

A photograph of a man with a weathered face, wearing a brown cowboy hat with a white band and a red and blue patterned scarf. He is sitting on a horse, holding a rope. The background is a cloudy sky. The text "MindStormPhoto Argentina 2015" is overlaid on the left side of the image.

MindStormPhoto Argentina 2015

Burt and Evelyn Johnson

Manhattan in Buenos Aires?

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Manhattan in Buenos Aires?

Manhattan in Buenos Aires?



Tango is a popular theme of painters in Buenos Aires. We bought this painting for a wall at home.

We arrived in Buenos Aires yesterday. After a couple days of walking around, our biggest impression (and surprise) is how similar the town is to Manhattan (New York City), which we visited last November. The frequent fruit stands, outdoor seating at restaurants, and the general feel of the town is very close to East Village, or perhaps Little Italy.

While we went to NYC in November, when it was very cold, the weather here has been balmy and beautiful though. Yesterday, while the weather was warm, a strong gusty wind picked up in the afternoon, as the clouds gathered, and everyone kept saying it was going to rain all the next day. Instead, the wind passed, the clouds parted, the weather cleared up again, and today was gorgeous, if a bit humid.

Manhattan in Buenos Aires?

While we have found the city to be generally very expensive, two exceptions have been wine and cheese. We picked up a few bottles of very good assorted wines, and the most expensive bottle was \$3 US. I then ducked into a specialty grocery store, where I picked up 5 different cheeses to take back to our apartment, with the total coming to around \$8 US. Back home in Ecuador, each of those purchases have cost roughly three times as much.

We have walked our feet off these first two days here. When in Cuenca, we typically walk about 8000 steps per day (according to the trusty pedometers we always carry). As the result of a lot of exploration today -- and a couple missed turns -- we hit over 26,000 today. I must say I was glad to get home and take my shoes off tonight!

Manhattan in Buenos Aires?



The local park in Palermo was filled with vendors, art and music. The Jivers entertained with some vocal jazz I remember from "[Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks](#)"

Manhattan in Buenos Aires?



The local park, just outside of Cementario Recoleta, had 22 artists exhibiting and selling their work, much of which related to The Tango, and all of which was quite good.

Manhattan in Buenos Aires?



We visited the famous Cementario Recoleta of Buenos Aires, where monuments memorializing the wealthy and famous abounded.

Manhattan in Buenos Aires?



Where statues were not present, plaques existed on each mausoleum. Evita Peron is also buried here, with her grave being one of the least ostentatious.

Manhattan in Buenos Aires?



Today (our second day in the city) brought us to the renown Sunday San Telmo street market.

Walking and Tango in Buenos Aires

Walking and Tango in Buenos Aires



We were joined in Buenos Aires yesterday by Evelyn's sister, Pauline and her friend, Amy (upper left image above). We spent much of their first day on a [Free City Walk tour](#) of the Recoleta neighborhood of Buenos Aires, starting at Teatro Colón and ending at the well known Recoleta Cemetery. We learned fun and little known facts along the way, such as where Mr. Spock found his signature hand gesture and why the city is known as the Paris of Latin America.

Walking and Tango in Buenos Aires

One other example of a behind-the-scenes fact we heard was that the "most beautiful church" in town was built for the sole purpose of allowing the church to bestow titles upon the family that built it. The church dominated the landscape of downtown BA, but now can only be seen by going down a narrow alley. Why? Because the family that built the church refused to let their daughter marry the son of another wealthy family -- and that other family therefore created a huge office building that blocks all view of the church, and whose front face looks strangely like it is giving the middle finger to the home of the girl's family... Gotta love these Latin lover's quarrels!



We also took a separate tour of the [Teatro Colon](#). This is a renowned theater which Pavarotti considered one of the five best performance theaters in the world. It seats 2400 people, with another 300 allowed to attend standing on the 7th balcony. Unfortunately, the tour was rather expensive and very short, without very much in the way of interesting back-story provided.

Walking and Tango in Buenos Aires



What is Buenos Aires without Tango? We stopped by Salon Canning in the Palermo area and watched some students learning Tango in the afternoon, then went to a professional Tango dance show in the evening. We found Tango shows ranging from \$20 to \$150. We chose the *Passion de Tango* show at Galería Pacifico which started 7:30 PM instead of 10:00 PM, and was outstanding without the touristy nonsense and high prices. We had a wonderful dinner at La Posada around the corner before the show. The rapid steps and sensual high kicks distinguishes Argentine tango from others, and was an experience not to miss. I can't imagine having seen anything better by paying 8 times as much...

