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Cycling the way to see Argentina

Tour of northern provinces a trip through time, food and wine

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It's common to see dogs just about everywhere in Argentina. They are not aggressive and often just curious to see who's passing by.

It has often been said that the true enjoyment of a trip lies in meeting the locals. These encounters -- often far too brief -- allow us to absorb a foreign culture in its purest form, unyoked from the rituals of mass tourism. Nowhere is this more true than in the northern provinces of Argentina, where mules and scooters share broken roads, where subsistence living is the accepted norm, and where locals will open their hearts and homes.

Argentina's Northern provinces are a unique amalgam of cultural infusion.



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Calgary's Darren Flach rides through a swollen river near Santa Barbara. (POSTMEDIA)



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One of the many view points along the Quebrada de Cafayate in the province of Salta, Argentina. (POSTMEDIA)

With Chile to the west, Bolivia to the north, and Paraguay to the east, the region is rich in history, geography and personality. Last March I experienced Argentina's allure while perched from the seat of a well ridden, but reliable, mountain bike.

Cycling with 11 others from Canada and the U.S., initially strangers to one another, we joined together in an effort to raise funds for the Calgary-based charity Two Wheel View. Rick McFerrin, the founder of Two Wheel View, promised us a trip we wouldn't forget. He was right.

Whether travelling by bike, or navigating the winding roads of the region by car, the spellbinding effects of northern Argentina are the same.

In just a few hundred kilometres the landscape and weather of the region morphs dramatically.

We began our trip in Salta, a mid-size city dotted with magnificent churches, as is common in most of South America.

Here, on our first night, we were treated to staples of the traditional Argentine diet, including locro -- a hearty beef and corn broth with a smattering of chopped-up tripe and intestine. Putting preconceived notions about how something "might taste" behind us, we soon grew to appreciate the local fare, jokingly predicated on the simple question, "where's the beef?"

The biggest challenge of our first few days was learning how best to avoid the dogs, which are everywhere.

Habitually friendly, the stray canines of Argentina serve as a kind of frontline "welcome wagon" for the even warmer

reception you'll receive from polite restaurant owners, eager merchants and uniformed schoolchildren.

For the first few days of the trip we ride south from Salta through a series of valleys and straightaways.

Taking refuge from the midday heat we watch as young and old alike celebrate the annual Vendemina wine festival in small town squares.

Days are marked by long stretches of peddling on uneven pavement, frequent stops to photograph what seemed to be an era long passed, and waving to the constant throng of supportive car-honking passersby. Evenings are marked by roadside camping, laughter and sleep of the dead.

The locals we stay with along the way have a relationship with McFerrin that he forged on previous trips to the region. But they treat us all as family, immediately inviting us into their homes and their lives.

One day we meet Maximilliano and his adorable family. Part farmer, part construction worker, and part-time vineyard owner, Maximilliano stands proud and tall. Sporting a long ponytail, his pants tucked into calf-hugging knee-high leather boots, and a 12-inch knife tucked into his traditional Argentine white belt, he looks every bit the Marlborough Man of Latin America.

We soon come to appreciate that Maximilliano -- although a foreign specimen to us -- is very much like most of the people, women or men, we would meet in the days ahead; hard working, humble, polite, generous, extremely devoted to family, and entirely appreciative of our presence.

After several days of biking we stop for two days in the picturesque town of Cafayate. Surrounded by wineries and tucked into the foothills of the Andes, Cafayate allows for some much needed R&R before continuing south to the town of Quilmes (also the name of the region's most popular beer).

The next two days are spent biking up the mountain pass.

Temperatures drop, vegetation is sparse and windswept, and clouds linger below our path.

After a gruelling trek to the summit we are treated to the backside of the pass, where we stay in the quaint town of Tafi del Valle.

A local tourist destination, "Tafi" is replete with everything from upscale dining to tacky trinket booths.

The final days of the bike portion of the trip are spent traversing the rainforest side of the mountain range. Here the vegetation is so lush that in places no rock can be seen, and steep drops into deep ravines await us at every turn. The humidity here is so intense that eyeglasses needed constant wiping, even when it isn't raining. As one sign ominously announces at a particularly precarious hairpin turn: La Fin De Mondo. Literal translation: The End of the World!

The formal part of our trip ends in the delightful -- and far more cosmopolitan -- city of Yueba Buena, a bedroom community of the more hectic city centre of Tucuman.

The days spent here, enjoying Malbec and eating lamb, served as the perfect prelude to a stay in the world capital of Buenos Aires.

People now ask, "What did you like best about the trip?"

Six months after my return that's still a difficult question to answer. The food was spectacular, the scenery other worldly, the people intensely kind.

"All of it," I reply. "You've got to go."

-- Postmedia News

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