



TRIP

NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS IN THE UPLANDS OF ARGENTINA – A WONDROUSLY EERIE PLACE FOR AN





OUT

OFF-ROAD ADVENTURE. BY JONATHAN BASTABLE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALISTAIR TAYLOR-YOUNG





THE CONO DE ARITA is the most mesmerising volcano you are ever likely to set eyes on. It is a perfect cone, a mini-Fuji that stands alone on a salt flat as straight and level as a becalmed sea. At first sight the shape appears petite – you’d think it was the smallest volcano in the world. But this is a trick of perspective, an illusion created by the tall mountains behind it. Get closer, and you realise it’s a good 150 metres high. And there’s another strange effect: at ground level the Arita cone appears to be the same muddy colour as the dry plain, but

if you climb the gravel dune to the west of it, everything changes. The brown ground looks ice-white from this height and angle because the sun’s rays are reflected by the salty crystals in the earth. The volcano, meanwhile, turns onyx-black. I was there at midday, and something about the quality of the light meant all I could see was its geometric shape seemingly detached from the earth, floating like a silent spacecraft above the desert floor.

The Arita stands in the middle of the puna, the Argentinian term for the vast upland plateau located in the foothills of the

IN THIS WILDERNESS OF CLAY, THE RED-BROWN EARTH IS CRACKED AND SPONGY UNDERFOOT:





Andes, in the country's far north-west. Mountainous ridges, the exposed ribs of the Western Cordillera, divide this flatland into a series of separate and startlingly different environments. So to cross the puna in a four-wheel-drive is to climb and fall, climb and fall, and to be constantly surprised by a landscape that changes before your eyes. Each new valley constitutes a new world: visually, botanically, zoologically, geologically – even texturally. One afternoon I strolled across the hard surface of a salt lake, the top-grade sodium under my boots crunching exactly like snow that had frozen overnight. An hour later,

I was in a wilderness of clay where the red-brown earth was cracked and spongy underfoot: to explore it was like walking across the surface of a slightly over-baked chocolate muffin.

And the mountains, of which there are a great many, all seemed to belong to different orogenic pedigrees. I saw the dizzying, icy peaks – Lullaillaco, Socompa, Aracar, Guanaquero, Incahuasi – that form the border with Chile. Elsewhere, I passed some small ashen tors (volcanettes, you might call them) arranged in a perfectly straight row, like the black pawns on a chessboard. Within the puna there were piebald cliff-faces ➤

IT IS LIKE WALKING ACROSS THE SURFACE OF A SLIGHTLY OVER-BAKED CHOCOLATE MUFFIN



The desert outside Tolar Grande in the puna of north-west Argentina. *Previous pages*, the Cono de Arita. *Following pages*, Ojos del Mar salt flat





THIS FLATLAND IS DIVIDED INTO STARTLINGLY DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENTS. EACH VALLEY





CONSTITUTES A NEW WORLD: VISUALLY, BOTANICALLY, GEOLOGICALLY – EVEN TEXTURALLY





► the variegated colours of ice cream in an Italian gelateria: green, pink, yellow. Occasionally, there were mountains that appeared somehow to have ended up in the wrong company: a brick-red massif conspicuously out of place in a grey-headed chain; a purple pike amid a custard-coloured col. My favourite mountains were a nameless range in a stretch of the puna called the Salar de Antofalla: the slopes were grey and rounded, and it seemed that if I could just reach up and touch them, they would be slightly furry, like the flank of a seal pup.

summoned him here. His aim – to open up the puna to visitors – seemed far-fetched at the time. ‘People told me I was crazy,’ he says. ‘They said: why would anyone go up there? It is nothing but empty desert.’