, March 18, 2015

Family, Festival, Music, Theater, Travel · Argentina

Wineries and Cooking Class

Wineries and Cooking Class



Wineries and Cooking Class



We visited three distinctive [wine regions in Mendoza area](#) - Luján de Cuyo, Uco Valley, and on last day, Maipú, during our first two days here, receiving premium VIP treatment at every stop. That magic was performed by Roman Kowenski, our driver and tour guide for Mendoza. If you ever come to Mendoza and want to be treated like royalty (without having to pay fancy prices), we recommend Roman highly. His web site is [here](#), or his [TripAdvisor page](#) (#1 out of 28). Note that the page is in Spanish, but you can paste the url into GoogleTranslate, and then read the page in English. Or contact him directly at his [email](#) (he speaks excellent English)

Wineries and Cooking Class



Most of the premium wines we tasted on this tour were good-to-excellent. Our favorite was Tierra de Dioses (Land of the Gods) at the Vines of Mendoza winery ("bodega" means winery) in Luján de Cuyo. [Bodegas Salentein](#) ("bodega" means winery) had our favorite art and architecture. To top it off, Bodega Septima had the best lunch -- excellent fixed-course meal with fine wine pairing for each course.

Roman even invited us to see his newly built home, and to meet his wife (Marta) and mother-in-law (lower right image, along with Roman). It is always an extra treat to be able to see how people live in countries that we visit, though we do not get that opportunity very often.

Salta Landscapes

Salta Landscapes



We have now completed our tour of the Salta area of Argentina, spending six days driving through both the "Northern loop" and "Southern loop." This is a large area, where we often feel we are driving through the [Painted Desert](#) of Arizona. Though we are high in the Andes, often topping 10,000 ft, this entire region was underwater in the past. The colors of the mountain cliffs are a combination of iron, copper, and fossils.



Salta Landscapes

Though we started this portion of the trip under heavy rain, it cleared by noon, and the rest of the trip involved clear blue skies. As we wound through switchbacks to get up one side of the mountain and then down the other side, each corner turned revealed more colors that were so vivid they almost did not seem real.



Salta Landscapes

One afternoon found us walking around Cafayate, when we came across a small stage being set up with scores of white plastic chairs. Reading the sign next to the stage, we saw they were about to put on "Romeo and Juliet Unplugged" -- a comedy musical based on the Shakespeare play, targeted at small school children. We decided to grab back row seats and see how this went. Though the play was cute, it didn't seem the timing was appropriate for such young children - they were mostly fidgeting and ignoring the play by the halfway point. I think it could have been a lot more successful if half the story line were removed (it went over the kid's heads anyway), and cut the length to half an hour.



Besides gorgeous scenery, the Salta area is known for high altitude wineries. Both the world's highest vineyard (where grapes are grown) and the world's highest winery (where grapes are processed into wine) are in this region. Unfortunately, we did not like the taste of most of the wines from this region. They have a much higher alcohol content than more traditional wines, which may be part of the issue. Also, we found the wineries here less than inviting in many cases. Though I am glad we came and saw it, I would not recommend Salta for a wine tour.

Salta Landscapes



One stop we were looking forward to was the [Salinas Grandes](#). This is a large salt desert covering 2,300 square miles, and I envisioned a huge expanse of salt bed. To our amazement, it was mostly underwater -- in a desert!? It turns out that it does not rain on the plain, but it had rained the prior week in the surrounding mountains, and that water runs off into the lake bed. The lake is actively mined for salt, potassium and lithium and is dry for about half the year, with up to a few inches of water the rest of the time.

