

FINANCIAL TIMES

# how to find it

JANUARY 7 2012

SINGULAR SENSATIONS





# ALL THROUGH MY WILD DAYS

Venturing into Argentina's vast wilderness, Heidi Mitchell embarks on a voyage of intense discovery – through vineyards, wetlands and a remarkable private art collection.

Main picture: the Andes backdrop to Bodega Colomé in the Upper Calchaquí Valleys. Inset: riding into the Iberá Wetlands.



**T**

he orb of liquid pink is a finger's-width above the horizon, and time is running out. The capybaras are slipping back into their mud baths; the monk parakeets and fork-tailed flycatchers are returning to the trees, whose branches are just bursting into spring bloom. And the horses are growing impatient.

We trot across an island on which howler monkeys are playfully grooming one another, then locate the path leading back to the estancia. Philippe Brown, my guide on this whirlwind romp through three very different landscapes of Argentina, gives me an encouraging nod and we turn the corner on to the landing strip, its mowed green expanse the only visible manmade scar upon the wetlands. Brown takes off, and my part-Arabian follows. We pick up speed, and I hear his counsel from days past echo in my head: "Relax; let your body move with the horse; lean into it." Finally, after several rides this week – and countless others as a girl growing up in the American West – it comes together. I'm riding at a full gallop, flying down the airstrip, relishing the primordial joy of teetering between control and the complete loss of it. My hat flies off, and I don't even notice – my heart is too conspicuously lodged in my throat.

The horses slow when they see the Land Rover awaiting our arrival with pastries, coffee and proper English tea. I dismount and walk to a pair of camper chairs positioned for sunset viewing. Sundowners, just like in Africa, but minus the malaria-fighting G&Ts. Brown hands me a cup of Earl Grey, then my hat. I can't speak – all is drowned out by the "thump-swoosh" of my rapid pulse – so we watch the final drops of molten sun ooze into the flat, marshy plain of the Iberá Wetlands. This is my third time in Argentina; my brother lived here once, but I'd never been so far into its vast wilderness – nor out of my comfort zone at such high speed.

A wild gallop in the wetlands was not expressly written on my checklist of Things to See and Do in Argentina; it was added value. I was looking to understand the vastness of the landscape and the perseverance of a people who have endured military dictatorships and deep recessions in recent memory. I had spoken at length with Brown and his partner, Oliver von Holzinger, at their bespoke travel company Brown + Hudson, in Notting Hill, west London, about creating a trip that would show me another Argentina, the one beyond the Peróns and the San Telmo flea market and the Pampas. Brown spent 10 years as one of the top private guides at Toronto-based Butterfield & Robinson, where Argentina was one of his specialised countries, and, more recently, he has worked as a consultant to other luxury travel companies. It explains why 60 per cent of Brown + Hudson's clients have already rebooked in the two short years the company has existed, and why it has gone from



Clockwise from left: the swimming pool at Estancia Colomé. *Unseen Blue* by James Turrell, part of The Hess Art Collection at Bodega Colomé. The living room at Rincón del Socorro, on the edge of the Iberá Wetlands.



*A wild gallop across the wetlands was not expressly written on my checklist of Things to See and Do in Argentina; it was added value.*

dispatching a handful of departures each year to around 30. The average price: north of £60,000 a week.

My itinerary covers three fascinating aspects of the second-largest country in South America. We start with wine, in the New World's fastest-growing wine region of Mendoza; we fly up near Salta to a private villa owned by a famous winemaker-entrepreneur, and his even more famous art collection; and we end with horseback riding in the Iberá Wetlands, near the Paraguayan border, where an incredible conservation effort is reclaiming over-ranched land. Wine, art and conservation – easy to understand, easy to pack for. But even with a final rundown in hand, I wasn't prepared for the unexpected. I certainly didn't have the proper footwear.

