

Chapelco, a new Jack Nicklaus design in the Andes.



Golf to a Latin beat

Argentina is a new golfing destination, becoming increasingly attractive for South Africans, but with most of the top courses in the city of Buenos Aires, your golf trip must be carefully planned.

By Stuart McLean & Barry Havenga

South Africans have been finding new golf destinations in the Far East – Thailand and Malaysia in particular – to supplement traditional venues such as Scotland and Ireland, but another part of the globe that’s opening up for us as somewhere distinctly different is Argentina.

This remarkably diverse South American

country is relatively close to us, has a similar climate, the airfare is reasonable, the rand offers exceptional value, Buenos Aires is a large European-type city with great shopping, and it comes with a strong golfing tradition and history that goes back more than a century. Okay, it’s a Spanish-speaking nation, where English isn’t wide-

ly spoken, but why hasn’t Argentina made more of an impact on us as a place to regularly go and play golf?

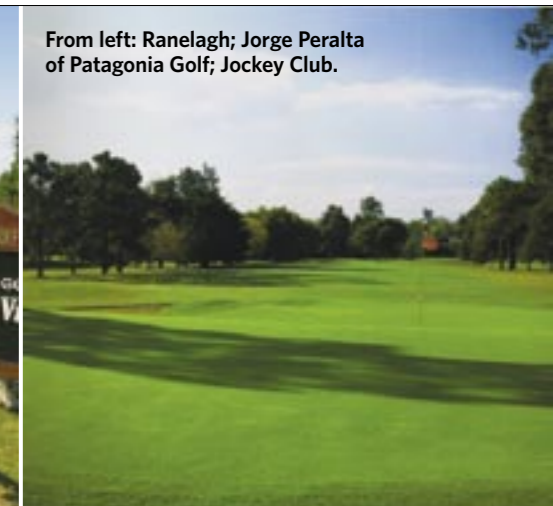
Last year we noticed that Argentina had three courses among the 100 best in the world outside the United States, which is as many as Thailand, Malaysia and Dubai grouped together, and decided to venture



PHOTOS COURTESY CHAPELCO, PATAGONIA GOLF



The course at Llao Llao, overlooked by the hotel.



From left: Ranelagh; Jorge Peralta of Patagonia Golf; Jockey Club.

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out west ourselves to find out more about golf in this fascinating country of hugely contrasting scenery and natural wonders. Argentina is more than double the size of South Africa.

Before leaving, however, we did our homework, and sensibly found ourselves a guide who could introduce us to the game as first-time visitors, because Argentina's golfing culture is very different from the one we know here. It's a game enjoyed by its wealthiest citizens, and doesn't have the mass exposure we take for granted here.

One of the compelling attractions for golfing tourists coming to South Africa is the relative ease of access to courses, a wide choice of them, and plenty of information about how to package a golf holiday, but over there it's nothing like that.

It's all very well pitching up unprepared in Buenos Aires for a week's holiday of shopping and sightseeing, because as a tourist you'll quickly find your feet. Not so easy if you're hoping to play golf at the top courses, most of which are in this sprawling metropolis of some 12 million people.

Golf in Argentina is something of a paradox. It's a country where the game was established 100 years ago by the British, a country which we're told

has some 240 courses, has produced some of the world's outstanding professionals, yet as recently as five years ago it was named the Undiscovered Golf Destination of the Year.

That award leads us to assume that outsiders never went there, and tells us how low a profile the game has maintained through much of the 20th century. Argentina never projected itself as a golfing destination, and even today it still pretty well does not do so. For a start, there are no golf resorts at all, nothing comparable to a Fancourt or Sun City. The only "golf resort" we saw was in neighbouring Uruguay, where only two other people played golf on the same day as us.

It's the absence of resort-type courses that makes Argentina different from many of today's popular golf destinations, although there are some modern courses which promote the golf-cart culture.

When we visited last October, in spring, the courses were quiet, and we were able to play even on weekends, when members were out and about. We found the golf clubs not geared for tourists at all, not to say we weren't welcome. The game in Argentina is more exclusive than we imagined, much like Europe two or three decades ago, before

the game exploded in popularity.

What we encountered during from our travels were some enchanting courses, spectacular green designs of a variety that you do not see in South Africa, excellent conditioning, top-class caddies and a smart pace of play that you don't find at busier golf destinations.