But with every year that passes, this spectacularly empty desert is drawing more visitors (usually once they have been to Buenos Aires and Patagonia). And Salta, gateway to the plateau, is an attraction in its own right. It is one of the best-preserved Spanish-colonial cities in South America. The

THERE'S NO DISCERNIBLE ROAD ACROSS THE PUNA; THE ROUTE CONSISTS OF DIRT

There's no discernible road across the puna; the route consists of dirt tracks, so you need a guide who is well acquainted with the country. Mine was Fabrizio Ghilardi, an Italian mountaineer who fell in love with this far-flung corner of Argentina 11 years ago, and came to live here with his wife Valentina. She is an architect, and she built them a stylish, rustic house just outside Salta, a city that sits in the valley below the high table top of the puna. (Finca Valentina is now a wonderful place to spend a night or two at the start or end of an expedition.) Ghilardi set up a tour company that he named Socompa after one of the Andean peaks that

whitewashed town hall on the main square, with its two-storey colonnade, was built by the conquistadors as soon as they arrived here in the 1580s. The church on the opposite side of Plaza 9 de Julio – a 19th-century mock-baroque profusion in lilac and cream – was erected after a catastrophic earthquake in 1844 destroyed its predecessor. At the heart of it is an overblown faux-rococo rocket-ship of an altar, wrought in solid gold. A block away is the more austere and attractive Church of San Francisco. Inside, there is an unusual statue of the Madonna of Sweet Hope: a visibly pregnant Virgin Mary. It is draped with offerings of knitted booties

Above, the pumice-stone fields outside El Peñon. Opposite, mountains along the road between the Cono de Arita and Salar de Antofalla





and surrounded with snapshots of babies – all ostensibly conceived as a result of prayers offered to the expectant mother of God.

The unborn Jesus in the basilica is not Salta's only sacred child. Just a few steps away, the High-Country Archaeological Museum was built to house the frozen bodies of three Inca children – a girl of six, a seven-year-old boy and a teenage girl – who were sacrificed 500 years ago on the peak of the Llullaillaco volcano, away to the west. The victims were

there is so much to be amazed by at every turn. Making the crossing this way means that you save some of the outstanding sights until the last day, when you reach El Peñon, just inside the plateau's southern fringe. This village is a short drive from the eerie pumice-stone field, which looks like the bitter ruins of Sodom; and from a magical, restless dune of white sand, like a mountain suddenly come alive. When you are inside the puna you stay at *hosterías municipales*, state-owned guesthouses. They are cheerful and comfortable, unfussy

TRACKS, SO YOU WILL NEED A GUIDE WHO IS WELL ACQUAINTED WITH THE COUNTRY

lowered into a pit, along with all sorts of ritual and domestic objects, and abandoned there as a gift to the Incas' greedy gods. The children would have died of exposure in the course of a single night. But the dry cold that killed them also preserved them, more or less in perpetuity. In 1999, the bodies were excavated and brought to Salta, causing controversy and protest.

I caught sight of the far-off frosted topknot of Llullaillaco, where the sacrificial children were found, at the end of my first day inside the puna. Going the whole way across the plateau from north to south involves long, bumpy days in the car. It can be tiring, but that is partly because it is constantly exhilarating:

in the nicest possible way. Everyone eats the same meal in the evening: *tallarines* (thick Argentinian spaghetti) with a slice of beef, or barbecued goat with Russian salad. The electricity goes off during the hours of darkness, but you won't notice because you will be deadbeat and blissfully asleep. The *hostería* at El Peñon is better than most, because it is managed by the Ghilardis. The decor has a touch of Finca Valentina about it, or rather of Valentina's finely tuned design sense. Miuccia Prada, when she passed this way in spring last year, found it charming and bought some of the colourful local textiles at the village shop in nearby Antofagasta. ➤

Following pages, the barren, russet-coloured mountains outside Tolar Grande, an area known as the Desierto del Laberinto (the Labyrinth Desert)