Salta Landscapes

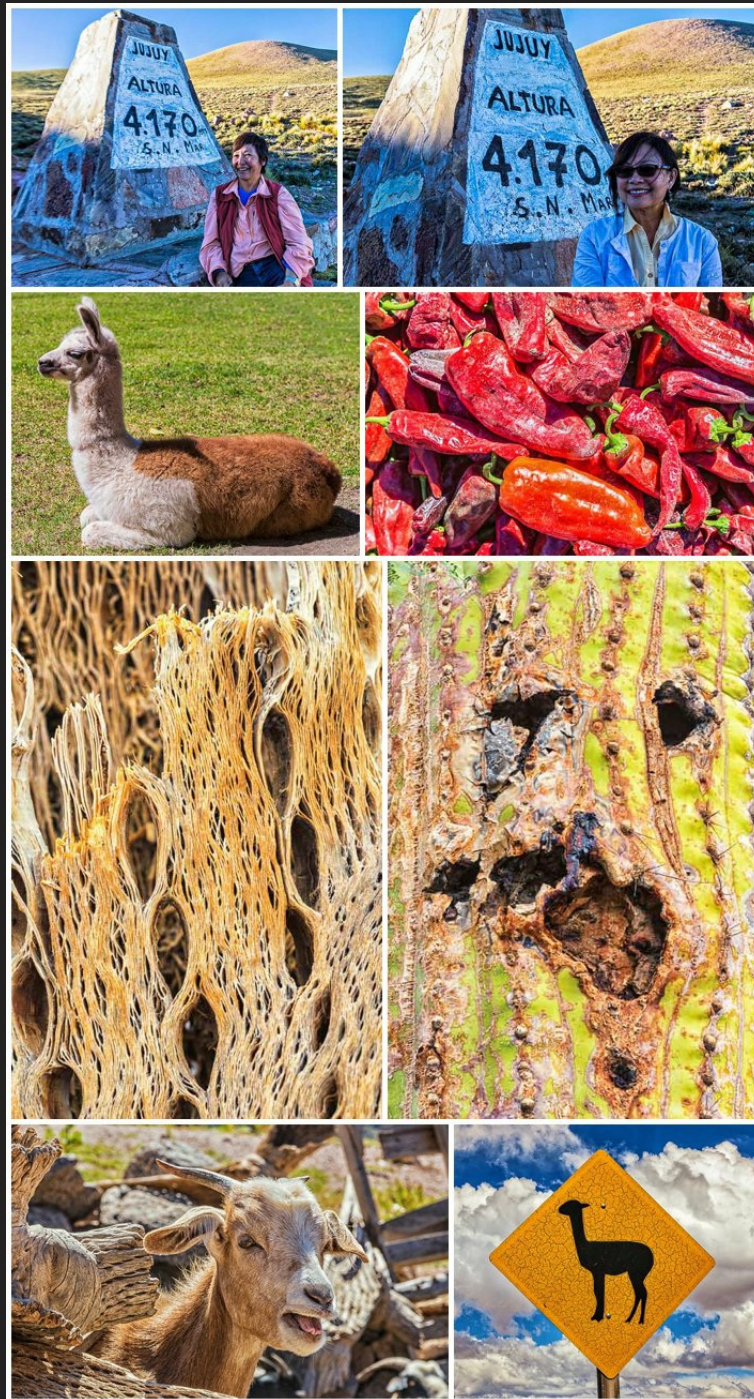


Salta Landscapes



One of most enjoyable parts of this segment of our Argentina travel was observing the local indigenous people going about their daily lives -- be it milking goats or selling hats to (mostly Argentinian) tourists.

Salta Landscapes



Poor Niagara!

Poor Niagara!



