

Buenos Aires...Mendoza...El Calafete THREE ARGENTINE DELIGHTS

By DOMINICK and SUSAN MERLE

Author Dominick Merle at glacier site



EL CALAFATE, Argentina---"There she goes!" exclaimed our excitable tour mate from Norway as a thunderous boom emanated from a glacier that looked the size of New Jersey.

"Nah, just another false alarm," our skeptical Scottish observer responded. "All noise and no action."

Glacier watching has become a hot ticket item in the travel industry these days, and we are in Los Glaciares National Park at the southern tip of Argentina waiting for Perito Moreno to break apart.

The Perito Moreno glacier, also known as the "White Giant," is a

massive tongue of ice that stretches 100 square miles. It is one of 50 glaciers in the Patagonian ice fields shared with Chile at the base of the Andes, but only one of three still growing.

Something very rare is expected to happen this weekend. A large chunk of the White Giant will snap away and sail into Lago Argentino, and we are among several thousand spectators, cameras ready, our fingers on the snap buttons.



Buenos Aires demonstration



Buenos Aires
walking street

We stare motionless, almost frozen, waiting for this breakaway birth of ice, and Perito Moreno seems to be staring back. It makes a growling sound periodically and

sheds a little ice here and there. But the large cave-like chunk scheduled to float off remains connected.

When it finally crashes away into the lake, it is a private affair. It is 4.a.m., the park is closed and only one security guard hears the tremendous boom and records the time. The last time Perito Moreno gave away some of its ice field, in 2008, was also in the middle of the night.

El Calafate is a small village in the Santa Cruz section of Patagonia that has high hopes of being Argentina's next tourist

hotspot because of its proximity to the glacier fields. A 5-kilometer skywalk has been constructed for glacier viewing, and the downtown area is sprucing up with shops and restaurants although some of the sidewalks are still in the rough dirt stage.

We stayed in a relatively new boutique resort known as Casa Los Sauces (The Willows) a short walk from downtown. It had 38 suites in five separate casas, two

Chunk that broke off during the night





Los Sauces cottage view

restaurants (one, La Comarca, upscale gourmet), a spa and indoor swimming pool (www.casalossauces.com).

A natural garden of willows, roses and lavender covers much of the grounds, and a tiny stream runs through it. As a final touch of royalty, you will be walking on property purportedly owed by the Argentina president herself, Christina Fernandez de Kirchner,

and she often makes unannounced visits to the area.

From sleepy El Calafete and its ice fields we flew north to speedy Buenos Aires and its tango floors. We checked into the Panamericano Hotel in the absolute heart of the metropolis (www.panamericano.us).

Our room overlooked Avenue 9 de Julio (Independence Day),

often described as the widest street in the world with six lanes in each direction and a small park running through the center. To the left stood the 70-meter Obelisk, the icon monument of the city, and across the street on the right, the world famous Colon Theatre.

"This is a very lively area," said Paula Caggiano, the hotel's marketing director. "You must look both ways just to leave the hotel."

It was no exaggeration. There is a constant stream of pedestrians outside the front entrance so one often has to look for a spot to jump in and then walk in that direction. But no matter which way you go, there is something interesting---walking streets, entire blocks of shops that specialize in one item, ritzy areas, honkey-tonk sections--or, you can SIMPLY wait for the next demonstration.

Mendoza scene - brush, vines & the Andes



Self-proclaimed gauchos



Demonstrations are a daily part of life in the downtown area, sometimes several of them a day. The demonstrators are often paid (sometimes by the city) to support or oppose a cause. Consequently, many are not sure why they're even there.

Aside from the disruption of traffic, the demonstrations rarely erupt into violence so the "Portenos," as Buenos Aires residents are called, take them in stride.

After our walk, we took refuge at the Panamericano spa and swimming pool on the 23rd floor and enjoyed a balcony view of the swirl of activity below, including the traffic jams and paid protestors.

Buenos Aires is a city of distinct neighborhoods and the next morning we visited several of them, beginning with the Recoleta district, a high rent area that includes La Recoleta Cemetery, final resting place of Evita Peron.

This is actually Evita's fifth burial spot. After she died and her President husband was ousted, Evita was buried, exhumed and re-buried several times in Europe and Argentina by a romantic embalmer who, some say, was falling in love with the body. But that's another story.

Our city tour included walks in the Palermo section, a trendy neighborhood where most of the city's artists and theatrical people

live, and the colorful (but dangerous) La Boca district, where the tango was born. Stick with the two or three streets with a heavy police presence in La Boca; they are the most interesting anyway.

There is something else unique in La Boca. It is the only place where Coca Cola allowed its signs in black and white instead of the customary red and white. The black/white signs are at the soccer stadium since red and white are

Spectators at "White Giant"





Suan Merle at Salentien

the colors of the home team's most hated rivals.

There are about 25 tango shows nightly in the city and we attended one called Los Angelitos.

It was exciting, very professional and cost about \$120 for two including dinner. The tango is making a comeback with the young Portenos, after having been

viewed as simply tourist bait by their parents.

The final stop was a 50-minute flight west to Mendoza at the foot of the Andes. While glaciers rule in El Calafete and nothing seems to be in charge in Buenos Aires, vineyards are the official rulers of Mendoza.

There are more than 1500 bodegas in Mendoza province.

The production of olive oil is also beginning to take off.

While most of the bodegas are in the northern area of the province, we visited the Valle de Uco in the south which resembles the early years of the Napa Valley. But great plans are in the works to develop this valley as a luxury resort with the Andes and the vineyards at your doorstep.

We met with Julia Tonconogy,

the young and dynamic creative director of a massive project in the works called the Casa de Uco Hotel (www.casadeuco.com).

She motioned across the vineyards to a faraway signpost at the foot of the Andes. "That will be our main hotel, with separate bungalows, private villas, restaurants, a spa, golf, tennis, horse riding area, a quincho (special area for typical Argentine style asado or barbeque)...it'll all



Touristy El Calafate



be ready next year. Come back for the grand opening."

Casa de Uco estate spans across 320 hectares (790 acres) and will be the largest development in the southern part of the province catering to upscale travelers.

We stayed "just up the road," as locals call a 30-minute drive here, at the Salentien Posada (www.salentien.com). Salentien is state-of-the-art built in four wings forming

the shape of across. There are about a dozen rooms in several buildings, all nicely furnished, and a separate dining room.

While in the south, we asked several times about gauchos and were told they were as rare as American cowboys. But as we were leaving the Valle de Uco and heading for the airport, we spotted two horsemen wearing the typical gaucho hats and capes.

We stopped for photos and asked our driver to ask how long they had been gauchos. One, a local farmer, simply said he liked to dress that way. The other said he became a gaucho a few years ago, shortly after he emigrated from Croatia.

(For further information on El

Calafate, Buenos Aires and Mendoza, try www.argentina.travel and follow the links).

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View from Panamericano of Obelisk

