



THE ROAD

RUTA 40
 From Cueva de las Manos to the Perito Merino Glacier and from a Welsh tea house to the bolt-hole of Butch Cassidy, Argentina's Route 40 is wild and welcoming



goes ever on

Argentina's *Ruta 40* is one of the world's most arduous but, also, most austere beautiful stretches of road as the adventurous at heart will discover



The mammoth Perito Merino Glacier spilling into Lago Argentino



An Estancia off Ruta 40



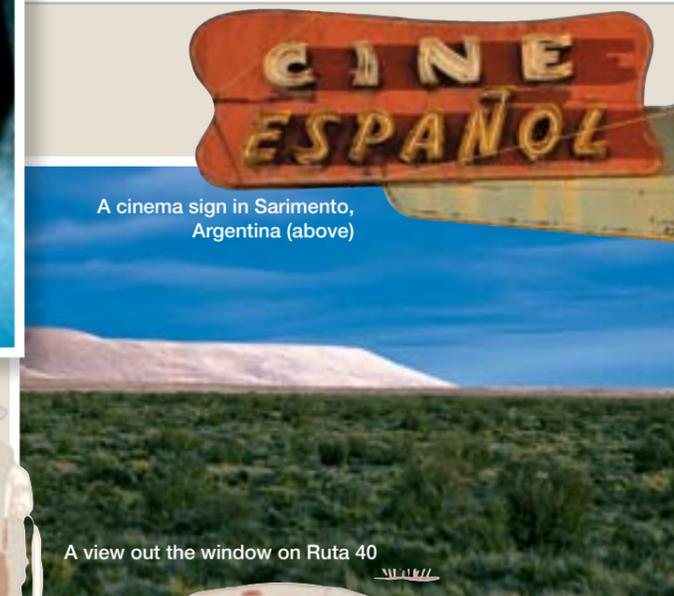
Outside the Butch Cassidy ranch in Cholila



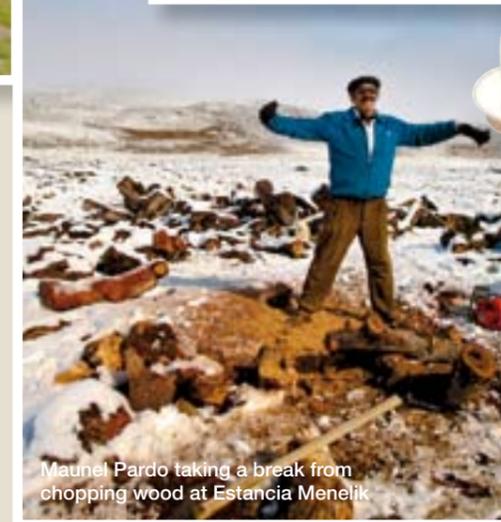
Cave of the Hands (Cueva de las Manos)



Gaicho Manuel Pardo (Don Manuel) at Estancia Menelik



A cinema sign in Sarimento, Argentina (above)



Maunel Pardo taking a break from chopping wood at Estancia Menelik



A view out the window on Ruta 40



“Luxury here is a dependable 4x4 and plenty of

clearance. Plan on ... the ride of your life”

This is not a drive for the faint of heart or the short on time. The spiritual, wild-eyed cousin to Route 66, **Patagonian Argentina's Ruta 40** is a Mad Max-style dirt road to nowhere, skirting the Andes, connecting only north and south, with rib-like smaller roads reaching out to the major stopping points along the way. Here, luxury travel is a dependable 4X4 with plenty of clearance. Plan on dings in the windshield and the ride of your life.

The hit list is diverse: **Cueva de las Manos**, the mammoth **Perito Merino Glacier** which calves building-sized chunks of ice into Lago Argentino, some of the world's best hiking, fly fishing and outdoor activities. Even driving to parts of Patagonian Chile like Torres del Paine National Park with craggy granite peaks that reach 3000m, requires passing through Argentina; two countries share one road toward the end of the world.