But we also came to realise that golf wasn't as cheap as many other things in Argentina, where you pay R40 for a sizzling slab of steak in a city restaurant, and getting around to courses, especially in a vast, high-rise city like Buenos Aires, is no simple task. Green fees generally were about on a par with those at Cape Town golf clubs, and the best BA courses were as good, if not better, as anything in the Cape. Renting your own car and driving to them would require driving and navigational skills on a par with being in the World Rally Championship, and while taxis are plentiful and cheap, they are not the ideal answer. Instead, we relied on our guide, Jorge Peralta, of Patagonia

Golf, not only to take us to the golf courses we wanted to play, but also gain access and tee times at golf clubs where very little English is spoken. He played an invaluable part in making our experience an enjoyable one.

While most of our time was spent in Buenos Aires, because we wanted specifically to play the older, historic layouts, our golfing trip started in Patagonia, close to the mighty Andes mountains, where we were among the first foreign golfers to play a dazzling new Jack Nicklaus course, the first in South America, which was the best layout we played on the entire visit. And this design was done by the Golden Bear in partnership with eldest son Jack II. Called Chapelco, it's bound to become Argentina's future No 1, being set among rugged, inspiring scenery in the back of beyond.

In Buenos Aires itself we had the privilege of playing the famous Jockey Club, which has two courses designed by one of the world's greatest course architects, Alister Mackenzie, of Augusta





Wild grasses convey a rugged natural look at Chapelco.



Barry Havenga on the 12th tee.

BY THE NUMBERS

- 142** - Buenos Aires' ranking (out of 144) of the world's most expensive cities.
- 4** - BA's ranking in a list of the world's noisiest cities.
- 240** - golf courses in Argentina, of which three are in Golf Digest's Top 100 outside the United States.
- 60** - kilograms of meat consumed per year per capita in Argentina.
- 4** - average number of songs in a tanda (tango set).
- 6** - number of Argentine presidents since the 2001 economic crisis.
- 2** - World Cup football trophies, 1978 and 1986. Runners-up in 1930 and 1990. (Source: Time Out Buenos Aires)

National and Cypress Point fame. The Jockey's Red course, which hosted two of the earlier World Cups, in 1962 and 1970, features some of the most dramatic greens in the game. Here in South Africa, our golfing forebears gave us flat greens. Mackenzie introduced sensational slopes and elevations to his greens complexes when he went to South America 75 years ago, and as a result his style of design was copied by locals. Undulating, raised greens are a feature at many older courses.

Buenos Aires has two major airports,

one on the city outskirts which handles only international flights, and another internal airport right in the heart of the city, a stone's throw from the mighty Rio de la Plata, the river which divides Argentina and Uruguay. The river crossing here takes an hour on the fast Buquebus.

We flew for two hours from BA to Bariloche, a resort in the heart of the Lake District, surrounded by snow-capped hills and peaks in October. We went from a warm climate to a chilly one. Most golf tour operators in Argentina send their clients to

the spectacular Llao Llao (pronounced chow-chow) hotel about 25km along the lake shore from Bariloche, because it happens to have an 18-hole course, not a particularly good one, but reasonable, and what a setting! Llao Llao is an idyllic and romantic getaway for golfing couples, and the hotel, built in 1940, has immense character with its wooden construction.

The greens on the golf course were being redone when we were there, and the upgrade will be welcome. It's a shortish layout (5 355 metres), and some holes were

The game of GolfCross

One of the more peculiar derivations of golf is GolfCross, invented by a Kiwi called Burton Silver in 1989, but only launched in 2001 after much experimentation, and now slowly being set up at a few golf courses around the world (see www.golfcross.com). We spotted our first GolfCross course at Llao Llao Hotel & Resort in Patagonia, it having been opened in September 2005. In the game, you use an oval-shaped golf ball, specially designed and moulded by the Penfold company in Britain, and which we're told can do remarkable things. You place it on the tee or fairway like you would a rugby ball, so it can be positioned upright or torpedo-style. The game has the same rules as golf and you use the same clubs, except you won't need your putter. Instead of playing for a hole in a green, your target is a goal suspended in mid-air. The game might have more appeal in colder climates, because you can play it on a snow-covered course, using a red ball.

plain, but the back nine was special alongside the lake and through a forest. The birdlife on the course was extraordinary. At that time of the year we had to wrap ourselves warmly on the course. A charming cottage served as the clubhouse.

