

AN ARGENTINIAN AUGUST

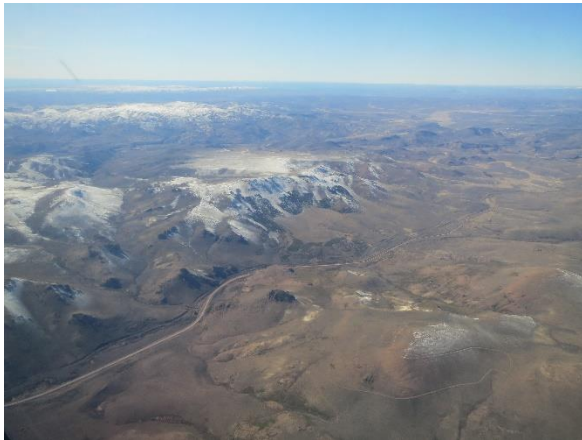
I'll tell you how the Sun rose – Emily Dickinson

August is a winter month in Argentina. Near the bottom of the world, the sun doesn't rise until after 8:00 A.M. Mornings are gray; temperatures are cold but moderate. And skiing is the major winter attraction to this distant southern clime.

After a flight from Buenos Aires, we landed in San Carlos de Bariloche, an urban center spread out along the banks of the Nahuel Huapi Lake in northern Patagonia's Lake District.



The Argentinian mountain region is largely a vast wasteland of barren, red-brown rock with hardly an intersecting road and few signs of human or any other habitation.



Altitude is a key distinction between Argentina's three primary – and isolated - ski destinations. Las Leñas is the highest with altitudes above 11,000 feet. Ushuaia, the planet's southernmost city, is at sea level in Tierra Del Fuego near the Strait of Magellan. With the altitude of Bariloche in the middle.

We chose Bariloche for its modest elevation and the variety of three major ski resorts rising above the lakes: Chapelco, Bayo and Catedral.

Politics, rampant inflation and a host of esoteric issues may include Argentina among the so-called third-world nations, but there is nothing backward about the overall appearance and



atmosphere of its settled areas: *McDonald's* and *Starbucks* are familiar sights. Buenos Aires could be Los Angeles and Bariloche – Cheyenne, Wyoming. It doesn't hurt to speak Spanish, but you can get by with English (same as in LA).

And where the mountains of Chile still rely heavily on Poma lifts and T-bars, chairlifts and even a few gondolas carry you to the top of the slopes in Argentina.

Winter 2024 started early in the Andes with heavy snow falling in May, before any of the ski areas even opened. (When we made our reservations.) But one local resident bemoaned the fact that it hadn't really snowed since and conditions were generally hard packed on the groomed trails, much as you find most ski days in New England.

While the snow wasn't soft, the mountains were all around white with the addition most nights of a few inches, enough to raise a bit of trailing spray at least on our early morning runs. And when the sun came out its rays bounced brightly off frozen surfaces slightly warming the crisp, dry mountain air that I'd come to breathe deep.

It's a long way from anywhere in the United States to the ski slopes of Argentina – twelve hours of flight time from Houston. A lot of movies, restless sleep and (increasingly) bad airline food, plus the inconveniences of TSA, immigration and baggage to check and collect, including skis and boots. But if you hate summer or just miss winter, skiing off that first chairlift is all that it takes.

Ski shops, clothing boutiques, upscale restaurants and hotels line the streets of San Martín de Los Andes, a resort town three hours by car from Bariloche near the base of Cerro Chapelco. (It's certainly not Aspen but it's a lot closer to it than most ski towns in Vermont – for better or worse.) Be careful as you round the corners of the road climbing through the mountains on the way there. Cattle, sheep and horses as well as various wildlife popped up at every other turn in the gathering twilight.



Chapelco has the look and feel of mountains in New Hampshire, mostly tree-lined trails with relatively short runs. But of the three Argentinian mountains we skied, it turned out to have

had the best snow conditions and when the sun shined for a few moments on our first day, I had my best run of the trip. (More wall sits at home through June and July would have helped.)