Get it while you can. Progress is coming in the form of asphalt. The paving of Route 40 in Patagonia is a political promise supported by former President Nestor Kirchner along with current president, Cristina Fernandez, Kirchner's wife. For now, however, Ruta 40 remains wild.

In northern Patagonia, Trevelin is one of a handful of far-flung Welsh settlements colonized here in the late 1800s. Hardship was commonplace, but settlers met for tea and tarts as a way to maintain their heritage. Today, Welsh tea houses are a Patagonian tradition.

We stop at the **Nain Maggie tea house** for an afternoon tea, accompanied by a meal's worth of homemade breads, scones, tarts and cakes such as the dark torta negra.

"We have no machines in the kitchen," says Nain Maggie owner, Lucy Underwood, descendant of some of the town's founders. Save a stove, the kitchen where she works with her son and daughter is absent of signs of the industrial age. The closest thing to a measuring cup is a Tupperware mug used to scoop flour. Mixing is done with wooden spoons and the kneading by hand – no small feat considering the number of locals and tourists who come through every afternoon. "The apple tart is apple, sugar, flour and eggs. The cream tart has cream and a little sugar. It's simple," she says. "This is the way my family ate." If ever a weary traveller needs a taste of home, Underwood's tarts are direct links to grandma's kitchen table.

Heading south, the road dissolves into the nothingness of the steppe – no buildings, no lights, no other cars. For hours upon hours, it is just you and the ñandús (the ostrich-like rhea), deer-like guanacos and the occasional armadillo, all framed with tufts of grass, mountains and mesas, stars and sunsets.

Cholila is nothing on the map, and after years of fast horses, robberies and life on the run, this was a big part of the draw for **Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid**, who holed up here in the

early 1900s, looking to put hold-ups in their past and earn an honest living as ranchers. Their cabin is far from everything and even current-day fugitives would be wise to hide here.

Caretaker **Daniel Sepúlveda**, who, though not "grogged out of his mind," as *In Patagonia* writer Bruce Chatwin described his father, is still off-kilter, like he's been riled from a nap.

He meets us at the gate, now ironically adjacent to the Cholila police station, and drives the short distance to the cabin while we follow on foot.

Showing us through the slightly-refurbished cabin, he suddenly jerks one of the wooden window blinds open and, eyes wide, pokes his gun-shaped fingers out of the window, Sundance-style, as he apparently mows down some Argentine police or bounty hunters.

Perhaps he's honing the presentation for a tour group of the future, but I lose interest, sacrifice my partner to him and wander off to snap photos and contemplate what life was really like here.

This isolation and unforgiving terrain has spawned a big list of standard supplies for a trip down **La Cuarenta** that include two full-sized, easily-accessed spare tires, camping supplies, extra food, fuel and oil.

Equipped with all of the above, we still learn the wisdom of preparedness in short order. Thick snowflakes begin falling seventy kilometres into the access road toward **Perito Moreno National Park**, famous for pristine steppe, glacial peaks, surreal blue lakes and a guanaco population that wildly outnumbers the visitors. (A scant 1,200 people visit each year and in early spring, we are the first in weeks to sign the guest book.) Our planned lodging – **Estancia Menelik** – one of thousands of lonely ranches that populate Patagonia, is still closed for the season. Caretaker Manuel Pardo, known as **Don Manuel**, generously invites us in for a maté.

Sitting quietly as the snow falls, we talk and sip the herbal drink from a gourd for two hours. Time and conversation flow, contract and flow again.

Coming from the world of industrialized food and wanting to know more about what makes Argentine beef so famous, I ask what a cow's life is like here and Don Manuel clearly doesn't understand. Finally, he gestures toward the window and the 10,000 lonely hectares that belong to the ranch. "That's their life," he says.

