.ar; San Francisco Solano s/n) in Pampa de los Guanacos (where there are simple accommodations). Daily buses run through here from Santiago del Estero and Resistencia. In the park itself, 24km west then north from Pampa, there’s a simple camping area but no facilities. See p290 for tours to the park from Santiago del Estero.

CATAMARCA & LA RIOJA
Comparatively little visited by travelers, these provinces are great fun to explore, and are rich in scenery and tradition. Both were home to several important pre-Columbian cultures, mostly maize cultivators who developed unique pottery techniques and styles, and the region has many important archaeological sites.

The town of Catamarca has an immediacy and lively feel, while La Rioja’s calm center and moving Tinkunaco celebration are also worth getting to know. Further towards the sierra, the remote poncho-making town of Belén feels miles from anywhere, while Chilecito has a fascinating mining heritage and is the base for several excellent excursions into the lofty mountains.

CATAMARCA
☎ 03833 / pop 171,923 / elev 530m
Vibrant Catamarca has a very different feel to other towns of this size in the region. The local authorities have been energetically promoting the province’s natural products, and trade fairs showcasing wines, walnuts, olive oils and jams mean the city’s hotels are often full.

San Fernando del Valle de Catamarca, to give the city its full name, has a lovely central plaza, and noble buildings dot the streets. To the west of town, the huge eucalypts of Parque Navarro scent the air and are backed by the spectacular sierra beyond.

Orientation
Nearly everything is in walking distance in the city center, an area 12 blocks square circumscribed by four wide avenues: Belgrano to the north, Alem to the east, Güemes to the south and Virgen del Valle to the west. The focus of downtown is the beautiful Plaza 25 de Mayo.

There are numerous internet and phone places around the central streets. BBVA (Rivadavia 520) Cashes traveler’s checks and has an ATM.

Municipal tourist office (☎ 437413; turismocatamarca@cedeconet.com.ar; Av República 446; 8am-9pm) Helpful place on the plaza. There’s a desk in the bus terminal as well.

Provincial tourist office (☎ 437791; www.turismocatamarca.gov.ar; Av República 446; 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-9pm Sat-Sun) Near the plaza. Professional staff with excellent information on the whole province.

Sights
Dating from 1859, Catamarca’s Catedral Basílica de Nuestra Señora del Valle (☎ 7am-9pm) shelters the Virgen del Valle, who is the patron of Catamarca and one of northern Argentina’s most venerated images since the 17th century. The atmospheric cathedral also contains an elaborately carved altar to St Joseph, an ornate baroque pulpit and an exhibition of paintings
of the Virgin. The cathedral overlooks Plaza 25 de Mayo, a truly beautiful square filled with robust jacaranda, araucaria, citrus and palm trees.

The fine **Museo Arqueológico Adán Quiroga** (437413; Sarmiento 450; admission AR$4; 7am-12:30pm & 3-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat & Sun) is reason enough to come to Catamarca if you have an interest in Argentine indigenous culture. A superb collection of pre-Columbian ceramics from several different cultures and eras is on display. Some – in particular the black Aguada ceramics with their incised, stylized animal decoration – is of truly remarkable quality. A couple of dehydrated mummies found at 5000m are also present, as well as a spooky shrunken head from the Amazon, and trays used to snort lines of *rape* (finely ground tobacco). There’s also a colonial and religious section.

**Tours**

**Yokavil Turismo** (430066; www.yokavilturismo.com.ar; Rivadavia 916) arrange tours to area attractions, including Gruta de la Virgen del Valle (AR$75), and trips to Belén, Londres and El Shincal ruins (AR$350). Kids go free. It’s tucked away in an arcade.

**Iskay Patatí** (03833-15-53150; mharía23@hotmail.com) can hire you bikes or take you on guided bicycle tours to places such as the Gruta de Choya (p296).

**Festivals & Events**

The **Fiesta de Nuestra Señora del Valle** takes place for two weeks after Easter. In an impressive manifestation of popular religion and heroism of pilgrims come from the interior and from other Andean provinces to honor the Virgen del Valle. On her saint’s day, December 8, she is similarly feted.

**Sleeping**

**BUDGET**

**Autocamping Municipal** (RP 4; per car/person AR$5/3; (w)) Four kilometers west of town, in the Sierra de Ambato foothills, this is a pleasant riverside spot. It’s loud and crowded on weekends and holidays, and it has fierce mosquitoes. Take bus 101A (AR$1.75) from outside the Convento de San Francisco.

**Residencial Avenida** (422139; Av Güemes 754; s without bathroom AR$30, d with/without bathroom AR$58/45) With plenty of rooms arranged around a central courtyard, the Avenida, meters from the bus terminal, is a fine place to rest your legs and your pesos. Most of the rooms are excellent value, although some are a little rickety.

**San Pedro Hostel** (454708; www.hostelsanpedro.com.ar; Sarmiento 341; dm/d AR$30/100; (w)) One of three hostels in town, this is a great spot, with a big back garden that includes a *parrilla* and a tiny pool. Dorms are OK (mattresses are foam) but the overall package and cheery vibe make this a real winner. It runs another hostel around the corner if it’s full. Bikes available to rent for AR$10 per day.

**Residencial Tucumán** (422209; Tucumán 1040; s/d AR$70/100; (w)) This well-run, immaculately presented *residencial* has spotless rooms, is excellent value and is about a one-minute walk from the bus terminal. For this reason you might want to book ahead. Air-con costs a little more.

**Sol Hotel** (430803; solhotel@hotmail.com; Salta 1142; s/d AR$95/150; (w)) Clean and welcoming, the Sol’s bright, cheery rooms are an OK deal if you want to be near the bus terminal. Some are much better than others; ask to see a few.

