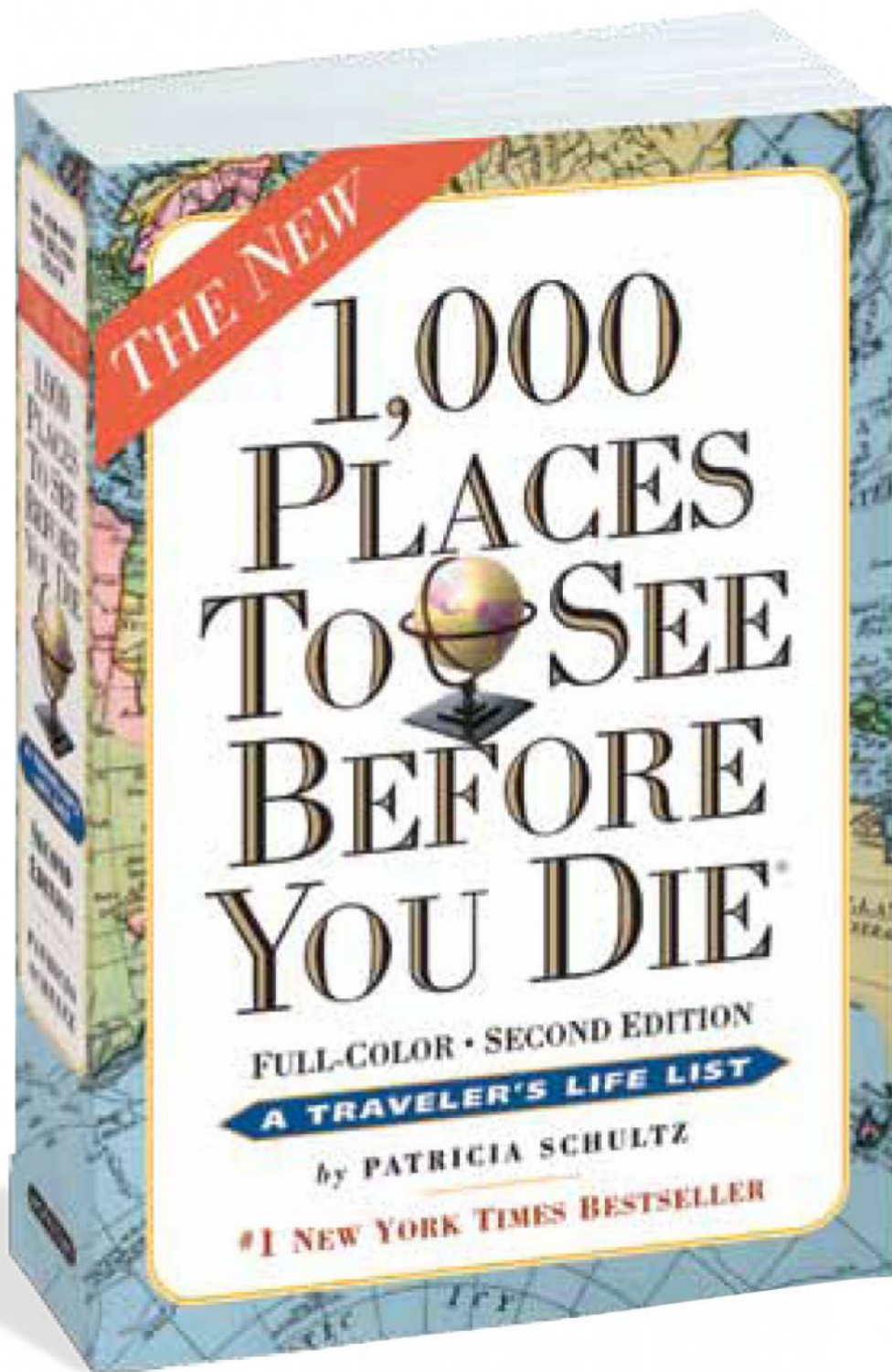


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The Patagonian Atlantic

PENÍNSULA VALDÉS

Chubut, Argentina

Jutting into the Atlantic from Argentine Patagonia, the Valdés Peninsula was, until recently, the country's best-kept secret. Its grassy expanses and 250 miles of rugged, cliff-lined coast are one of the world's most spectacular

marine mammal and bird habitats. Puerto Madryn is the base for those who come to explore this unique environment.

