

ARGENTINA

BUENOS AIRES, PERGAMINO AND THE PAMPAS.

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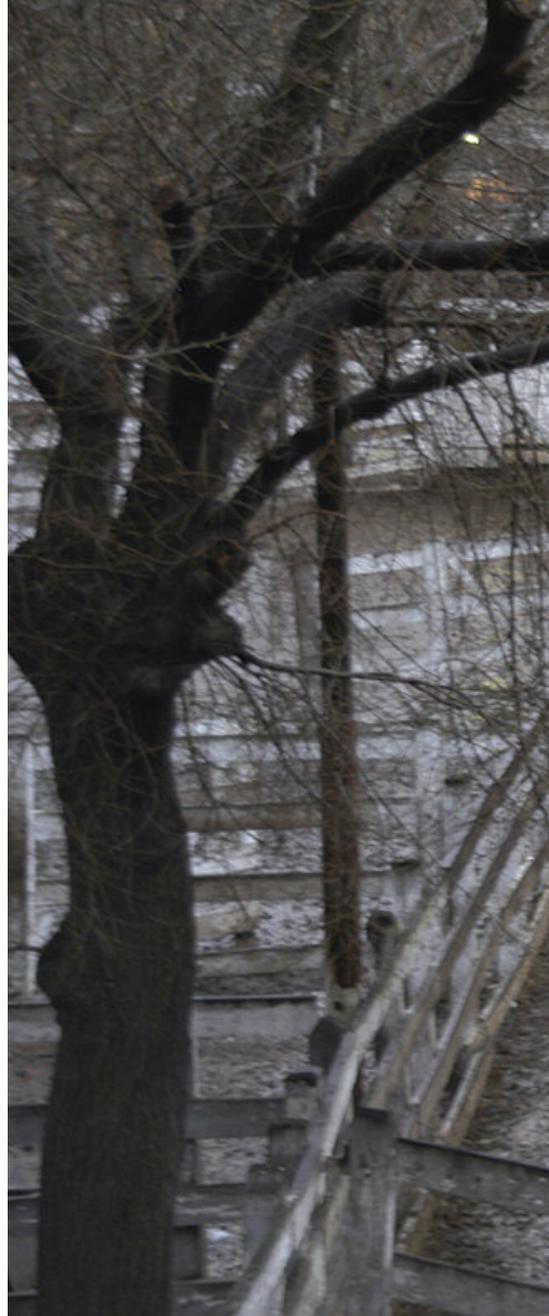
Argentina stretches lean and tall between the South Atlantic in the east and the Andes and Chile in the west. The eighth-largest country in the world—1,078,000 square miles—it is 2,300 miles from top to bottom. Its north-northeast is bordered clockwise by Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil and Uruguay. Its southern tip kisses the Antarctic.

This rich country's history is volatile, colorful, filled with political upheaval. Spain established a colony in what is now Buenos Aires in 1580. In 1806, the British tried to claim it but their invasion was repelled. The Spanish colony was overthrown by the natives in 1810, with independence formally granted in Tucuman in 1816.

Since the 1880s, European migration added to custom and culture. It also subdued or exterminated most of the indigenous tribes throughout the Pampas and Patagonia. The Indians and gauchos are the remnants of those old times.

No other country in the world equals Argentina for beef consumption. With 40 million residents and more than 50 million head of cattle, per capita consumption of beef averages 154 pounds per year. North Americans will never equal that.

The Mercado de Liniers, one of the largest livestock markets in the world, is in Buenos Aires. Close to 15,000 head of cattle are bought and sold in a day, well over two million a year. That single market accounts for close to 20 percent of the cattle sold in Argentina. Mad cow disease is unlikely in Argentina because of the grass-fed majority, but foot and mouth disease is still a problem in some of the northern





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Mercado de Liniers stockyards in Buenos Aires, one of the largest in the world, moves more than two million cattle through its pens each year. ▶ Cook grills meat at a Pergamino restaurant. No tricks, no seasoning, just plain, grass-fed beef and other meats. ▶ Auctioneer and buyers move fast at Liniers. ▶ Gauchos at the La Rural de Palermo agricultural show in Buenos Aires. They share a *maté*, a bitter but good tea made from the holly family. ▶ Gaucho saddle, used at an estancia on the Pampas.





provinces. This is why only thermo-processed Argentine meat is allowed in the United States, with annual U.S. imports ranging from 85 million to 131 million pounds. Argentina trails only Brazil, Australia and India in beef exports.