**Hotel Colonial** (423502; Av República 802; s/d AR$120/160; (w)) Cutesy decorated in highland colonial style, with dimpled ‘adobe’ walls and cactus, this down-to-earth place represents value. The rooms are fairly ordinary, but there’s space and everything works. Try to get one facing the rear for a bit more peace and quiet.

**MIDRANGE & TOP END**

**Hotel Pucará** (431569; www.hotelpucara.com.ar; Caseros 501; s/d AR$130/180; (w)) Style gurus need not apply. This peaceful hotel on the west side of town stands out for its gloriously kitschy faux-Chinese knickknacks and ruffled bedspreads. The china dog on the stairs appeals (finely

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with more color, and some of the windows have irritating fixed louvres, but the facilities and treatment of guests are good.

**Amerian Catamarca Park** (425444; www.amerian.com; República 347; d AR$509; ) This upmarket hotel is well appointed and coolly modern. Grab a mountain-view room at the front of the building and you’ll be content with your stay. Facilities include a gym, sauna and restaurant.

**Eating**

There’s a row of eateries along the north side of the plaza. Cheap burger and *lomito* (steak sandwich) joints are along Güemes west of the bus terminal.
Los Hornitos (☎ 451937; Av Virgen del Valle 924; empanadas AR$2; ☥ 10am-10pm) The province’s most legendary spot for empanadas – meat, cheese or chicken – this hole-in-the-wall cooks them on the street in two wood-fired clay ovens. A sight to see, and a Catamarca classic.

El Rincón de Lucho (☎ 457000; Av Puente Castillo 65; dishes AR$10-32; ☥ lunch & dinner) This popular parilla east of the center gets lively on weekend evenings when there’s a live folklore show. Follow República eastwards then Ave Puente Castillo curves northwards from it.

Open Plaza (☎ 404718; Av República 580; mains AR$23 to AR$30), available from noon till night.

Los Troncos (☎ 434944; Mota Botello 37; dishes AR$10-36; ☥ lunch & dinner) Deservedly popular with locals, this typical restaurant and parrillada offers a great opportunity to try traditional Catamarcan cuisine. Tasty tamales and empanadas are on offer, and meaty options include chivito and lechón (suckling pig).

Salsa Criolla (☎ 433583; Av República 546; meals AR$45; ☥ lunch & dinner) On the plaza, this bright and solicitous spot offers a high-class all-you-can-eat parrillada. It doesn’t try to cynically stuff you with chorizo first like in some places – rather, it insists on tempting you with high-quality cuts long after you’ve insisted you don’t want any more. The salad bar (AR$20 on its own) isn’t so inspired, though.

Drinking & Entertainment

There are a couple of weekend boliches along República west of the plaza, but the real pub action is in a zone north of the center on and around Ave Gobernador Galindez.

Caravati (☎ 426185; Sarmiento 683; ☥ 10am-midnight) The most inviting of the plaza’s terraces, this is a little removed from the traffic noise. Named after the Italian architect who designed the cathedral and much of central Catamarca, it occupies part of the handsome social club edifice next to that building.

CCA Cinemacenter (☎ 423040; www.cinemacenter.com.ar; Av Güemes 850) Located in the bus terminal, this cinema screens the latest releases.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Aerolíneas Argentinas (☎ 424460; Sarmiento 589) has three weekly flights to Buenos Aires (AR$975) and to La Rioja (AR$211). A minibus (☎ 0383-15-685208; AR$23) runs at 1pm from outside the Hotel Arenales on Sarmiento to Aeropuerto Felipe Varela (☎ 430080, 435582), some 22km east of town on RP33, to coincide with flights.

BUS

Catamarca’s spruce bus terminal (☎ 423415; Av Güemes 850) includes a shopping complex and cinema. Following are sample destinations and fares around the country:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Cost (AR$)</th>
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<td>Tucumán</td>
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AROUND CATAMARCA

According to local legend, in 1619 the image of the Virgen del Valle appeared in Gruta de Choya (🕒 8:30am-7:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat & Sun), 7km north of downtown Catamarca on RP 32. The present image is a replica of that in Catamarca’s cathedral, and a protective structure shelters the grotto itself. Empresa Cotc’a’s bus 104 goes to the Gruta de Choya every 40 minutes (AR$1.75) from outside the San Francisco monastery.

Six kilometers west of town, not far from the campground, Pueblo Perdido de la Quebrada is the ruins of a 9th-century-AD settlement built by an indigenous group who had moved south and conserves. There are several shops stocking these along Sarmiento and Rivadavia near the plaza.

Mercado Artesanal Permanente y Fábrica de Alfombras (Av Virgen del Valle 945; ☥ 8am-1pm & 2-8pm) For Catamarca’s characteristic hand-tied rugs, visit this artisans’ market. Besides rugs, the market also sells a range of ponchos, blankets, jewelry, red onyx sculptures, musical instruments and basketry.

Shopping

Catamarca is enthusiastic in promoting its fine natural products; the region is well known for wines, olive oil, walnuts, and various jams and conserves. There are several shops stocking these along Sarmiento and Rivadavia near the plaza.
from the puna, perhaps driven by extreme climatic conditions. There’s not a great deal to see, however; only low foundation walls remain. Take bus 101A (AR$1.75) from outside the San Francisco monastery.

The Sierra de Famatina, the province’s highest mountain range, is visible from the road to picturesque Villa Las Pirquitas, near the dam of the same name, 29km north of Catamarca via RN 75. The foothills en route shelter small villages with hospitable people and interesting vernacular architecture.