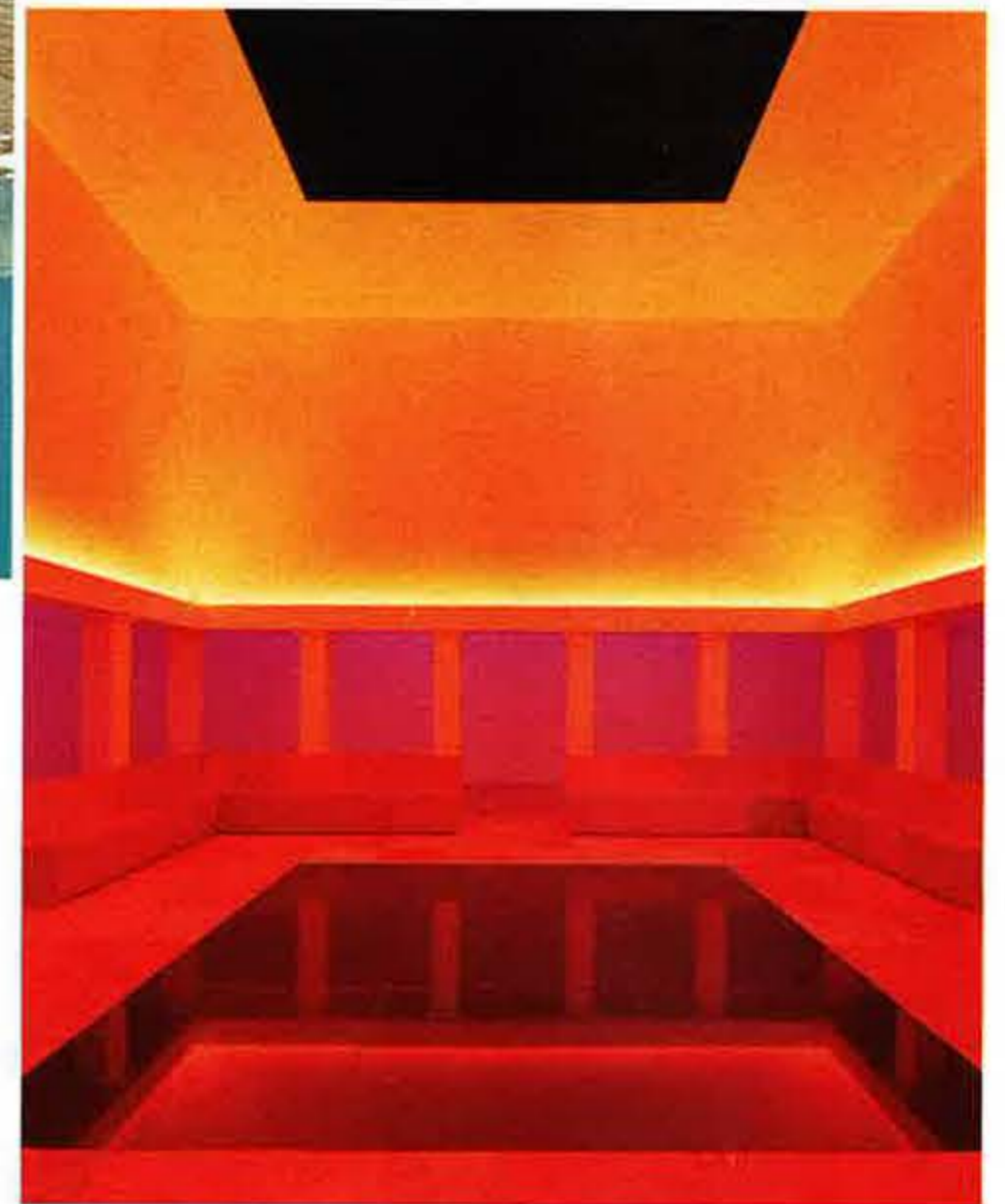
We start our quest for intense discovery in Mendoza province. To access the Andes and those stripes of Malbecs, you first have to ford raging rivers, layer on the fleece and drive 30 miles by dirt road outside of the diminutive Mendoza city. You are eventually rewarded with majestic vistas of vineyards book-ended by towering mountains – and winery after winery built by inspired architects. One resembles a futuristic insect (O Fournier), another is made of brutalist cement (Bodegas Salentein), a third is all right-angles and austere steel. This one, Valle de Uco, offers oenophiles a way to own a piece of the dream: one can buy a villa overlooking the communal vines, golf course and clubhouse that will form part of the development. This is not commercialised Napa; these people are artists.

Our first full day was a rather boozy combination of horseback riding and vintage wine sampling at Vines of Mendoza, a co-op vineyard run by an American and his Argentine team. Walter, a gaucho, met us with a fleet of horses prepared to lead us on a slow-trot orientation, but in my jeans and New Balances, I was reluctant. The ever-prepared Brown handed me a pair of polainas, those

suede leg-warmers preferred by gauchos to riding boots. Off we went in a line, Walter indicating the 920 acres of grapes here, the trailhead into the silver-capped Andes there. Under a threatening sky, the landscape was tinted a muted shade of brown, while inside the winery, echoing in its grandness, the overwhelming sense was not sight but smell: tangy, sweet, bitter, bold, rich. A meal was presented in the tasting room at a communal table where we were joined by an entertaining assemblage of local writers, property owners and winemakers, all enjoying a midday *asado* paired with soon-to-be-bottled Torrontés and early-harvest Petite Syrahs. This, I quickly understood, was just an introductory course to viticulture in Mendoza. This was only lunch.