We emerge to discover I've left the truck lights on and Don Manuel brushes a few inches of fresh snow from the hood of his truck to give us a jump. ▶



A Ruta 40 road sign outside the town of Bariloche



A roadside 'devotional' to Gaucho Gil, an unofficial Argentine saint



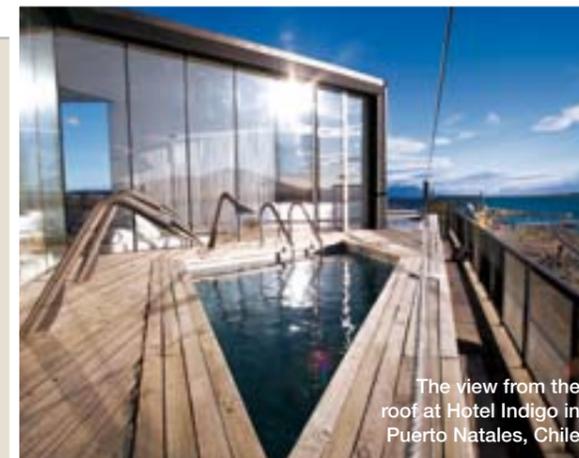
A view from the petrified forest in Sarimento



Tending to the lamb at the Don Pinchon parrilla in El Calafate



Lamb chops at the Don Pinchon parrilla in El Calafate



The view from the roof at Hotel Indigo in Puerto Natales, Chile



“By now, the inconvenience of driving La Cuarenta have become the charms”

We ask about the road.

“You’ve got four-wheel drive, right?”

“No.”

“Ah. Well, that’s ok. You’ve got chains, right?”

“No.”

“Ah.”

Before we realise we’re stuck, he offers a place to stay.

Don Manuel is one of the last of a slowly-dying breed. Argentina’s version of the American cowboy, gauchos tend to be solitary men whose understanding of the land and its animals comes from a lifetime of experience. There are traces of cowboy attitude, but gauchos are gentlemen ranchers, first and foremost.

By now, the inconveniences of driving **La Cuarenta** have become the charms. Separated by a lot of time on rough road known as ripio as the only practical means of getting around, each leg is a voyage into a vanishing point, each destination an island where function and beauty worked themselves out decades or eons ago. Though Chatwin’s approach to *In Patagonia* might strike the reader as a cubist-style set of unrelated vignettes, there’s a reason: that’s what it’s like here.

Not far from a ghost town, tumbleweeds cross main street

undisturbed at high noon in **Gobernador Costa**, population 2000. We wonder what it must be like to grow up so far away from everything, in these strangely nuclear places in the middle of all this space.

We picnic on the merry-go-round in an empty playground and a shy kid comes to play on the ailing swing set. We say hello and ask his name – Elias – before returning to our eating and swinging. His eyes rarely leave us. Ten minutes later, he holds his hand in the air and lobs a pair of tiny rectangles our way – Bazooka bubble gum. He edges closer, hopping atop a slide, staring, smiling – a quiet, playful curiosity for the outsider. Later, sensing our departure, he beckons us around the corner. “That’s my house!” he says, pointing. “You can come and visit me!” We pack up and Elias reappears with an old Kodak 110 camera to take our picture. Memory captured.

Later, we visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site, **Cueva de las Manos**, named for the hundreds of hands painted on the walls 10,000 years ago by nomadic hunters who congregated here. A guide walks us through, explaining the art that also shows how hunters surrounded and killed guanacos and ñandús, but equally inspiring is having this place to ourselves. Except for the most popular sites, similar solitude is found in almost every national park we visit along the way.

For those seeking this disconnect, a paved Ruta 40 is a nightmare that risks drying up towns like **Gobernador Costa** and their quirky experiences, or turning them into awkward hubs focused on moving tour buses to the next Cave of the Hands-style monument. On the coast, Ruta 3 lurks like 40’s evil twin and a

grim glimpse of the future – a 3,104km paved stretch between Ushuaia and Buenos Aires, populated by antique, fume-belching 18-wheelers and long lines of cars, dying to pass.