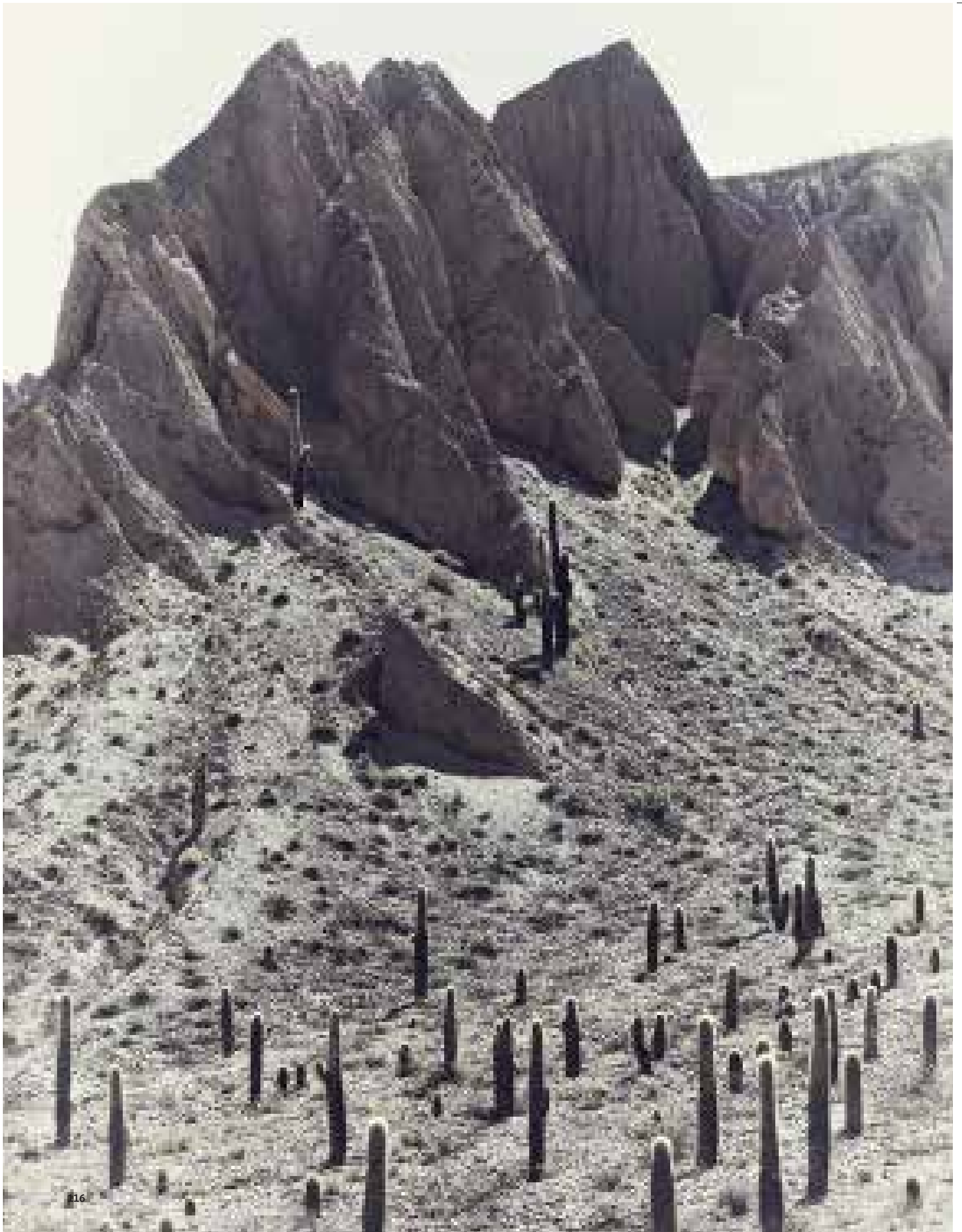
IT SEEMED THAT IF I COULD JUST REACH UP AND TOUCH THE ROUNDED SLOPES OF THE





NAMELESS RANGE, THEY WOULD BE SLIGHTLY FURRY, LIKE THE FLANK OF A SEAL PUP









➤ Ms Prada missed out on the amazing Grace Cafayate, because the hotel opened at the end of 2013. A five-hour drive from the edge of the puna, it makes for an extremely pleasurable homecoming when you arrive, dusty and road-weary, after three days in the parched highlands. This is wine country, and the ranch-like main building is set in the middle of an apparently infinite acreage of new vines, all of them heavy-laden with Malbec and Torrontés, the two emblematic Argentinian grapes. The Grace is an outdoorsy hotel in

make the desert tracks so rough and rutted. ‘I’d happily kill them all if I could catch them,’ Ghilardi had told me.

On our last day in the desert we had passed through the Vega Colorada, an incongruous green water-meadow at the lowest point of a desiccated gorge. This oasis was riddled with becks and gullies that ran deep through the meadow, dividing it into a jigsaw of islets. It was populated by a great many birds: puna teals, cinnamon-coloured ground tyrants, Andean geese. But the lords of this lush kingdom were the vicuña, nervous

AFTER DAYS IN THE PARCHED HIGHLANDS, WINE COUNTRY IS A PLEASUREABLE HOMECOMING

an outdoorsy country, so you should be inspired to go horse-riding in the spectacular puna uplands.