By the time we arrived at Cavas Wine Lodge, an achingly beautiful vineyard dotted with 14 luxurious adobe guest cabanas, the long journey and day of riding and drinking had begun to take its toll. And so I did what any reasonable traveller does: threw on a robe, grabbed yet another bottle of wine (of which there were quite a few literally lying about) and headed to the spa for a soak. Not just any old tub filled with bath salts, it should be said; this one was ripe with Tempranillo, whose restorative benefits moisturise skin parched by the desert. And fortunately, restored I was, because the owners of Cavas Wine Lodge had invited Brown and myself for a lengthy dinner of more local beef accompanied by no-holds-barred storytelling, courtesy of José Manuel Ortega of the O Fournier group of wineries. His take on the global financial crisis was priceless – he had some rather acerbic words for his former Goldman Sachs boss, Robert Rubin. Not exactly what one expects from a winemaker in this fertile crescent, but certainly a qualifier for the “intense discovery” I was seeking.

But no one ever said intense discoveries are easy to access. So on Thursday morning, we hopped on a prop



charter and set flight for the north, and the colonial station of Salta. At a luncheon with polo-player Nacho Figueras weeks before, I'd heard of the beauty of this high-altitude stronghold founded in 1582 by a conquistador, a perfectly preserved town that's increasingly on the trophy-traveller's radar. At the tiny airport, we were met by a joyful engineer-cum-guide called Pablo; for five hours he deftly navigated narrow roads through the velvety mountains of the Parque Nacional Los Cardones, their spines bristling with ancient saguaro cacti. When we emerged into the Calchaquí Valley, a remote glen near the border with Paraguay, the landscape did an abrupt scene change: all blonds and beiges and stripes of green. The 400-mile-long, north-south-oriented valley is ideal for growing grapes at high elevation, which is precisely what Swiss beverage tycoon Donald Hess is doing. A few months ago he converted Bodega Colomé, his circa-1831 Relais & Châteaux estancia, from an über-exclusive hotel into a sole-hire estate. When we meandered in at dusk, the place was ours alone, from the ravishingly pretty planted courtyard to the expansive pool.

Here in Colomé, Hess has created a universe of good intentions that starts with the tasting room and extends to the village school. The 10,000 acres are so self-sufficient that one wonders how fresh blood gains access into this utopian community, though welcoming is an understatement to describe its residents. One night, the property's general manager, Gloria, invited us to dinner in the staff kitchen, where she candidly discussed the crisis of 2001 and its effects on the country and her community. Another day, on yet another horseback ride, we came upon the schoolhouse where children were celebrating Mother's Day with their parents. Naturally, the principal invited us in for lunch and a raffle of rice, flour and sugar. The children were delightful, the serendipity was so perfect it seemed it must have been planned.

But the pinnacle of the week came literally out of the blue sky, courtesy of a man I didn't even meet. Hess is known for his art collection, and, from my brief study of the map and itinerary, I had a vague sense that we'd be near a fairly recently arrived James Turrell art installation. I did not realise, however, that the two were linked, and that I would actually be staying

on-site. At precisely 5pm, Gloria escorted us across a gallery of vines and unlocked the door to The Hess Art Collection: over four decades, the Swiss entrepreneur had collected works by Turrell, but because they require the artist to build them, they only existed as sketches in books. In late 2009, Hess commissioned Turrell's team to erect eight light installations here, in the literal and proverbial middle of nowhere.

*Penumbra* (1992) is a room lit all in blue, with but a square of light (was it pink? White? Whitish-pink?) pouring in from a framed cutout. *Alta Green* (1968) projects a milky pyramid in a corner; one has to wave one's hand through it to believe it isn't solid matter. The morphing sky colours – purple, green, white, indigo-black – seeping through a hole in the roof of *Unseen Blue* (1992) are mesmerising. *City of Arhirit* (1976) is like stepping through the looking glass: one corridor was neon red, the next emerald, the next violet. To the left and right, infinity; there is no way of telling where the light ends and the wall begins. And thanks to Brown's far-reaching connections, I had it all to myself.

Back at the scene of my penultimate-day gallop, the former ranching station of Rincón del Socorro, I change out of dusty jeans and my new polainas. This final portion of the trip, in the north-eastern Iberá Wetlands, was intended for exploring some of the country's more notable conservation efforts. The second-largest wetlands in South America after Brazil's Pantanal, Iberá is a verdant mix of stagnant lakes and shallow bogs, of 350 species of birds and numberless caimans, deer, capybaras, even anteaters.