Though there are still hundreds of unpaved miles north and south of El Chaltén, a big stretch of new pavement links it with the town of **El Calafate** and the **Perito Moreno Glacier**. Thrown together in 1985 during a border dispute with Chile, **El Chaltén** feels like a cross between a military base and a burgeoning tourist draw.

Though resident **Paulo Gallego**, a guide who specialises in bringing hikers into the nearby **Los Glaciares National Park**, profits from increased accessibility brought by Ruta 40, he’s at odds with the rapid expansion it brings. “There’s an amazing quality of life here, but the growth gets to be a disaster. It’s no good for us and no good for the tourists,” he says. “Nothing is planned. All the streets are broken and when they fix the streets, they break the gas lines!”

In early spring, the town sits deep in mud. Considering the town’s year-round population of 600, there’s an amazing amount of hotel and restaurant construction. Even a visitor could detect a whiff of chaos in the air. “Without pavement, it makes it so only the people who really want to get here come,” adds Gallego. “When you pave Route 40, you lose the essentials.”

Ahead is the slog north on Ruta 3. It will take a couple days to cover the same amount of ground we drove in a few weeks. The miles will seem unearned. Already, I miss the rumble of the dirt road and the slowing of time. *Joe Ray*

PHOTOS JOE RAY, ILLUSTRATION NICOLA SCHALLER

WHO TO CONTACT AND WHERE TO GO

LODGING

Helsingfors Estancia

Sitting equidistant between El Chalten and El Calafate, Helsingfors offers luxury accommodation on the Lago Viedma inside the Los Glaciares National Park. Horseback and foot expeditions head out regularly, as does a trip to the Viedma Glacier via Zodiac. www.helsingfors.com.ar info@helsingfors.com.ar Buenos Aires office: Av. Córdoba 827, piso 11, depto. “A” C1054AAH – Buenos Aires

Los Notros

Situated in the Los Glaciares National Park, the address given on their web site simply reads, ‘Facing the Perito Moreno Glacier.’ Here, ‘the glacier’ spills into the Lago Argentino, all framed by the picture windows in every room. www.losnotros.com info@experiencepatagonia.com

Hotel Indigo

In Chilean Patagonia, Puerto Natales is the launch point of the Torres del Paine National Park and luxurious Indigo was conceived as a place to begin or end several days of intense hiking. www.indigopatagonia.com/uk/ info@indigopatagonia.com Ladrilleros 105 Puerto Natales, Chile

EXPLORING

Hielo & Aventura

This well-respected guide service based in El Calafate offers a “Big Ice” journey (and small-group) journey atop the Perito Moreno

Glaciar.

www.hieloyaventura.com info@hieloyaventura.com Av. Libertador 935 El Calafate

FLY FISHING

Guide Alejandro Leutgeb runs an exclusive fishing operation out of the northern Patagonia gateway town of Bariloche. Floating down the Limay and Manso rivers in the Nahuel Huapi National Park, fly fisherman chase several species of trout, landlocked salmon and native perch. riderothestorm_2001@yahoo.com.ar

DINING

La Tablita

Wildly popular and for good reason, El Calafate’s La Tablita is one of the best parrillas (steakhouses) along Ruta 40. Reserve ahead or wait in the queue. For a more modern twist on the art of grilling, try Don Pinchon, just up the hill. www.interpatagonia.com/latablita latablita@cotecal.com.ar Coronel Rosales 28 El Calafate

Kaupé

If you’ve come to the end of La Cuarenta, you may well want to continue to the city at the end of the world and have a meal at one of Argentina’s very best restaurants. Overlooking the Beagle Channel, chef Ernesto Vivian serves local seafood, including several variations of his speciality – king crab. www.kaupe.com.ar Roca 470