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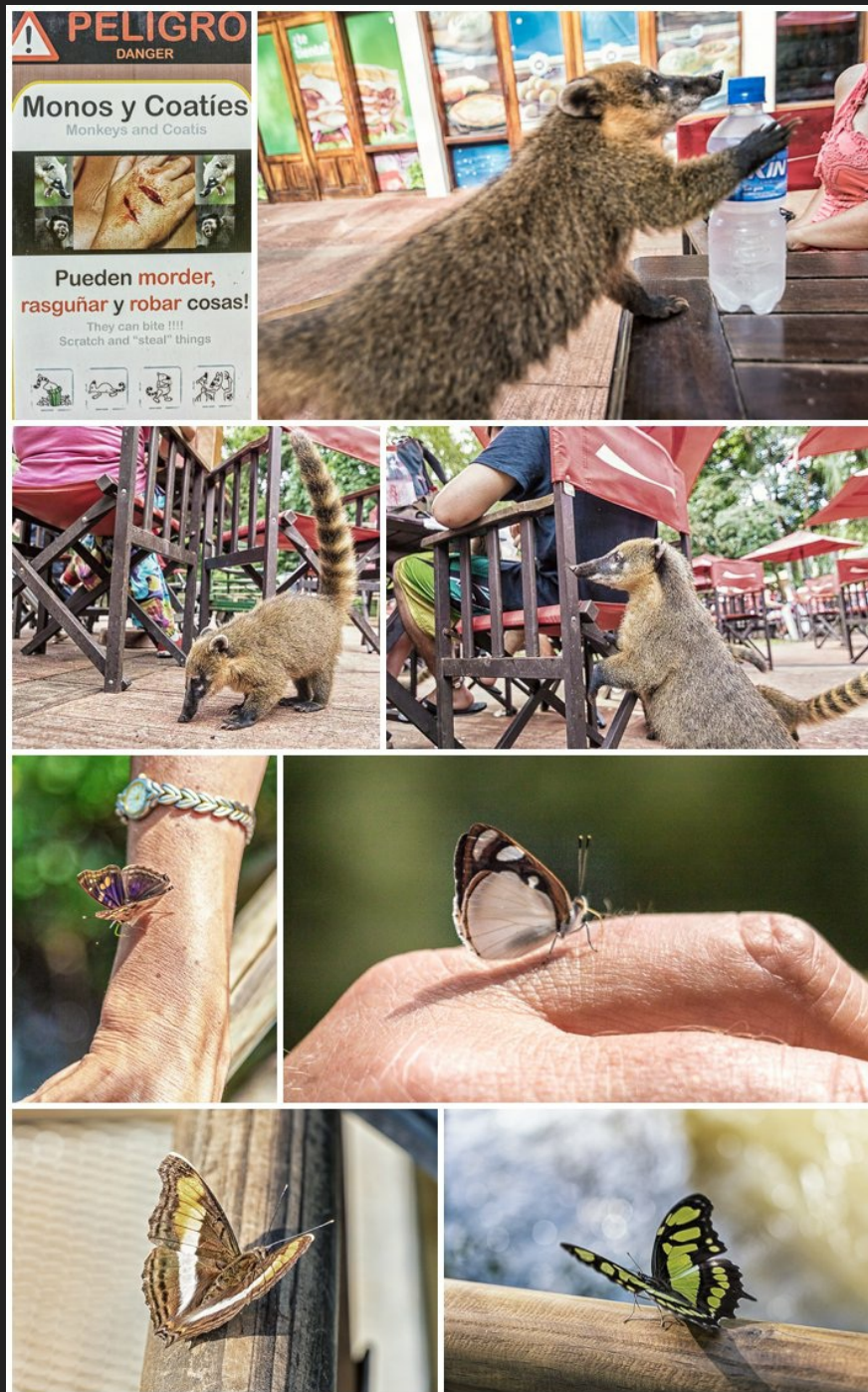
We recently completed a three day visit to the Argentina side of [Iguazu Falls](#). The falls span an area of 1.7 miles wide, and sits on the border between Brazil and Argentina. When First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt first saw the falls, she is reported to have said "***Poor Niagra!***" There are actually approximately 275 waterfalls that combine to make Iguazu Falls ("approximate" because the exact number varies with how much water is flowing).

Poor Niagara!



Though the forecast was for rain each day, we had beautiful weather, with only a few wispy clouds in the distance. The clear sky and huge volume of waterfall spray meant we saw several rainbows.

Poor Niagara!