Free camping is possible at the basic river beach, where the shallows are too muddy for swimming. Hostería Provincial Las Pirquitas (☎ 03833-15-584944; s/d AR$30/50) is great value, with clean and comfortable rooms, and a bar with pool table and very cheap meals.

From Catamarca’s bus terminal, Empresa Cotca’s bus 201 leaves hourly for the village. You can catch it on Salta between Esquiú and Prado.

BELÉN  
☎ 03835 / pop 11,003 / elev 1250m
Slow-paced little Belén feels like, and is, a long way from anywhere, and will appeal to travelers who like things small-scale and friendly. It’s got an excellent place to stay and is one of the best places to buy woven goods, particularly ponchos, in Argentina. There are many teleras (textile workshops) dotted around town, turning out their wares made from llama, sheep and alpaca wool. The nearby ruins of El Shincal are another reason to visit.

Before the arrival of the Spaniards in the mid-16th century, the area around Belén was Diaguita territory, on the periphery of the Inca empire. After the Inca fell, it became the encomienda (colonial labor system) of Juan Ramírez de Velasco, founder of La Rioja, but its history is intricately intertwined with nearby Londres, a Spanish settlement that shifted several times because of floods and Diaguita resistance. More than a century passed before the priest José Bartolomé Olmos de Aguilera divided a land grant among veterans of the Diaguita wars, on the condition that they support evangelization in the area.

Orientation & Information
In the western highlands of Catamarca, Belén is 289km from the provincial capital and 180km southwest of Santa María.

There’s a tourist office (☎ 461304; turismobelen@ gmail.com; ☎ 7am-1pm & 2-10pm Mon-Fri, 8am-10pm Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) by the bus terminal, and another at General Paz 180, which keeps similar hours.

Sights
The neoclassical brick Iglesia Nuestra Señora de Belén dates from 1907 and faces Plaza Olmos y Aguilera, which is well shaded by pines and colossal pepper trees. Up some stairs at the end of a little shopping arcade, the Museo Cóndor Huasi (cnr Lavalle & Rivadavia; admission AR$2; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-8pm Mon-Fri) has a well-presented archaeological collection, including some fine bronze axes, gold-leaf jewelry and an illustrated information panel (in Spanish) on hallucinogen use among the Diaguita people.

Festivals & Events
On December 20, the town officially celebrates its founding, Día de la Fundación, but festivities begin at least a week earlier with a dance at the foot of the Cerro de la Virgen, three blocks west of the plaza. A steep 1900m trail leads to a 15m statue of the Virgin, side by side with a 4.5m image of the Christ child.

Sleeping & Eating
Hotel Gómez (☎ 461250; Calchaquí 213; s/d AR$40/60)
One of a handful of cheap hotels on the main road, this spot has a plant-filled patio and basic rooms with bathroom and TV. The welcome isn’t exactly effusive, but that’s life.

Hotel Belén (☎ 461501; www.belencat.com.ar; cnr Belgrano & Cubas; s/d AR$159/181; ☎)
It’s hard to believe that this superstylish hotel exists in Belén (thank the enlightened Catamarca government of a few years back). The exposed rock bathrooms, with inlaid-tile mosaics on the floors and wall, and grotto-like, extremely comfortable rooms are unusual and a delight.

El Único (Roca 74; mains AR$12-34; ☎ lunch & dinner)
A block and a bit west of the plaza, this is the best parrilla in town. It features an attractive quincho (thatch-roof hut), cheap patero wine and friendly service.

1900 (☎ 461100; Belgrano 391; mains AR$12-26; ☎ lunch & dinner)
Beyond-the-call service is the key to this highly enjoyable restaurant a block down from the plaza. It’s very popular, but it hates to turn people away, so a Tetris-like reshuffling of tables is a constant feature, bless ’em. Prices are more than fair, and there are a number of large platters designed to be shared. Well-mixed salads and juicy brochettes are highlights.
Shopping
There’s a marquee off the plaza with a number of friendly artesanía stalls selling ponchos, cameld-wool clothing and foot-trodden local wine. For more upmarket woven goods, Cuna del Poncho (☎ 461091; Roca 144) has reasonable prices, accepts major credit cards and arranges shipping.

Getting There & Away
Belén’s bus terminal (cnr Sarmiento & Rivadavia), one block south and one block west of the plaza, is sadly underused, and Catamarca (AR$20, four to five hours) is the only long-distance destination served daily at a reasonable hour (1pm). There’s a night service to La Rioja (AR$30, five hours) and Córdoba (AR$83, 14 hours), as well as four buses a week to Santa María (AR$20, four hours) via Hualfin. For Salta and Tucumán, you can change at Catamarca or Santa María.

AROUND BELÉN
Londres & El Shincal
Only 15km southwest of Belén, sleepy Londres (population 2134) is the province’s oldest Spanish settlement. It dates from 1558, though it moved several times before returning here in 1612, and the inhabitants fled again during the Diaguita uprising of 1632. Its name (London) celebrated the marriage of the prince of Spain (and later King Philip II) to Mary Tudor, queen of England, in 1555. The Festival Provincial de la Nuez (Provincial Walnut Festival) takes place here the first fortnight of February.

Seven kilometers west of Londres, the Inca ruins of El Shincal (admission AR$5; ☟ 8am-sunset) are well worth visiting. Founded in 1470, the town occupied a commanding position in the foothills of the mountains, surveying the vast valley to the south. The setting is spectacular, with fantastic views and great atmosphere. The site was pretty thoroughly ruined when excavations began in 1991, but the ushno (ceremonial platform) and kallanka (possibly a barracks) have been restored, and you can climb two hillocks on either side of the central square. Aligned to the rising and setting sun, they probably served as both lookout and altar. Entrance usually includes a tour by one of the welcoming family that lives here and looks after the site.