Indeed, more than 180 kinds of marine and shore birds make their home on and around the peninsula, from Magellanic penguins at Punto Tombo Nature Reserve to herons, kelp gulls, and egrets that are found throughout the cliffs and muddy tidal basins on the ocean's edge. At Punta Norte, in the peninsula's northeast corner, orcas prey on the birds, sea lions, and elephant seals by letting the tide carry them onto the beach, then snapping up their quarry, and rolling back into the water. The beach on the Attack Channel is off-limits to humans, but platforms are built in February and March overlooking the violent feeding frenzy. You'll also find nearly 2,000 southern right whales, half the world's population, congregating in

the sheltered Golfo Nuevo, south of the peninsula.

The area's most comfortable lodge is El Pedral, a former sheep farm at the edge of Punta Ninfas, 30 miles from Puerto Madryn. It's a vast property that stretches up to the cliffs overlooking Golfo Nuevo. Located on its own secluded beach, the 1904 Tudor-style lodge has just eight rooms. The staff arranges private animal- and whale-viewing tours.

WHERE: Puerto Madryn is 870 miles/1,400 km south of Buenos Aires. **HOW:** U.S.-based Borello Travel offers a variety of Península Valdés tours. Tel 800-405-3072 or 212-686-4911; www.borellotravel.com. **EL PEDRAL LODGE:** Tel 54/11-4311-1919; www.elpedrallodge.com. **Cost:** from \$220 per person, all-inclusive (off-peak); from \$290 (peak). **BEST TIMES:** all year for penguins and sea lions; Jun-Dec for right whales; Oct-Apr for orcas.

A City's Intellectual Center, Then and Now

CÓRDOBA'S JESUIT BLOCK

Córdoba, Argentina

Now the country's second-largest city, Córdoba was established in 1573 by Jerónimo Luis de Cabrera, and the Jesuits arrived soon after. The city's romantic stucco-and-cobblestone heart is the Manzana Jesuítica,

or Jesuit Block, anchored by the University of Córdoba. This is Argentina's first university,

opened in 1613, and one of the oldest in the Americas. Within the "block" are the

architecturally stunning Iglesia Compañía de Jesús (Church of the Society of Jesus), Argentina's first church and the city's oldest surviving building; the Colegio Nacional de Monserrat, the country's oldest high school; and the Capilla Doméstica (Domestic Chapel). These buildings, along with the flourishing estancias the Jesuits established outside of town, serve as one large historic museum. Nearby Plaza San Martín is graced with a number of cafés and several of its own historically significant buildings. The Cabildo, or Old City Hall, is now an arts center whose various cultural events include a Friday evening tango performance. The eclectic Cathedral of Córdoba next door, known for its angels with Native American faces, was started in 1577 and worked on for more than 200 years in a charming pastiche of styles. A few blocks away is the Museo Histórico Provincial Marqués de Sobre Monte, housed in what was once a private home; dating from 1722, it is the city's oldest residence still standing and an excellent example of Colonial architecture. Stay within the city's historic district by checking into its first design-minded hotel, the 14-room Azur Real Hotel Boutique, set in a 1915 town house just blocks from the main plaza.

La Cañada, a man-made canal lined with oak trees, meanders through town; its walkways and cafés are popular gathering points at night. On weekends, the Feria Artesanal del

Paseo de los Artes bustles with handicrafts and antiques vendors.

Entire towns have grown up around the former Jesuit estancias surrounding Córdoba, the oldest of which is Caroya (1616). Alta Gracia, dominated by a Baroque church that is reached by an imposing staircase, is the closest (16 miles southwest); the young Ernesto Che Guevara lived in a house on its outskirts. In early January, visit Jesús María (31 miles north of Córdoba) for the gaucho-themed Festival Nacional de Doma y Folklore. Later that month, nearby Cosquín (32 miles northwest of Córdoba) hosts the Festival Nacional de Folklore, followed by the Cosquín Rock music festival in February. With its polo fields, extensive grounds overlooking the Córdoba Mountains, and spa, the elegant Estancia El Colibrí, a nine-guest room property 20 miles west of Córdoba, will make you feel like you're starring in an Argentine-style Ralph Lauren ad. Along with polo lessons and long rides accompanied by gaucho guides across the 420-acre tract, there's a juicy steak and a glass of Malbec to enjoy at the end of the day.

WHERE: 388 miles/624 km northwest of Buenos Aires. **AZUR REAL:** Tel 54/351-424-7133; www.azurrealhotel.com. *Cost:* from \$125. **ESTANCIA EL COLIBRÍ:** Tel 54/352-546-5888; www.estanciaelcolibri.com. *Cost:* from \$575 (off-peak), from \$725 (peak), inclusive. **BEST TIME:** Jan–Feb for festivals and pleasant summer weather.