

Notes from a Train In Argentina.

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Two sleeper trains later and we are slowly making our way back up to Buenos Aires, Argentina. We had flown down to Esquel in Patagonia and from this point we will overland all the way up to Rio, Brazil. We were keen to ride on the famed La Trochita, the Old Patagonia Express. Our time was limited in Esquel (meaning 'The Land Of Thistles') and only had one day to take the 'Turistca' trip to Nahuel Pan and back.

Through a series of mishaps and delays, we were late getting to town where you would buy your tickets from a local travel agents. This was extremely disappointing, having travelled so far to see the famous railway. However, we picked up one nugget of information, the train reserved 6 seats for maintenance staff. We devised a plan to get up early and head to the train station and talk our way on to these coveted seats. The staff were very kind and got us two tickets on the afternoon train (thankfully the train didn't break down, as I'm sure we took the Engineers seat!)

We were surprised how popular the the La Trochita is with tourists, not just with foreign visitors but Argentinian families on their holidays. The train is held in high regard as a symbol of Argentinian pride. The railway started in 1906 and was completed in 1945. Initially a trading route, then opened up to passengers. The original route 402km between Esquel to Ingeniero Jacobacci, is still open several times a year but requires charter advance bookings. During the summer months they run two daily 40km round trips, to an indigenous outpost serving delicious chore-pans (local hot dogs). They have two Belgian Baldwins and two German Henschel engines. The preservation railway teams have worked hard to become independent, securing original drawings and a skilled labour force to manufacture and maintain their own parts.

In Patagonia you can see hints of a steam industrial past. Here are some of the chance discoveries we found along the way. In Angostura, in the Lake District area, we had just completed a 20 mile hike along a beautiful peninsula. When in search of refreshment we saw this American Chase Traction Engine parked on display in front of a municipal building.

Two days later we were hiking outside Bariloche, and came across a Lincoln Procter & Company Traction Engine built in 1907. As I understand from the Spanish plaque alongside the engine, it had been shipped over to help build the famous Route 40 (The Pan-American Highway). It was now parked up as a standing monument.

It was time to leave Patagonia, but we had heard a sleeper train on the Trans Patagonia would get us across to the Atlantic side. It was also famed to have a 'Disco' and 'Film' coach, though sadly not running on our train service. The countryside passing by our 'couchette' window was enough for entertainment, like a small scale Monument Valley passing by in the fading sunset. The catering cart, was also a delight, a great way to mix with locals and eat fantastic steak cooked to perfection. We pulled into one junction station which had train grave yard with rolling stock from the last 40 years and noted the steam crane alongside our carriage. Sadly not enough time to wander round and further investigate.

On our last train, we arrived at Bahia Blanca into a eerie sandstorm. Bahía Blanca Sud station was in fantastic condition built by the British-owned Buenos Aires Great Southern Railway company in 1884. The service today is greatly reduced down to twice weekly journeys to Buenos Aires. Sadly the small museum which accompanies the station was closed, but we did get a glimpse of this British loco, apparently serving the Argentine navy at the Bahia Blanca docks.

On our return to Buenos Aires, we had a little spare time to visit the Museo Nacional Ferroviario Raul Scalabrini Ortiz, a fantastic curated railway museum documenting the history of railways in Argentina. We were lucky to meet the Curator Lauro Denezio who spoke such fantastic English and personal tour of the museum with humorous anecdotes.

Lauro explained Argentina's first railway opened in 1859, which ran 10km in Buenos Aires. Built by the British, the gauge is a curiously wide at 5ft 6inch which still remains today. Some have suggested this was an overhang from the Crimea War where Russian gauge was shipped over. But a more likely explanation originated from the building of India's railway a few mm shorter. It was also the possibility that this gauge was sold at a 'discount'. The upside is the carriages are very spacious.

The Trans Andino Los Andes, Mendoza Argentina tunnel link was completed in 1910, a massive feat of engineering in itself using Rack and Pinion to switch blade up the mountain passes and was built to compete with the opening of the Panama Canal. Sadly this amazing railway is mostly in ruins today. The last 80 years on Argentina railways have experienced several nationalisation's and privatisations. It is currently in the hands of two state run companies with an uncertain future.

With the beckoning popularity of rail tourism and the environmental benefits of taking freight off the road. Optimising the railways would be a major advantage for Argentina, if only the investment and the possible 'corruption' could be navigated. We were lucky to complete our travels before the Global Pandemic made its impact in Latin America. Argentina went into a strict lockdown with all unnecessary travel banned. The longer term financial implications on historical preservation and train travel may become a further casualty.