There are seven buses Monday to Saturday from Belén to Londres (AR$2), that continue to a spot a short walk from the ruins. There’s a campground between Londres and the ruins, and a cabin complex. Londres also has a couple of basic residenciales.

Beyond Londres, you can head on south to Chilecito, 200km away in La Rioja province along RN 40, if you have transportation. The drive is a spectacular one, with the imposing Sierra Famatina to the west, and the road is excellent.

Hualfin
About 60km north of Belén via spectacular RN 40 is the grape-growing village of Hualfin. Surprisingly green and fertile in the midst of a barren landscape, it has an attractive pink chapel, dating from 1770, beneath a small promontory whose 142-step staircase leads to a mirador with panoramic views of cultivated fields and the distant desert. Next to the chapel is a small archaeological museum.

Two kilometers south, and a further 2km west, the Termas de la Quebrada is a small thermal bath complex; a little further south of the turnoff, amazing reddish rock formations stand proud above the usually dry river valley; the ‘snowdrifts’ visible on the mountains behind are actually cascades of fine white sand.

Hospedaje Alta Huasi (☎ 03835-15-696275; r per person AR$30), 1km along the Santa María road

WAY OUT WEST
If you like getting off the beaten track, you’re sure to appreciate out-of-the-way Antofagasta de la Sierra, right up in the Andes in the far west of Catamarca province. This puna village sits at 3320m amid a spectacular landscape of guanacos, volcanoes, pumice fields, salt pans and lakes where flamingoes congregate. It’s particularly worth visiting in early March for the livestock- and traditional culture–based Fiesta de la Puna. There’s accommodation available, including the Hostería de Antofagasta (☎ 03835-471001; C Principal s/n; s/d AR$65/87). Buses run here from Catamarca at 6:15am Wednesday and Friday (AR$60, 12 hours), returning at noon on Monday and Friday.
from the church, offers simple accommodations. Around town, look for locally grown paprika sprinkled on creamy slices of goat’s cheese.

Minibuses run twice daily from Belén to Hualfín (AR$7, 1½ hours) from Monday to Friday; Belén–Santa María buses (four a week) also stop here.

LA RIOJA  
@ 03822  /  pop 143,684  /  elev 500m

Encircled by the graceful peaks of the Sierra de Velasco, La Rioja is quite a sight on a sunny day. And there are plenty of sunny days: summer temperatures rise sky-high in this quiet, out-of-the-way provincial capital. Even if you’re on a short highlights tour, you might consider stopping off here – it’s halfway between Mendoza and Salta – to take a tour to the Talampaya and Ischigualasto national parks.

Juan Ramírez de Velasco founded Todos los Santos de la Nueva Rioja in 1591. The Diaguita tribe who lived here were converted and made peace with the conquerors (see boxed text, p301), paving the way for Spanish colonization of what Vásquez de Espinosa called ‘a bit of Paradise.’

The city’s appearance reflects the conflict and accommodation between colonizer and colonized: the architecture combines European designs with native techniques and local materials. Many early buildings were destroyed in the 1894 earthquake.

Orientation

At the base of the picturesque Sierra de Velasco, La Rioja is relatively small, with all points of interest and most hotels within easy walking distance of each other.

North–south streets change their names at San Nicolás de Bari, but east–west streets are continuous.

Information

BBVA (Av San Nicolás de Bari 476) Changes US dollars.
Mama Espuma (Av JD Perón 324; per load AR$15) Laundry.

Municipal Tourist Kiosk (Plaza 25 de Mayo; 8am-9:30pm) On the plaza itself.

Provincial tourist office (@ 426345; www.larioja.gov.ar/turismo; Pelagio Luna 345; 8am-9:30pm) Helpful.
Telecentro (Av San Nicolás de Bari 502; per hr AR$2.50) On the plaza. Internet and telephones.

Sights

LANDMARK BUILDINGS

La Rioja is a major devotional center, so most landmarks are ecclesiastical. Built in 1623 by the Diaguita under the direction of Dominican friars, the picturesque Convento de Santo Domingo (cnr Pelagio Luna & Lamadrid; 9:30am-12:30pm & 6-8pm Mon-Fri) is Argentina’s oldest monastery. The date appears in the carved algarrobo doorframe, also the work of Diaguita artists.

The curious neo-Gothic Convento de San Francisco (cnr 25 de Mayo & Bazán y Bustos; 7pm-9pm) houses the image of the Niño Alcalde, a Christ-child icon symbolically recognized as the city’s mayor (see the boxed text, p301, for details).

The enormous and spectacular neo-Byzantine 1899 cathedral (cnr Av San Nicolás de Bari & 25 de Mayo) contains the image of patron saint Nicolás de Bari, an object of devotion for both riojanos (people who live in La Rioja) and the inhabitants of neighboring provinces.

MUSEO FOLKLÓRICO

The hugely worthwhile Museo Folklorico (@ 428500; Pelagio Luna 811; admission by donation; 9am-1pm & 4-8pm Tue-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun) is set in a wonderful early-17th-century adobe building, and has fine displays on various aspects of the region’s culture. Themes include chaya (local La Rioja music) and the Tinkunaco festival, weaving (with bright traditional wallhangings colored with plant extracts) and winemaking. The lagar (stretched leather used for treading the grapes) is quite a sight, as is the room that deals with mythology, including a demanding series of rituals required to sell your soul to the devil hereabouts. The informative guided tour is excellent if your Spanish is up to it.