We took a bus from there in a scenic drive through the Andes – this is close to the border with Chile, and you can take a boat through the Lake District to that neighbouring country – to the town of San Martin de los Andes, part of an area which offers a wide selection of adventure sports, from skiing to whiteriver rafting, and this is where Chapelco is situated, about 10km outside the town, close to the airport which has direct flights to BA.

The course is part of what will become a 225-hectare golf resort and estate, with a fly-fishing river on its boundary, but when we were there it was like being in a mountainous wilderness, with limited development as the course had only just been opened. The photographs convey the magic of the place. It was like being on the set of a western movie. Nicklaus used the sloping terrain to create a very natural looking course, with considerable width to the fair-



Above and right: Ten Rivers & Ten Lakes lodge at San Martin de los Andes, and its view. Below: Thirsty! Enjoying a litre-bottle of Quilmes after a round.



THE TOP 10 COURSES

(as ranked by Golf Digest Argentina)

1. Buenos Aires GC
2. Olivos GC, Buenos Aires
3. Jockey Club, Buenos Aires
4. Mar del Plata GC
5. Martindale GC, Buenos Aires
6. Highland Park CC, Buenos Aires
7. Cordoba GC
8. Ranelagh GC, Buenos Aires
9. Las Praderas de Lujan, Buenos Aires
10. San Andres GC, Buenos Aires

ways, making for especially user-friendly golf, although off the back tees it's 6 550 metres. Water hazards, streams and bunkers contributed to the challenge. We spent two days at Chapelco, travelling out by taxi from our mountain retreat at San Martin, and couldn't get enough of the course or the crisp mountain air. The temperature tended to fall quickly as the sun dipped.

We preferred San Martin as a town to Bariloche. Also touristy, but quiet in October, its restaurants and pubs had a warm glow to them. We stayed at Ten Rivers & Ten Lakes, a remote lodge high above the town, looking straight down the lake between steep mountains. It was a stunning piece of paradise.

We played five courses in Buenos Aires – Jockey, Olivos, Pilar, Ranelagh and San Andres – and somehow missed the country's No 1 ranked layout, Buenos Aires GC,

ARRIVE IN ARGENTINA

Currency: Argentina Peso (1 Peso = R2).

Time: GMT -6 hours.

Population: 36 million, half who live in Buenos Aires province.

Language: Spanish.

Weather: In Buenos Aires, Cordoba and Uruguay golf is played all year round. Travel to Patagonia in summer months (Nov to May).

Visas: No visas are required for South Africans on holiday.

Shopping: Fans of leather products are spoilt for choice. Florida Avenue in Buenos Aires CBD is a shopping haven with shops open until 10pm.

Sightseeing: Start out at Plaza de Mayo, BA's central square. Take in the colourful Caminito area full of tango dancers and artisans, and the Recoleta cemetery, home to Evita Peron's grave. Taxis are cheap, buses plentiful and the underground is fast.

Food: Vegetarians stay at home.

Argentina has the highest meat consumption per capita in the world, and after your first steak you'll know why. Try a steakhouse (parrilla) in the suburbs for a huge juicy steak for as little as R30. In BA's centre visit La Chakra for a meaty experience. Also try 'dulce de leche,' a sweet spread that the locals put on all pastries and breads. Restaurants rarely open before 20h00 and locals only eat out from 22h00 onwards.

Drink: Quilmes is the local beer and the average wine consumption per person per year is an impressive 60 litres.

Nightlife: Argentina is in the midst of a Tango revival and there are numerous bars where you can either watch or take lessons.

Soccer: BA has a passion for football. For an unforgettable experience take in a live match at La Bombonera stadium - close to the CBD - and home to Diego Maradona's beloved Boca Juniors. Tour companies organise escorted trips (from your hotel) to matches where fireworks, dancing and signing are constant throughout.