The American entrepreneur Doug Tompkins, co-founder of The North Face outdoor clothing company, has taken over 127,000 hectares of land near Corrientes, 12,000 of which are wetland, with the aim of turning them into a national park. Conveniently, he has also taken over the gloriously decaying six-room estancia, with three additional



bungalows nearby, complete with a swimming pool, a fantastic chef and Wi-Fi.

During my brief two-night stay, I'm led on that magical gallop; I'm escorted by concessionaire Leslie Cook to the Laguna Iberá for a sunset boat ride; I have a final *asado* with Cook's family on the shore. It is a packed itinerary, to be sure, filled with plenty of Malbec, which seems to flow from the taps here.

If anything can disrupt such an idyllic adventure, it's the eruption of a volcano. And so it happens, the day before my journey back to the capital. "Buenos Aires is shut down," Cook tells us. "Looks like you'll have to stay." Brown, however, is already abuzz with alternative plans. The team in London is busy finding flights from more

**Left: grape-enriched baths at Cavas Wine Lodge in the Mendoza region.**

northerly airports. At first light, rather than heading south to Buenos Aires, we fly north on a prop plane, gaining clearance en route to circle Foz do Iguacu.

"Why not see one of the world's widest waterfalls while we're in the area?" Brown asks, quite sincerely. I can't hear the roar of the rivers plummeting into the crevasse through my noise-protection headphones, but I can see the rainbows and carpet of foliage that extends beyond the curvature of the earth. It's a miracle any explorer found the Foz, so lost among thousands of miles of greenery is it. From high up in our Cessna, it's a plunge pool and a tiny spray of mist.

It transpires that our jaunt was an especially good idea as flights on the Argentine side are delayed anyway; I'll miss any connection home. A driver is promptly enlisted to escort me across the border into Brazil; a flight to São Paulo is already arranged. I'll be back in New York only three hours later than planned, volcano be damned. And I'll have the proper riding attire for my return. ♦

#### DON'T KEEP YOUR DISTANCE

Heidi Mitchell travelled as a guest of **Brown + Hudson**, 13b Hewer Street, London W10 (020-3358 0110; [www.browndanahudson.com](http://www.browndanahudson.com)), which offers seven-day bespoke itineraries in Argentina from £21,499 per person, including exclusive use of Estancia Colomé and privately chartered domestic flights, but excluding international flights. January to April sees pleasant summer temperatures and long days, followed by the harvest. May and June are mild; July and August can present rain and chillier temperatures.

**Cavas Wine Lodge**, +54261-410 6927; [www.cavaswinelodge.com](http://www.cavaswinelodge.com), from \$732. **Estancia Colomé**, [www.bodegacolome.com](http://www.bodegacolome.com), from \$3,500. **Rincón del Socorro**, +54378-249 7172; [www.rincondelesocorro.com](http://www.rincondelesocorro.com), from \$390 full board. **Valle de Uco**, 0845-680 8791; [www.valle-de-uco.com](http://www.valle-de-uco.com).

**British Airways** (0844-493 0787; [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies to Buenos Aires from London Heathrow four times a week, from £843.

BROWN + HUDSON 2011. GABRIEL D'ORRIVE, JAMES TURRELL, PHOTO FLORIAN HOI ZIEGER, JUAN HITTICH (3)

**KRONOMETRY**  
1999

INTRODUCES

**HUBLOT**



London • 106 New Bond Street - Tél +44 (0)2074 991434  
Paris • 60, Rue François 1<sup>er</sup> - Tél +33 (0)1 42 25 15 41  
Cannes • 4, La Croisette - Tél +33 (0)4 97 06 69 70  
Saint-Tropez • 3, Rue Allard - Tél +33 (0)4 98 12 62 50  
Lyon • 27, Rue Gasparin - Tél +33 (0)4 78 37 31 92  
Bordeaux • 29, Cours Georges Clémenceau - Tél +33 (0)5 56 48 21 18  
Courchevel • Hôtel Le Lana - Tél +33 (0)6 03 18 00 89  
Boutique HUBLOT Cannes • 4, La Croisette - Tél +33 (0)4 93 68 47 88  
Boutique HUBLOT St Tropez • 14, rue François Sully, place de la Carrière - Tél +33 (0)4 94 95 98 66

All our brands available on :

[www.kronometry1999.com](http://www.kronometry1999.com)

LONDON • PARIS • CANNES • MONACO • ST TROPEZ • LYON • BORDEAUX • COURCHEVEL