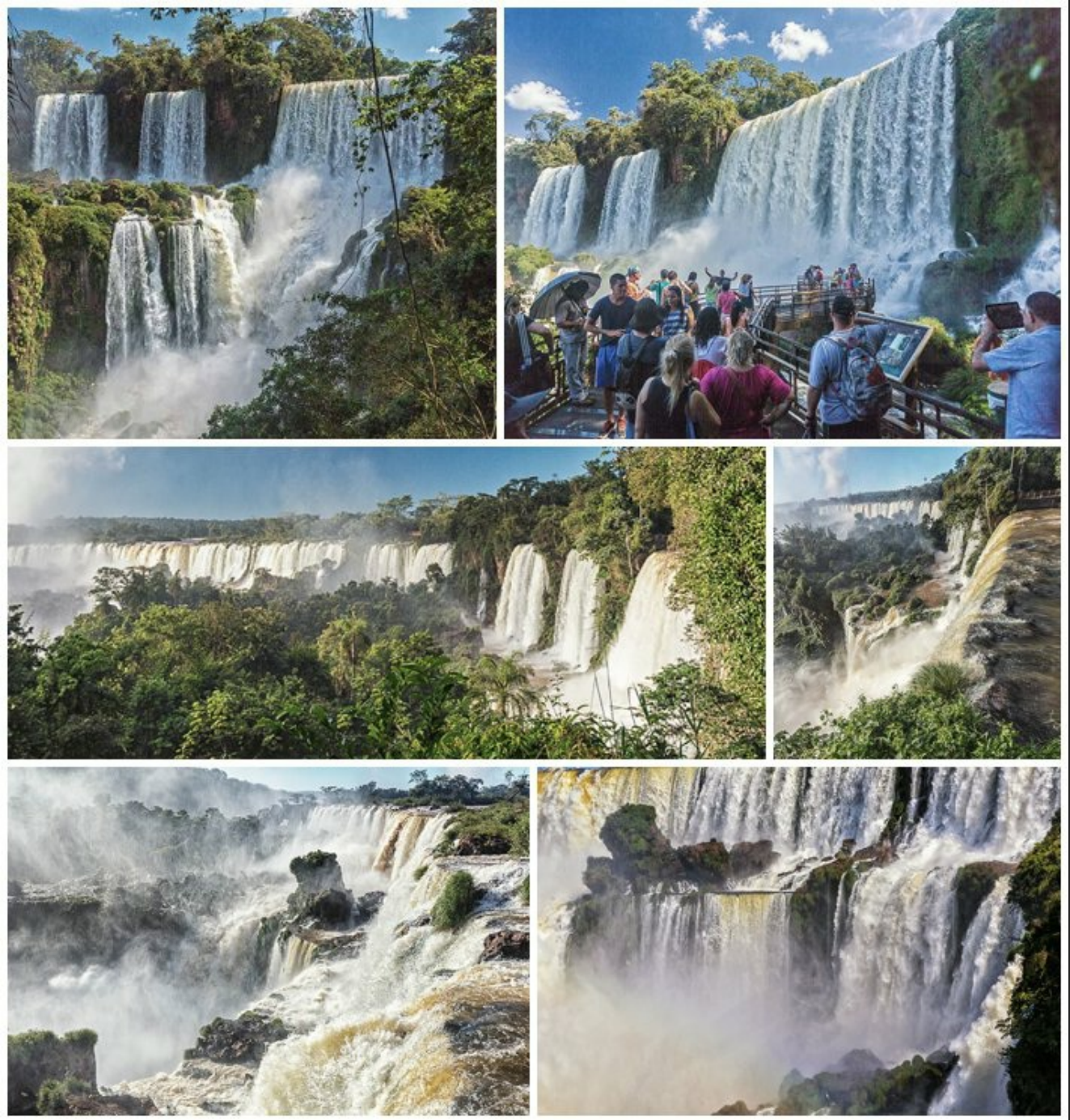
Coaties roamed all the eating areas, snatching backpacks and crawling over the tables in search of food. I saw as many as 30 covering one restaurant deck, before the security guard came after them with a nightstick, at which point they all scattered into the neighboring forest -- only to return 5 minutes later when the guard was gone.

Poor Niagara!

Even more surprising was the sheer abundance of butterflies, and their aggressiveness. I have never seen that many in one place before -- even in a butterfly farm, let alone outdoors. They often landed on people and traveled with them for a distance. That middle-right image above is from one that landed on my hand, and stayed there for more than a mile before finally deciding to fly away.



Poor Niagara!



Animals, Family, Travel · Argentina

Patricia and The Big Rat

Patricia and The Big Rat



We finished our month in Argentina with four days at the [Estancia](#) Don Joaquin (Estancia is what they call a working ranch in Argentina) in Esquina. Though fairly close to [Iguazu Falls](#), the only way we could reach it was to fly to Buenos Aires, and then take an overnight luxury sleeper bus. Though the bus was certainly spacious, with lay-flat seats, it still made for a long day (and night) to reach it. Fortunately, the ranch was worth it -- you can read my [TripAdvisor report on it here](#).

Patricia and The Big Rat



Just hours after arriving, we went out on a "truck safari" to see the animals of the area. The ride was mostly about seeing a large variety of birds and caiman. Unfortunately I did not have a suitable lens for bird photography, so I have nothing to share of them. At one place, we drove off-road by a small river, and saw the [Capybara](#) -- the largest rodent in the world, and the animal for which Evelyn's horse was named. The gregarious male adults were over 4 feet long, weighing almost 150 pounds. Though they are eaten in some parts of Argentina, this ranch owner protects them and does not allow hunting.

Patricia and The Big Rat

After a parilla lunch and a siesta, we did a sunset ride, where we kept mostly to a walk, as we remembered what it was like to be six feet off the ground on an animal that keeps wanting to eat the tall grass. At one point, we sped up to a cantor, but Burt almost lost his hat, and then quickly found that saying "whoa horsie" while pulling on the reins wasn't enough. After our riding partner (they always had one gaucho per guest rider) helped get control, Burt realized that he had forgotten to also sit back in the saddle. By continuing to lean forward, he was giving Patricia conflicting orders. Burt and Patricia came to an understanding after that, and later rides were less eventful...