Websites: www.patagoniagolf.com; www.sanandres-golfclub.com.ar; www.pilargolf.com.ar; www.ranelaghgolfclub.com; www.olivosgolf.cc; www.llaollao.com; www.tenriverstenlakes.com; www.turismo.gov.ar/eng; www.malaysiaairlines.com

a modern development that hosted the 2000 World Cup, won by Tiger Woods and David Duval for the US. Our guide Jorge was not keen to take us there, explaining that it was a "very American" layout and not an enjoyable experience. Preferring older, tree-lined, classic courses myself, I didn't argue with him.

Olivos, on the distant outskirts of the city, was the course we enjoyed most, beautiful parkland, with 27 holes, all of them worth playing if you get the chance. Ranelagh is the home club of Argentine golfing legend Roberto de Vicenzo, who still plays there most days of the week. Very spacious, with its own mashie course, and holes lined by bluegums, which gave it something of an Australian feel. San Andres is the oldest golf club in Argentina, founded in 1907 on its current site,

although golf was first played nearby in 1892. It's named after the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews, and San Andres has a venerable old look to it, as does the thickly-forested course. It was not long, but a memorable challenge, again the small greens being a feature. It's next to a railway station - as is Ranelagh - which was specially built for club members. Today, you can still travel there by train, from Retiro, one of the main downtown railway terminals, and it might be quicker than car, because Jorge took us through a maze of suburbs to get there. Pilar is a modern 27-hole layout, which contained some really good golf holes, particularly on the white nine. The blue nine was second best, while the red nine had a par-6 hole of 665 yards (all distances are in yards on their courses).

A detour to Uruguay

We spent a night in Uruguay at the Four Seasons Resort in Carmelo, and played the 18-hole course at the resort. However, if you're over there, it would be difficult to justify making this trip away from Buenos Aires. It took close to 3 hours by boat and car. You can fly to Patagonia in that time. This part of Uruguay is very quiet, rural and dull, and the luxurious resort is expensive, with everything priced in \$US. The new golf course, with a green fee of \$65, was a typically modern design, good without being special. And it can be windy. If you really want to see Uruguay, a better bet would be the city of Montevideo or the Punta del Este resort. Both have courses designed by Alister Mackenzie.

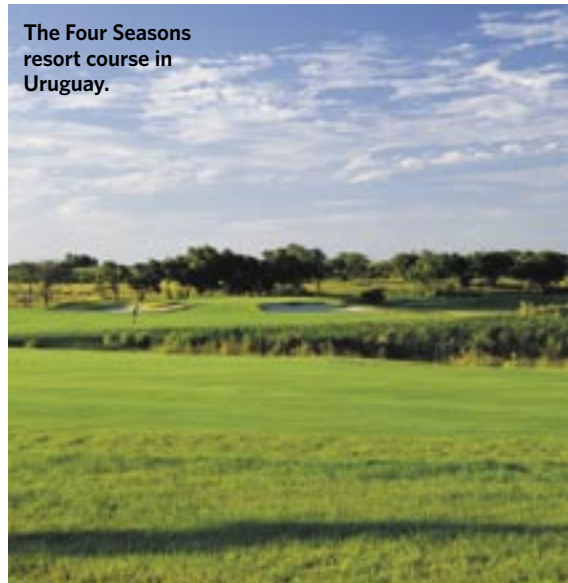
Green fees

Jockey (Red) \$100; **Olivos** \$50 weekdays, \$100 weekends; **San Andres** \$35 and \$50; **Pilar** \$40 and \$50; **Llao Llao** \$25; **Chapelco** \$40. Caddies: \$20.

Malaysia Airlines

Malaysia Airlines flies from Johannesburg and Cape Town to and from Buenos Aires every Wednesday and Sunday. The aircraft that operates this route is a Boeing 747-400 with first, business and economy class cabins. Contact their offices in Johannesburg on 011-880-9614, Cape Town 021-419-8010 and Durban 031-368-1966. www.malaysiaairlines.com

The Four Seasons resort course in Uruguay.



Patagonia Golf

Patagonia Golf is the largest South American golf operator, providing special escorted tours and custom-designed holidays. There is golf in Buenos Aires, golf in the wine region, and golf and fly-fishing in Patagonia. The cost per person of a 7-night stay in Buenos Aires, staying at the Dazzler Tower Hotel in the city centre, including five rounds of golf at top courses of your choice, caddies, transport and sightseeing would be \$1 100 (about R7 000).

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