Cerro Bayo is like our Vermont and Maine resorts, covering a wider terrain than Chapelco with more surface above the tree line. It's located closer to Bariloche by the town of Villa La Angostura, a slightly more urban resort town than San Martín.



Catedral Alta Patagonia has an out West feel, more like the craggy, open terrain of Utah and Colorado. Located just beyond the city of Bariloche, it's the



oldest and largest ski area in this region with a developed commercial base and a multi-acre, paved parking lot.



Each had its share of off-piste slopes for the more adventurous, skilled and better conditioned in our group.



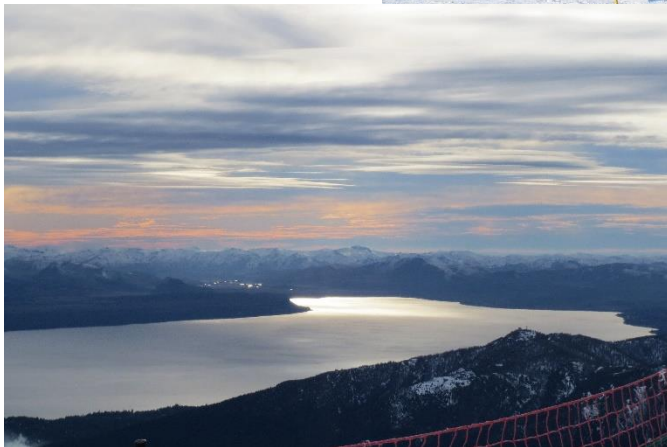
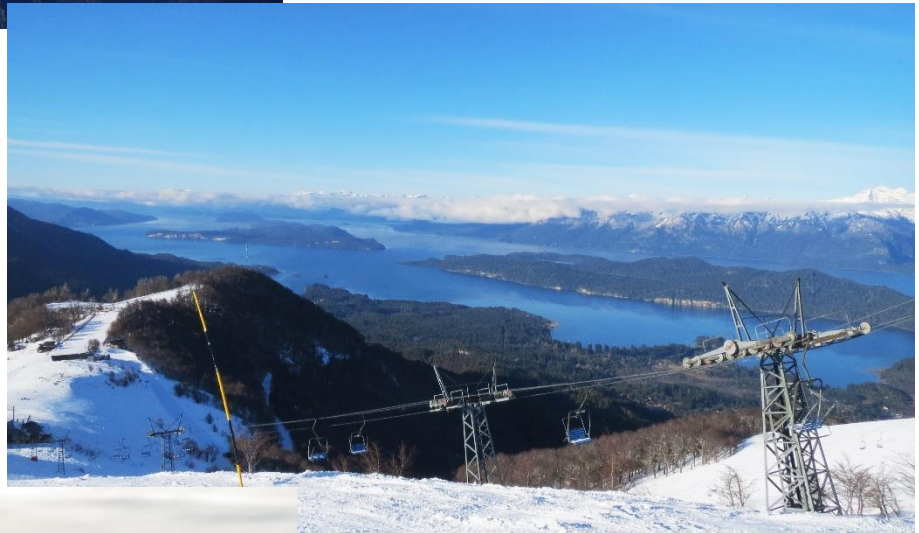
Plenty of runs to satisfy every level and interest.

And it quickly became clear that if you earned your lunch on the slopes, you would be more than compensated by the full range of food and beverage offerings available in the trailside restaurants. (I wasn't sure how many could get up to ski again.)





And then there were the views! If snow conditions left something to wish for, the views did not. The way the light shifted during the day across the mountain range. The lake laid out its 50-mile length at our feet. Or the sun hazily reflected in its calm surface.



Steve Glovsky can be reached at TravelsWithTwain.com.

(First in a series of articles on an August visit to Argentina.)