MUSEO INCA HUASI

A couple of blocks from the plaza, this curious museum (Alberdi 650; admission AR$5; 9am-1pm & 4-8pm, Sat 9am-1pm Tue-Fri), run by monks, has a notable collection of pre-Columbian ceramics from the region from a number of different cultures.

Activities & Tours

Several operators run excursions around the province, including visits to the Parque Nacional Talampaya, which invariably includes
the nearby Parque Provincial Ishigualasto ("Valle de la Luna") in San Juan province. Rates vary according to numbers, but the 13-hour day trip to the two parks tends to cost around AR$180 to AR$210 per person. These companies also offer excursions to high, remote parts of the Andes in the west of the province (see boxed text, p305, for more information on these destinations).

A couple of operators:
Corona del Inca (422142; www.coronadelincas.com.ar; Pelagio Luna 914)
Terra Riojana (427-4160; www.terrariojana.com.ar; Av Ramírez de Velasco, Km 7), who offers instruction and tandem flights.

The La Rioja area has high drop-offs and thermals that make it a great zone for hang-gliding and paragliding; world records for long flights have been set here. Get in touch with Hugo Ávila (451635, 03822-15-663296; www.vuelosaguilablanca.com.ar; Av Ramírez de Velasco, Km 7), who offers instruction and tandem flights.

**Festivals & Events**

La Chaya, the local variant of Carnaval, attracts people from throughout the country. Its name, derived from a Quechua word meaning ‘to get someone wet,’ should give you an idea of what to expect. A particular style of local music, chaya, is associated with the festival.

Taking place at noon December 31, the religious ritual of El Tinkunaco is one of Argentina’s most interesting ceremonies (see the boxed text, opposite).
Sleeping
La Rioja’s hotels often offer discounts if you pay cash and aren’t afraid to bargain.

**Residencial Anita** (☎ 424836; Coronel Lagos 476; s/d AR$80/95; 🛏️) Offering excellent value for two, the quiet and proper Anita is a few blocks away from the center in a residential district. Rooms are very clean, with spotless bathrooms, and the plant- and saint-filled patio and plump pet dog are bonuses. It’s not the sort of place that will appreciate you rolling in pissed at 4am.

**Pensión 9 de Julio** (☎ 426955; cnr Copiapó & Dalmacio Vélez Sársfield; s/d AR$80/100; 🛏️) Definitely a good deal, this place has clean and pleasant rooms in a central part of town. A shady, vine-covered patio overlooking the plaza of the same name is another bonus. The drawback is substantial traffic noise from exterior rooms.

**Gran Hotel Embajador** (☎ 438580; www.granhotelembajador.com.ar; San Martín 250; s/d AR$95/130; 🛏️) This cheery place is very tidy; the rooms upstairs are larger and sunnier – a good thing if dark-red color schemes oppress you – and some have balconies. It offers plenty of value, and is popular as a result; reservations are advised.

**Hotel Talampaya** (☎ 422005; Av JD Perón 1290; s/d AR$140/250; 🛏️) What was formerly the Hotel Turismo has been taken over by the nearby King’s Hotel. The rooms are good at this price (especially the singles), and have excellent bathrooms and noisy balconies. There’s also a good restaurant here.

**King’s Hotel** (☎ 422122; Av Juan Facundo Quiroga 107; s/d AR$160/280; 🛏️) Though the King’s has a few gray hairs appearing, it still has atmosphere. The rooms have space and are comfortable enough, but the big pluses are the service, buffet breakfast and the pool, sun deck and gym.

**Plaza Hotel** (☎ 425215; www.plazahotel-larioja.com.ar; Av San Nicolás de Bari 502; s/d standard AR$228/261, s/d superior AR$320/341; 🛏️) Right on the plaza, this hotel looks a great deal better from inside than out. Rooms overlooking the plaza are much nicer than those looking onto internal light wells. Superior rooms are also available; they have a newer feel and king-sized beds.

**Naindo Park Hotel** (☎ 470700; www.naindoparkhotel.com; Av San Nicolás de Bari 475; s/d AR$374/430; 🛏️) Just off the plaza, and dominating itassertively, La Rioja’s finest hotel has an excellent level of service and comfort and prices to match. The rooms are particularly spacious, and many have good views.

Also recommended:

**Camping Alameda Park** (☎ 03822-15-501977; Ruta 75, Km 9; campsites per person AR$10) Best and closest campground west of town; to get there, catch city bus 2 or 5 southbound on Perón.

**Residencial Florida** (☎ 03822-15-688170; 8 de Diciembre 524; s/d/tw without bathroom AR$30/50/60, s/d with bathroom AR$40/70) Dark but decent rooms with fan for a pittance.

Eating
Regional dishes to look for include locro, juicy empanadas, chivito asado (barbecued goat),

**El Tinkunaco – Conflict Resolution in the 16th Century**

The fascinating and moving El Tinkunaco ceremony is a symbolic representation of the resolution of the clash of cultures that occurred at the founding of La Rioja. When Juan Ramírez de Velasco founded the city in 1591, he blithely ignored the fact that the land was owned and farmed by the Diaguita, who naturally took exception to their territory being carved up among Spanish settlers. They rebelled in 1593, and a bloody conflict was averted by the mediation of the friar Francisco Solano, later canonized for his efforts. The Diaguita trusted the cleric and listened to his message. They then agreed to down their arms on two conditions: that the Spanish alcalde (mayor) resign and that his replacement be the Christ child. The Spaniards agreed and peace was made. The new mayor became known as Niño Jesús Alcalde.