The wildlife up there is almost as diverse as the landscape. I saw Andean foxes, small, slim and lithe as Siamese cats; chinchilla scurrying over rocks like fuzzy geckos; great flocks of barranquero parrots glorying in their blue-green dragonfly plumage. I spotted flamingos half-asleep on a broad lagoon, where they arranged themselves in long queues as if waiting at the locked doors of some invisible shop. I failed to see any *ocultos*, but I was very much aware of these little rat-like creatures because their subterranean tunnels and burrows

deer-like creatures that grazed in little knots all over the grassland. A few individuals gathered on the steep slope that formed the vega’s back wall. Standing sideways, clinging to the hillside, they look like decorations hanging from the branches of a Christmas tree. The verdant meadow was stunning, because for most of the day we had been trundling across a rocky steppeland devoid of any life at all. And oddity upon oddity, the vega ended as suddenly as it started: its far edge was as neat and clean-cut as the verge of an English lawn. I was getting used to the quick costume changes of the landscape by now, but even so, there was nothing for it but to stop and stare. 📍

Above, a sand dune near the pumice-stone field. Previous pages, from left: the Quebrado del Toro landscape; a cactus on the Camino de los Colorados





HOW TO EXPLORE THE PUNA

The puna crossing takes three or four days, depending on how much car-time you want, and involves setting off from Salta, driving up onto the plateau, then heading south through the desert. If the full expedition seems too gruelling, base yourself in Salta and take day excursions into the northern desert. Or go south and stay in El Peñon, from where you can reach the white dune, the pumice field and Laguna Grande with its roosting flamingos.

WHERE TO STAY

Finca Valentina, just outside Salta, is chic and homey, with antique objects such as stirrups on the mantelpiece and a scarred carpenter's bench on which breakfast is served. There is a tasty set dinner every evening: green soup followed by pork with polenta cake. www.finca-valentina.com.ar; doubles from about £90
If you would rather be in the city, **Kkala** is a colourful boutique hotel a short taxi ride from the centre. The lone suite is the best room. It is on two levels and has a little balcony. www.hotelkkala.com.ar; doubles from about £140

Grace Cafayate is a destination hotel in this up-and-coming region. The suites, in the main building, are magnificent, and there are 20 villas – good for families – a few steps away. The bar is stocked with every worthwhile wine between here and Tierra del Fuego. www.gracehotels.com; doubles from £234, including breakfast

It is a five-hour drive from Cafayate to El Peñon. If you plan to explore the vineyards along the way, a good place to spend the night is **Hacienda de Molinos**. Formerly the mansion of a Spanish governor, it has a pretty courtyard with a huge pepperberry tree. www.haciendademolinos.com.ar; doubles from about £55

WHERE TO EAT

Raul's asado, in Santa María just south of Cafayate, serves wonderful Argentinian barbecue, eaten under a tree: steak, ripe tomatoes, bread and a roughish bottle of red wine. *Book through Socompa (+54 387 431 5974); about £35 for two*
In **Muse by Jonathan Cartwright** at the Grace Cafayate the food is modern-European, with local ingredients in dishes such as goat's cheese with wild peach, and llama carpaccio. *About £40 for two*

El Terruño (+54 386 842 2460; about £15 for two) is the best restaurant on Cafayate's main square. Keep it simple – beer and empanadas – then walk to **Heladería Miranda** (*Avenida General Güemes*) for wine-flavoured ice cream.

WHAT TO DO

See mind-bending art at the James Turrell Museum in Salta's Bodega Colomé. Turrell's medium is sunlight, and each room has a piece of luminous trickery. www.bodegacolome.com
Learn how to make empanadas on a cookery course at Bodega Piatelli in Cafayate. www.spanish.piattellivineyards.com

GETTING THERE

The writer's trip was arranged by Miraviva (+44 20 7186 1111; www.miravivatravel.com) and organised on the ground by Socompa (www.socompa.com). Miraviva offers 11 nights from £3,775 per person, including one night in Salta, one night in Purmamarca, four nights in the puna, two nights at Grace Cafayate, one night in Buenos Aires, flights, transfers and guides. British Airways (www.ba.com) flies from London to Buenos Aires

Above, an epic sky over the mountains between Tolar Grande and the Labyrinth Desert