Patricia and The Big Rat

This is a fully working ranch with 800 cattle and 80 horses, where guests are allowed to ride along and watch, but in which gauchos do their normal day-to-day routine. As such, if you choose "gaucho activities," what you see will vary with the needs of the day. When we did this on our second day, the gauchos were rounding up newborn calves to vaccinate and "mark" (each ranch has a specific ear cut they make to mark their cattle until the annual roundup for branding). It was amazing to see how accurate their lassos were. Even when the calf was hiding in shrubs, the gaucho captured it on their first throw every time.

Patricia and The Big Rat



Patricia and The Big Rat

There was always at least one gaucho per guest rider, so any problems controlling the horse could be quickly resolved. Angie (the center woman in the bottom-left image above) is the owner, and extremely accommodating. On our third day, we asked for some riding lessons to improve our style, and she offered to come along and provide the help herself. And, of course, what ranch would be complete without a trusty dog along? When she got bored, she would run off and chase some cattle for awhile, clearly honing her skills in helping during roundup.

Patricia and The Big Rat



Patricia and The Big Rat

This region has had a seven year drought, broken this year with heavy rains. Angie told us this was the first time she had seen standing water on the ranch in all those years. As we rode through newly deep marshes, she explained how good this was for the grass, which in turn is good for the cattle and horses. Indeed, the horses loved eating the water lilies -- a treat many had not had before in their lifetime. The weather was perfect for us, except for one night around dinner when the sky opened up, with a torrential downpour accompanied by almost constant lightning filling the sky for six hours -- after which everything cleared and we were back to gorgeous weather the next day.



Patricia and The Big Rat

Toby (above-left) is a 6 year old from England who rode with us. He had never ridden a horse before, but Angie's staff is gifted in working with children, and he was "racing us" (at a fast walk) by the third day. We spent the last afternoon on a bonus boat tour of the river (known for their dorado fishing) and sharing a cup of mate tea, which made for a relaxing way to end our trip.

Argentina Summary

Argentina Summary



Street murals found during our Argentina trip

Argentina Summary

We are now back home in Cuenca, Ecuador after traveling through Northern Argentina for the past month. The last six blog entries have covered our time in [Buenos Aires](#), [Mendoza](#), [Salta](#), [Iguazu Falls](#), and finally the [Estancia](#) Don Joaquin. I will close out the entries on this trip with some overall impressions.

Perhaps the most surprising thing for me was how expensive Argentina is to travel to. With an inflation rate of 40% per year, prices are being increased constantly. We had heard there was also strong devaluation of the peso, which we thought would counteract the inflation, keeping it inexpensive for those with US dollars. Nope. The Argentina government has put an official lid on the conversion rate, even for the "blue rate" you can get on the street. Last October, friends were able to get 15 pesos per dollar, but in March we could only get 12.5 pesos maximum (the official rate in the banks is 8.7). Thus, both the inflation *and* the conversion rate are working against us. Don't plan a trip here anytime soon unless you are willing to pay a *lot of money* for most things.

Cuenca is well known for [its street murals](#). We found them in Argentina too, particularly in Buenos Aires. However, they were more rare, and often rundown, on the sides of buildings that were cracking and had plaster falling away. Though there is certainly beauty in this country, it has a certain shabby appearance if you step off the main shopping areas.

Argentina is a really large country! When we first thought about this trip, we thought we would rent a car and explore the entire country in one month. We soon realized the distances between our main destinations was huge, and decided to fly instead. Even then, it was simply not reasonable to see the entire country in one month. We limited ourselves to the North, and I think it was about the right amount of time. We would still like to see Patagonia and the South, but that will have to be a future trip.

Argentina Summary - MindStormPhoto Blog and Gallery

[Mendoza](#) was our favorite part of Argentina that we visited. This was partly because of the excellent wineries and the pleasant countryside. It was also a monument to hiring a truly excellent guide though, who took care of everything and made sure everything worked smoothly. As I stated on the blog from that day, if you ever want to visit Mendoza, we highly recommend [Roman](#) as a guide. This also really showed the difference between a true guide and a simple driver -- the Salta experience could have been more enjoyable had our driver done the job of guide that he had been hired for.

, April 5, 2015

[Art, Travel](#) · [Argentina](#)