The Tinkunaco (the word means ‘meeting’ in Quechua) commemoration commenced not long after these historic events. Every year at noon on December 31, two processions – one representing the Spaniards, one the Diaguita – cross town and meet at the Casa de Gobierno. The ‘Spaniards’ are dressed as religious penitents and alféreces (lieutenants) with uniform and flag. The ‘Diaguita,’ or aillis, wear headbands with mirrors and ponchos. The processions meet, and solemnly all fall to their knees before the image of the Niño Jesús Alcalde, then embrace. It’s a powerful moment with a deep message about cultural differences and compromises.
humitas, quesillo (a cheese specialty) and olives. Cheap local wines are a good bargain in restaurants.

**Café del Paseo** (422069; cnr Pelagio Luna & 25 de Mayo; light meals AR$7-22; breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is your spot on the corner of the plaza to observe La Rioja life. The cell-phone clique mingles with families and tables of older men chewing the fat over another slow-paced La Rioja day. It's a fine place to try Argentina's favorite mixed drink – Fernet Branca with cola.

**El Marqués** (Av San Nicolás de Bari 484; dishes AR$10-22; 8am-midnight Mon-Sat) No surprises are on the menu here at this simple but effective local eatery. Pasta, pizza, omelets and grilled meats are well prepared and fairly priced. The fruit licuados are delicious.

**Tomato** (424444; Rivadavia 569; dishes AR$15-25; lunch & dinner) Chunky lomitos and decent pizza and pasta with big flatscreen TVs and outdoor seating make this a popular choice near the plaza. There's good cheap Rioja wine on hand, too.

**Stanzza** (430809; Dorrego 1641; mains AR$15-34; lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) One of the best places to eat in town, this friendly neighborhood restaurant serves up imaginative seafood and Italian dishes in an intimate environment.

**La Aldea de la Virgen de Luján** (460305; Rivadavia 756; lunches AR$18-25; 7am-3pm & 7-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) Though serving good-value breakfasts and a fairly predictable range of dinner options, lunchtime is the place to be at this spot, when it offers a good range of regional specialties.

**La Vieja Casona** (425996; Rivadavia 457; mains AR$19-44) Cheerfully lit and decorated, this is a cracking place with a great range of regional specialties, creative house choices and a long menu of standard Argentine dishes – the parrillada here is of excellent standard. There's a fair selection of La Rioja wines, too, and wonderful smells wafting from the busy kitchen.

**Shopping**

La Rioja has unique weavings that combine indigenous techniques and skill with Spanish designs and color combinations. The typical mantas (bedspreads) feature floral patterns over a solid background color. Spanish influence is also visible in silversmithing, including tableware, ornaments, religious objects and horse gear.

Fittingly for a place named after Spain's most famous wine region, La Rioja wine has a national reputation.

La Rioja crafts are exhibited and sold at the excellent **Mercado Artesanal de La Rioja** (Pelagio Luna 792; 8am-noon & 4-8pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun), as are other popular artworks at prices lower than most souvenir shops.

**Getting There & Away**

**AIR**

Aerolíneas Argentinas (426307; Belgrano 63) flies three times weekly to and from Buenos Aires (AR$975), stopping in Catamarca (AR$211 from Catamarca to La Rioja) on the way out.

**BUS**

La Rioja's **bus terminal** (427991; Barrio Evita s/n) is an interesting building, picturesquely backed by the sierra. It's a long walk south from the center of town. Sample fares and destinations:

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For going to Chilecito, **La Riojana** (435279; Buenos Aires 154) minibuses run from its office in the center of town four times a day. The trip costs AR$30 and takes 2½ hours, a little quicker than the bus.

**Getting Around**

Aeropuerto Vicente Almonacid (427239) is 7km east of town on RP 5. An airport taxi costs around AR$25. A taxi from the bus terminal to the city center costs about AR$12.
AROUND LA RIOJA
According to legend, San Francisco Solano converted many Diaguita at the site of Monumento Histórico Las Padercitas, a Franciscan-built colonial adobe chapel now sheltered by a stone temple, 7km west of town on RN 75. On the second Sunday of August, pilgrims convene to pay homage to the saint. Buses 2 and 5 go to the site (AR$1.50)

Beyond Las Padercitas, RN 75 climbs and winds past attractive summer homes, bright-red sandstone cliffs, lush vegetation and dark-purple peaks whose cacti remind you that the area is semidesert.

CHILECITO
© 03825 / pop 29,453 / elev 1080m

With a gorgeous situation among low rocky hills and sizable snowcapped peaks, Chilecito, a stop on spectacular Ruta 40, is the province’s second-largest settlement but still a small town. There are several interesting things to see, including the amazing abandoned cableway leading to a mine high in the sierra. With the intense heat, mining heritage and slopes around town dotted with cardón cactus, Chilecito can have a Wild West feel to it at times and is definitely the most appealing place to spend a few quiet days in this part of the country. It’s also a useful base for worthwhile excursions into the sierra.

Founded as Villa Santa Rita in 1715 by Domingo de Castro y Bazán, who had been granted the land, it was little more than a hamlet until the mining took off in the late 19th century. It acquired the name Chilecito (Little Chile) because many from that country crossed the Andes to come and work the mines here.

Information
The plaza has three banks with ATMs.

Municipal tourist office (Pl Sarmiento s/n; ℡ 8am-9pm) In a kiosk on the plaza; helpful and friendly.

Provincial tourist office (© 422688; turismochilecto@yahoo.com.ar; Castro y Bazán 52; ℡ 8am-9pm) Has enthusiastic staff and good material. There is also a small kiosk on Plaza Sarmiento.

