



In the South American summer, **Ed Merrison** and **Elizabeth Clancy** set out to explore Argentina's Lake District

A shore thing

Snow on the mountain tops at the start of summer is a reminder of how cold Argentina's Lake District can get

Away from its throbbing football stands and the dusty floors of its tango halls, it's easy to find solitude in Argentina. It's the eighth largest country in the world and in Patagonia much of that land is pretty wild.

On paper, Argentina's Lake District in summer is a sure thing. The region is made up of mountain, lake and forest scenery and offers every activity under the sun, establishing itself long ago as the playground of the nation's elite. But you ignore at your peril the wind's chilling reminder: This is Patagonia! And you need to remember that wilderness is fine until the only audible sound is that of your wife hitting The Wall.

Welsh farmhouses

The Route of the Seven Lakes runs just 112km from San Martín de los Andes to Villa La Angostura in the province of Neuquén. We decided to supplement this with a ride around the district's centrepiece lake to the thriving city of San Carlos de Bariloche, 80km further south. San Martín is a stylish mountain town of pine-fronted boutiques sitting at 650 metres on the shores of deep-blue Lake Lácar and beneath the forested hills of Lanín National Park.

The morning sun seeped through riverside trees as we

packed panniers fit for an Everest attempt. We aimed for four days of easy riding, but summer here is unpredictable and night-time temperatures can drop to freezing. We rode out of town into a chill breeze, while clouds hovered, undecided, over distant mountains. We opted against the lakeside road, instead tackling the initial climb in the shade of southern beeches, cypresses and conifers before rejoining the paved road near the ski resort of Chapelco.

Cattle speckled the high plains and mountains loomed. Smoke billowed from the chimney of a rust-red Welsh farmhouse – remote yet familiar, like the memory of Bruce Chatwin's exiles. We wound our way past Lakes Escondido, Hermoso and Machónico and entered Argentina's oldest and most popular national park, Nahuel Huapi.

By now the clouds had made up their mind. The wind blew their rain horizontal, a barrage of icy darts lashing our bowed heads as we pedalled towards Lake Falkner, 32 miles from San Martín. A campground shack was being renovated for the high season – too late for us. The wind billowed the tent as we sat shivering in our sleeping bags.

Climbing over The Wall

My surprise at waking next morning to find we hadn't been blown into the lake was matched by the pleasure of



seeing Falkner's softer side. Its surface glistened silver with the promise of sun, while the slopes above glowed with a fresh lick of snow.

From Falkner we passed Lake Villarino and lost the tarmac, twisting through the woods on a surface that alternated between gravel, mud and dust. Further down the line, men at work stood around, part of a long-held promise to pave this stretch of road. There was little action; locals said not to hold our breath.

Passing cars were few and far between. Birds sang, riders panted, and pebbles crunched under tyres. These sounds were all that disrupted the peace. But the legs got heavier and, with them, the panting. The need to refuel became urgent. My decision to don the national football shirt drew much-needed encouragement from the odd passing carload of natives. But all the cheers in the world weren't going to save us when we ground up one rocky climb too many around Lake Correntoso.

The question of where to shop in wilderness is a tricky one, as is the matter of how to salvage a cycle trip when the metaphorical wheels start falling off. My only hope was a sign for a 2km do-or-die detour to a campsite on Lake Espejo Chico ('Little Mirror'). A red herring, perhaps? For the sake of my health and marriage, I hoped not.

We arrived at the lake to find the store open. We swapped handfuls of pesos for armfuls of junk food and stumbled to the shore. As sugar zipped through our veins, we sprawled on the grass and breathed in the surroundings. Paradise regained.

Journey's end

Wind in our sails, we weaved around Lake Espejo and regained tarmac

to pelt along the last 12km to La Angostura. Like San Martín, this town of alpine architecture combines wealth and taste with a laidback vibe. It is a sublime spot to take a day's rest, mend relationships and toast the end of the Seven Lakes route.

La Angostura is home to Los Arrayanes National Park and its hiking trails among cinnamon-barked arrayán trees and panoramic views of the lake. The port also has two bays, the 'brava' (wild) and 'mansa' (tame), where jetties amble across diaphanous blue towards the gleaming crowns of the Andes.

Back on the bikes, we passed the idyllic bay of Puerto Manzano to curve around the northern shore of Lake Nahuel Huapi. Traffic was heavier along this stretch, but the views across our shoulder meant we hardly noticed. The flower-edged road rose and fell over a turquoise so clear we could trace the patterned bark of trees fallen to the lakebed. For an entire morning, the scenery constantly rivalled the world's finest waterfront trails.

Once we rounded the lake's eastern edge, we turned southwest into Rio Negro province to knock off the last 20km to Bariloche. Set in prime mountain-biking country, Bariloche combines all the services of a city with every possibility of outdoor adventure.

On its bustling shores we sat to contemplate the lakes, mountains, highs and lows we'd been through. Strange how, with belly full and local ale in hand, our perspective had altered. The highs still loomed large in our memories, like the Andes, while the lows were as transient and trifling as a ripple on the surface of Lake Nahuel Huapi.



Fact file Argentina's Lake District

WHERE: San Martín de los Andes is 1,000 miles southwest of Buenos Aires, close to Argentina's border with Chile.

WHEN: The Lake District is very popular from mid-December to early February. Just either side of this peak period is the best time to visit.

GETTING THERE: British Airways (www.britishairways.com) flies direct from London to Buenos Aires for about £860 return including taxes. Aerolíneas Argentinas (www.aerolineas.com) flies from Buenos Aires to San Martín de los Andes for £220 return.

BIKES: Dirty Bikes (www.dirtybikes.com.ar) in Bariloche has MTBs for £15 per day, with panniers an extra £5 per day. Bikes can be sent to San Martín for £10.

ACCOMMODATION: The towns have abundant accommodation options for all budgets. Basic camping is also available alongside many of the lakes. The more sophisticated sites start at £3 per person. **LANGUAGE:** Spanish. English is widely spoken.

INFORMATION: www.interpatagonia.com