

Postcards From the Underside

A ski bum flies south
and gets his feathers
blown back

Story and photos by Peter Moynes

Six thousand metres above the Argentine Andes, looking out the window of a small prop plane, it's hard not to be struck by the beauty and vastness of the geography below. To the east is Mount Aconcagua, the tallest mountain in the southern hemisphere. At 6,960 metres (22,831 feet) it casts its shadow past the border of Argentina and on into Chile. From this high point, the Andes spread north to the Caribbean and south to Tierra del Fuego National Park, a range that spans some 8,000 kilometres through seven countries, making it the longest mountain range on earth. It's also one of the world's highest. With over 50 peaks higher than 6,000 metres, only the Himalayas are higher. Yep, mountains as far as the eye can see.

In the shadows below these great peaks, people go about life as they do in most places: rising with the sun, working, raising families, growing. In my visits here I have been welcomed into their homes, eaten with their families, been blessed by their elders. This is my fourth time to South America, and I feel a connection that is difficult to explain. So I take photographs.



Bariloche, Argentina locals,
Lula and Huere Darquier.

ENDLESS WINTER

We've all seen the phrase before: "Skiing is Life." It's written on the T-shirt at that resort town souvenir shop. It clings to the bumper of some beat up 4 x 4 in front of the local ski shop.

But for Huere Darquier, a pretty girl from Bariloche, Argentina, skiing really is life. Huere has 29 ski seasons under her tiny belt, and she's only 24 years old. She has five sisters and brothers, and they all work as ski instructors at Cerro Cathedral, Bariloche's local resort. Her mother and father work at the resort as well. Skiing is a part of the Darquier family

makeup. It provides for them in every sense of the word.

When the Andean snows begin to wane in late October and the Argentine ski season is over, Huere and her sister Lula head to Whistler where they will instruct from December to April. It's all part of a cycle that keeps the girls skiing nearly 12 months a year and in a constant state of winter.

Here Huere Darquier drops a favourite line in her backyard, Cerra Cathedral, Bariloche, Argentina.



Skier Blair Debnam retreats from the wind off the summit of 4,023-metre (13,200-foot) Vulcan Llama in Chile's Lake District.

WINDS AND VOLCANOES

Like a long, thin strip of meat, Chile dangles from the rest of South America, bordered by a vast sea of saltwater nothingness on one side, and one of the world's highest, most continuous mountain ranges on the other. Two of the world's great oceans, the Pacific and the Atlantic, collide at its tip where they grapple in one of the most volatile climates on earth. Storms in these waters hammer Chile's coastline, rushing up on the country's literal spine — the Andes. The resulting consequences are near incessant precipitation and wind. Lots of wind.

Not just make-your-hair-swirl wind. Real blow-you-face-first-into-the-dirt wind. It's a serious factor in this part of the world; wind is inescapable, especially in the mountains. At times, its presence can be humbling.

"I think it's dying down a little," I shout to my partner. Blair is two feet below and six feet to my left but hears nothing. The only audible things are the wind's antagonistic roar and the occasional sound of shattered glass when crampons or an ice axe explode through what can best be described as a surface of icy corn flakes.

Located 4,023 metres above the Pacific Ocean, the summit of Vulcan Llama is one of many active volcanoes in an 8,000-kilometre line of impressive peaks that make up the Andes. Blair and I cling to the icy slope 200 feet below the summit of Llama, located in the heart of Chile's Lake district. Together we flutter like two thin strips of meat ourselves, waiting for the wind vultures, or worse.

Like pulling a child's toy from the mouth of a very large dog, we are shaken mercilessly by the wind. Body parts extended too far from the core feel as if they might rip off and fly away, like an errant napkin blown out of a speeding car.

With three more volcanoes left to climb on our trip, we decide to retreat to our tent and try our luck on Llama again another day. The tent, however, isn't looking so good.



Ski hill chauffeur, Lecherito, heads into the depth of August 10th, 2006.



BC-based skier Mark Lasseter slices through a 350-centimetre layer cake at Catedral Alta Patagonia, Bariloche, Argentina.

BIG AUGUST DUMPS

During the second week of August 2006, over 300 centimetres of snow fall on the Argentine resort of Cerro Catedral. During this cycle, nearly a metre of fresh snow accumulates at the resort in one 24-hour period. The storm is described by locals as the biggest provider of Argentine powder in over a decade.

In the early hours of August 9th we make a phone call to Lecherito, our self-appointed "ski hill chauffeur" during our stay in Bariloche. "No este bueno," he says. The roads are closed, and besides, he has two Brazilian models in bed with him, evidently too busy to drive us anywhere. His laughter bellows through the phone.

Akin to an Argentine incarnation of Danny DeVito, when you need a lift, Lecherito will arrive questionably sober, rambling off jokes and laughing, all the while pinning his rear-wheel Renault down the wrong side of some sketchy, ice-encrusted road.

In the early morning darkness of August 10th, Lecherito arrives at our front door, but on this morning there is no laughter, no talking. The air is laden with seriousness and wet flakes. It has been snowing for days. The roads are in terrible condition, and even though we have faith in our quirky cabbie, we also have our doubts.