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TRAVEL

Song of the cacti

Old towns provide the soundtrack to Argentina's vast cowboy country

Nellie Huang
travel@mediacorp.com.sg

"WE ARE reaching heights of 4,000 metres above sea level. Remember to chew on your cocoa leaves; you don't want to get altitude sickness," Pablo reminded us as we manoeuvred the hairpin bends of the Andean Altiplano or mountain plateau in northern Argentina.

Altitude sickness, that feeling of nausea and dizziness that kicks in when you're above 2,500m, was a small price to pay when the goal was to retrace the route of the world's third-highest railway into the clouds.

Since Tren a Las Nubes (Train to the Clouds) runs only once a week, my partner and I booked a guided jeep tour instead. Within hours of leaving the city of



(From top) The streets of Purmamarca; Humahuaca natives; wild llamas spotted along a bend; and a thick, savoury llama stew, which is a common dish in the region.

Photos Nellie Huang

Salta behind, we were snaking up mountain roads in the southern part of the Altiplano, close to the Chile and Bolivia border. The twisting road revealed views at every bend — white-capped peaks against copper earth. But that was just the beginning. The trail took us past some of the world's most memorable landscapes.

Gauche country

The rugged terrain gave way to a drier landscape of sandy hills and cacti. We weaved through rock-strewn canyons and prairies, visiting pre-Inca ruins, viaducts and expansive salt flats resembling those in Bolivia.

According to Pablo, this is where the famed gauchos of Argentina roam, but today, there was no sign of the silent cowboys. We felt the loneliness of their environments instead. The vast, empty hills — broken sometimes by a lone cactus, sometimes by a field of them — will make anyone feel small against the elements.

Temperatures here range from 10°C to 24°C. The area has an average rainfall of only 50mm per year, eliminating the existence of all but the hardiest of plants.

Llamas thrive, though. "The animals are endemic here," said Pablo. So much so that we later tucked into a lunch of breaded llama meat fried to crispy brownness. Surprisingly, the meat was light and tender, a cross between chicken and beef.

Native tunes

The further north we went into the Altiplano, the deeper we got into the cultural pockets of Argentina. This region in the province of Jujuy is littered with indigenous towns that are largely unexplored by foreign tourists.

At the Andean village of Purmamarca, artisan shops line the unpaved streets, their brightly coloured wares of mats,



A lone cactus stands on the vast, empty hills of the Andean Altiplano.

ponchos and the like forming a stark contrast against the mud-coloured buildings.

Women roam the streets in flat hats and traditional dresses. The atmosphere was laid back with none of the clamouring commercial instincts found in more touristy towns like Jujuy and Tilcara. With only 400 inhabitants, the pocket-sized village is a close-knit one as villagers stop to wave and welcome us to Purmamarca.

That night, we danced and sang at the Pena de Claudia Vite, a traditional tavern packed with music and laughter. Singing in their indigenous Quechua language, the band worked up a storm as almost the entire village gathered and swayed to the folk music.

Llama showed up again at dinner, in the form of a thick, savoury stew.

Cowboy tunes

Next morning, we cruised the formidable Quebrada de Humahuaca, a multi-hued rocky gorge, to arrive at Humahuaca, which, with its cowboy-style taverns and colonial architecture was reminiscent of an Old West town. It oozes old world ambience and a certain raunchiness to match. Along its streets, men sat strumming their charango, a small Andean guitar, and blowing on windpipes. Later, the same type of soulful, melancholic music was

recreated in a town restaurant, strangely giving voice to the land itself.

Within two days, we had seemingly crossed continents: From the heights of the Andes to cactus-strewn cowboy country. We didn't understand Quechua, but by the end of the journey into northern Argentina, we understood — if not a little of the land and its people — then certainly what goes into a good local stew.



Trip notes

Many airlines offer flights to Buenos Aires via Los Angeles for about \$2,600. From Buenos Aires, Salta is a short flight away (on Aerolineas Argentinas) or a 24-hour bus ride. Trips to the Andean Altiplano can be booked at Defrantur (www.defrantur.com.ar), which organised the two-day tour we took at a cost of \$50 per person, including one-night accommodation. A day tour is also available. Poncho Tours (www.ponchotours.com) organises longer trips that end in Cafayate town, and A Las Nubes Tours (www.alasubestours.com.ar) arranges adventure trips to this area that include trekking, rafting or hang-gliding. All tours depart from Salta.

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SHE SAID

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