Telecentro (Plaza Sarmiento; per hr AR$2) Phone cabins and internet access.

Sights
MUSEO DEL CABLECARRIL
The fascinating Museo del Cablecarril (suggested donation AR$5; ℡ 8:30am-12:30pm & 2:30-7:30pm) and cablecar station documents an extraordinary engineering project that gave birth to the town of Chilecito at the beginning of the 20th century. To enable the mining of gold, silver and copper from the Sierra de Famatina, a German firm was contracted to construct a cablecar running from here, at the end of the railway line, to La Mejicana, at an altitude of 4603m, more than 3.5km above Chilecito and nearly 40km away. With nine stations, a tunnel and 262 towers, the project was completed in 1904. Men and supplies were carried to the mine, operated by a British firm, in four hours. WWI put an end to this Anglo-German cooperation and the line started to decay, although local miners continued using it until the 1930s.

The picturesque museum preserves photos, tools and documents from the cablecar and mine, as well as communications equipment, including an early cell phone. There’s a detailed guided tour in Spanish, and you’ll then be taken to the cablecar terminus itself – a rickety spiral staircase climbs to the platform, where ore carts now wait silently in line. It’s worth going in the late afternoon, when the sun bathes the rusted metal and snowy sierras.

The museum is on the main road at the southern entrance to town, a block south of the bus terminal.

MUSEO MOLINO DE SAN FRANCISCO
Chilecito founder Don Domingo de Castro y Bazán owned this colonial flour mill, whose Museo Molino de San Francisco (© 422629; admission AR$5; ℡ 8am-12:30pm & 2:30-7:30pm) houses an eclectic assemblage of archaeological tools, antique arms, early colonial documents, minerals, traditional wood and leather crafts, banknotes, woodcuts, early cell telephones and paintings.

SAMAY HUASI
Joaquín V González, writer and founder of the prestigious La Plata university in Buenos Aires, used Samay Huasi (© 422629; samayhuasi@amnet.com.ar; admission AR$5; ℡ 8am-6pm), a finca (ranch) 2km from Chilecito, as his country retreat. The verdant grounds counterpoint the rocky cactus hills around them. González’ bedroom is preserved, as well as scrapbook material from his life. More interesting is a collection of paintings, mostly of the area; a canvas by González’ friend Alberto Alice, Claro de Luna, stands out. Below is a somewhat depressing natural sciences, archaeology and mineralogy collection.
You can stay at the finca, which offers full-board accommodations for AR$70 per person. It needs to be booked in advance.

To get there, head out from town past the Chirau-Mita cactus garden and follow the main road as it bends around to the right. Keep going and you’ll see the finca on your right.

LA RIOJANA WINERY
La Rioja is one of the best places to taste the aromatic white torrontés, though it’s far from the only wine the province has to offer. La Riojana (📞 423150; www.lariojana.com.ar; La Plata 646; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) cooperative is the area’s main wine producer, and a sizable concern. A good free tour (call or drop in to arrange a time; English is spoken) shows you through research, but it’s worth asking if it’s opened again.

This impressive cactus garden and handsome museum was closed indefinitely at the time of writing, but it needs to be booked in advance. It culminates in a generous tasting.

CHIRAU-MITA

This impressive cactus garden and handsome museum was closed indefinitely at the time of research, but it’s worth asking if it’s opened again.

Sleeping

A new five-star hotel and casino, Hotel Famatina, unsurprisingly owned by the local governor, was rapidly being built at 19 de Febrero 351 at the time of research.

Hostel Paimán (📞 429135; El Maestro 188; dm/s/d AR$50/50/80) With simple, comfortable rooms opening onto a quiet courtyard, and a welcoming owner, this is a friendly, relaxing place at a good price. There’s a kitchen and laundry; prices include breakfast. You can also pitch a tent for AR$20.

Hotel Ruta 40 (📞 422804; Libertad 68; s/d with bathroom AR$50/90, without bathroom AR$35/60; 🛋️) An excellent deal a couple of blocks from the plaza, this comfortable spot offers a variety of rooms with comfortable beds and clean spacious bathrooms. Look at a few – some look over a vine-covered patio to the hills beyond.

Hostal Mary Pérez (📞 423156; hostal_mp@hotmail.com; Florencio Dávila 280; s/d AR$100/120) A neat little residencial in the northeast of town that is more like a family-run hotel. The place is spotless – you may get high on the smell of cleaning products – and rooms come with TV and phone.
TRIPS AROUND CHILECITO

The western portion of La Rioja province is fascinating, with plenty of intriguing destinations in the sierras, and Chilcito is a launch pad for a range of excellent excursions. Parque Nacional Talampaya (below) is one appealing trip, which also takes in the Ischigualasto provincial park (p373) and crosses the picturesque Miranda pass. Northbound jaunts up RN 40 take in the ruins of El Shincal (p298) or the remote hot springs at Fiambalá, while for some serious 4WD mountain action, head up to the abandoned mine at La Mejicana (4603m), an ascent that takes in some amazing scenery and broad palette of colors, including a striking yellow river. Deeper into the sierras by the Chilean border is sizable Laguna Brava, a flamingo-filled lake surrounded by awesomely bleak and beautiful Andean scenery. Higher still, at 5600m, is the sapphire-blue crater lake of Corona del Inca, only accessible in summer.

Operators in town such as Salir del Cráter (☎ 423854; www.salirdelcrater.com.ar; 25 de Mayo 87), Inka Ñan (☎ 423641; www.inkanan.com.ar; Martínez 49) and Cuesta Vieja (☎ 424874; www.cuestavieja.com; Joaquín V González 467) run these trips, which cost around AR$150 to AR$250 per person depending on numbers. There’s usually a minimum of two people, but it’s always worth asking. Tailored multiday trips are available, too.