Patagonia in the south is sheep country and the Pampas east of Buenos Aires is home to most of the cattle. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid bought a 12,000-acre ranch in Patagonia and lived there for four years. It is said they were driven out by the harsh weather of the Andes and returned to a life of crime.

Some of the best rawhide braiders in the world are from Argentina. Armando Deferrari (shown here with his apprentice Machi), is a master braider. Armando says, "I like skins from Hereford cows, three to four years old." When the cows are





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: World-class rawhide braider Armando Deferrari and his student Machi pose in their Pergamino workshop, which is also a museum honoring the Argentinian gaucho. > Machi beats rawhide with a wooden stick to soften it. He will then stretch it on a wooden roller before cutting. > Armando is braiding a gaucho knife handle, with strings he has cut by hand. > Armando uses his gaucho knife to cut the rawhide. No machines are involved.

butchered, the skins are softened by beating with a mallet, stretched with a thick wood stick, then cut into tiny strings with a gaucho knife. Each craftsman works his own skins, making quirts, whips, reins, bridles, bozals, cattle counters, necklaces and bracelets. No machines are used.

The Deferrari workshop in Pergamino is a museum of gaucho traditions. Armando helps run a huge parade in his hometown in early November. Gauchos come from all over the country to ride in their finery; payment for showing up is free food. "Last year," Armando says, "25 cows and 25 sheep were barbecued for the gauchos in the parade."

World demands and the price of oil are changing the Pampas, where grass-fed cattle and horses have thrived for centuries. Farming—which some people think will destroy the Pampas—is encroaching on these windswept plains. There's





more money in soybeans, winter wheat and alfalfa.

Estancias (big ranches) and *campes* (smaller farms and/or ranches) dot the endless grasslands of the Pampas with rock buildings and treed windbreaks. Cattle are mostly Angus and Hereford. And there are horses: tens of thousands of often-bob-tailed *criollos*, descended from Spanish stock.

The horses are small, tough, able; the gauchos who ride them are proud, freedom-loving, skilled horsemen, often fast with a knife. They wear soft wool berets or flat-brimmed hats with comfortable and baggy riding pants tucked into high boots. Occasionally you will see *boleadoras*, three leather-bound rocks tied together with leather straps that are thrown at the legs of animals to trip and tangle them up to prevent them from running away. It's easier to catch fleeing emu with *boleadoras* than a rawhide reata. Gauchos all carry a big knife in the middle of their back, stuck in a rawhide belt. The





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Boy chases pigeons in the “La Congreso” district of Buenos Aires, much like boys in London, New York and Paris. ▶Tango dancers whirl to the intoxicating music of Latin America. ▶A tomb in La Recoleta, where Eva Peron is also buried. ▶Brightly painted cow art, one of many in the city. It is in tribute to the country’s most important asset—beef.



knife might have a silver handle, or one of intricate braided rawhide of more than 100 strings.

Buenos Aires has 12 million residents. It is a world-class cultural center, with an opera house equal to the best in the world. Laid-back, sophisticated, stylish but undisciplined, the locals enjoy their nightlife. Dinner starts at nine or 10. Tango clubs are popular. Entertainment lasts all night.

Juan Manuel Fangio, born in Balcarce, was a much-admired champion Formula One racer. Every Argentine driver on the road today is Fangio. Distances are great between towns so speeds of more than 100 mph are common. Double yellow lines mean nothing. Don’t rent a car in Argentina; call for a radio cab or take a bus.

Argentina is a country rich in culture, history, cows, sheep and horses. Its generous people exude spirit. It is—except for tango—much like the American West. ■