Hotel Chilcito (☎ 422201; hotel_acachilecito@hotmail.com; T Gordillo 101; s/d AR$117/156; ⚡️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) With a quiet location near where the town ends among rocky hills, this ACA establishment offers fine value for money. There’s space to burn here, with a garden and cavernous recreation room (pool table). The rooms are light, bright and pleasant, with tiled floors and gleaming bathrooms. There’s also a decent restaurant.

Eating & Drinking

La Plaza (☎ 422696; 25 de Mayo 58; mains AR$10-25; ⚡️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right on the plaza (as the name suggests), this warmly decorated restaurant specializes in tasty pizza and pasta. There are various set meals for AR$24 to AR$32, and all-you-can-eat pasta for AR$16.

El Rancho de Ferrito (☎ 424841; Av Pelagio Luna 647; mains AR$13-26; ⚡️ lunch & dinner) Seven blocks from the plaza, this inviting local restaurant is worth every step. You’ve seen the menu before – except for house specialties such as cazuela de gallina (chicken stew: yum), and local wines – but the quality, price and atmosphere make it truly excellent.

La Posta (☎ 425988; cnr 19 de Febrero & Roque Lanús; mains AR$22-59; ⚡️ lunch & dinner) Just the sort of place you wouldn’t expect Chilcito to have, and here it is – an intimate, stylish restaurant warmly decorated and lined with shelves of deli products on sale. The dishes are innovative (stewed goat with torrontés, for example) and attractively presented. The taste doesn’t quite live up to the service or decor, but it’s pretty good, especially the empanadas cooked on the parrilla.

Yops (AE Dávila 70; ⚡️ 8am-2pm & 5pm-late Mon-Sat) Atmospheric and darkish, this bohemian spot is comfortably Chilcito’s best cafe, serving fine coffee and decent mixed drinks. Watch the locals’ epic chess battles.

Entertainment

If you’re in Chilcito on a Saturday night, you’ll want to check out castle-like Fashion (admission AR$10; ⚡️ 11pm-late Sat), the town’s best discoteca. It’s on the way to Samay Huasi about 1km out of town, and a lot of fun. Girls get in a little cheaper, and you may even win a motorbike or similar in the prize draw.

Getting There & Away

The new bus terminal is 1.5km south of the center, near the Museo del Cablecarril. There are regular services to La Rioja (AR$22, three hours), and beyond to Rosario, Buenos Aires and other cities. La Riojana (☎ 424710; Maestro 61) minibuses also do the La Rioja run for AR$8 more and in half an hour less. There are no buses north to Belén; to avoid the lengthy backtrack through La Rioja and Catamarca you could take a tour to Shinkal and stay in Belén.
but torrential summer rains and gusty spring winds. The sandstone cliffs are amazing, as are the distant surrounding mountainscapes. Talampaya is adjacent to fossil-rich Parque Provincial Ischigualasto in San Juan province (p373) and it’s easy to combine the two if you have transport.

**Orientation & Information**

Talampaya is 141km southwest of Chilecito via a combination of RN 40’s scenic Cuesta de Miranda route, RP 18 and RP 26. Via RP 26, it is 58km south of Villa Unión and 58km north of Los Baldecitos, the turnoff to San Juan’s Parque Provincial Ischigualasto.

The park’s **visitor center** (☎ 470356; www.talampaya.gov.ar; 8am-6pm) is just off the RP 26; private vehicles are not allowed further into the park. Here you pay the AR$25 admission (AR$8 for Argentine citizens), and arrange guided visits to the park.

**Sights & Activities**

The focus of most visits is the spectacular Cañón de Talampaya, a usually dry watercourse bounded by sheer sandstone cliffs. Condors soar on the thermals, and guanacos, rheas and maras can be seen in the shade of the several varieties of algarrobo tree along the sandy canyon floor.

A series of enigmatic **petroglyphs** carved into oxidized sandstone slabs are the first stop on the standard 2½-hour visit (AR$65), followed by, in the canyon itself, such highlights as the Chimenea del Ecos, whose impressive echo effect is a guaranteed hit, the Catedral formation and the clerical figure of El Monje.

Longer 4½-hour excursions (AR$95) also take in the more remote gorge of Los Cajones. Other trips to sites such as Ciudad Perdida and Los Chañares can be organized inside the park. The trips are in comfortable minibuses and there’s little walking involved; nevertheless, take water and protection from the fierce sun.

Guided walks (AR$40 to AR$80) and trips on bicycles (AR$35 to AR$45) are also available; these can be more appealing if the heat’s not too intense.

**Sleeping & Eating**

There are no accommodations in the park itself, but there’s shadeless camping at the visitor center (AR$7 per person), which has decent toilets and showers. There’s also a cafe here serving meals and cold drinks.

There are simple accommodations in Pagancillo, 29km north. A further 29km up the road, larger Villa Unión has several cabin and hotel options, some of them quite stylish.

**Getting There & Away**

Buses bound from La Rioja to Pagancillo and Villa Unión will leave you at the park entrance (AR$22, 3½ hours), from where it’s only a 500m walk to the visitor center. The earliest bus leaves La Rioja at 7am, giving you plenty of time to make a day trip of it. There’s a daily bus between Villa Unión, 58km up the road, and Chilecito (AR$22, three hours) over the spectacular Miranda pass. It leaves Villa Unión at 3pm; you can make it if you cadge a lift off someone in your tour group.