

Friends, Legends, Wine, and the Promise to Return

We left Patagonia with the certain feeling that this was not a goodbye forever and that we would return one day. After all, we had eaten the calafate berry – according to legend, anyone who eats it, is destined to return. So, we left the Patagonia calafate berries in search of the Mendoza grapes.



The road toward Mendoza stretched wide before us with beautiful bright fall colors. The landscape shifted with every turn, mountains reshaping themselves, some in soft folds, others in jagged lines, and their colors drifting from green to gold to red.



Our first stop was Malargüe, a quiet town that serves as the gateway to one of the most unusual landscapes in Argentina: La Payunia Provincial Reserve. Often called the “black forest,” it is a vast volcanic field home to more than 800 volcanoes, one of the largest concentrations in the world. The ground here tells a story written with fire: ancient eruptions spilled rivers of lava across the land, which cooled into dark basalt, giving the terrain its striking black tone. It feels almost lunar and although we had already been to parts of the moon in Atacama, notably the moon valley, this felt different.

Unlike the moon in Atacama, guides are required to visit Payunia. We had planned a guided visit, but after snowfall the tour was canceled. As we tried to navigate the area on our own, it quickly became clear why guides are needed. The land offers no directions. There are no clear roads, only faint tracks. Strangely, the cancellation felt like a small gift. It slowed us down and kept us exactly where we needed to be, exploring on our own. Yes, we did explore some with TL’s help, just enough to get a taste for the place.

Under clear skies, we went to Caverna de las Brujas – *witches cavern*. The name comes wrapped in legend. It is said that during the time of the Spanish conquest, two indigenous women who had been held captive escaped and found refuge within these caves. They hid there, venturing out only at night in search of food. One evening, as others approached the cavern, they saw owls emerging from its depths. Mistaking the silhouettes for something supernatural, they believed the cave was inhabited by witches, and the name remained.

Inside, the cave tells a different story, one shaped not by myth but by time. Formed over millions of years, its limestone corridors twist and narrow, opening into chambers filled with stalactites and stalagmites that seem almost sculpted with intention. Mineral deposits have created delicate formations. Our guide, who has the same imagination as us, pointed to several formations within the cave: a pig, empanadas, an eagle, a monkey, among others. If you let your imagination go wild, you will never run out of things to see in this enchanted place. In fact, you could create your own fairytale with witches and all.



Just outside of the cavern, we caught a clear view of Tupungato Volcano. Towering at over 21,550 feet, Tupungato sits on the border with Chile and stands as one of the highest peaks in the Andes. And with that, we continued north towards Mendoza, but we first detoured into Las Leñas, one of the largest and most famous ski resorts in Argentina. Even though it was only the beginning of fall, fresh snow had already dusted the ground and the surrounding peaks, giving the whole valley that feeling that ski season is about to start. Interestingly, Las Leñas sits at the same latitude as Oklahoma City, yet by early fall, the Argentine calendar screamed winter!



While attempting to build a snowman, we met a group of Argentinians traveling by motorcycle through the mountains. Like so many encounters on the road, the conversation started casually and quickly turned into shared stories, recommendations, and laughter. They reside in Santa Fe, close to Rosario, both in the Santa Fe Province, but they were quick to let us know that although Lionel Messi and Che Guevara are from Rosario, *the place* to visit in the province is in fact Santa Fe. We observed once again the ritual of the yerba mate and noticed something else about it: the person carrying the thermos is the one who serves the mate and passes the cup around.

Leaving the snow and cold behind, we arrived at Chacras de Coria, a 15-minute drive from Plaza de la Independencia in the heart of the city of Mendoza. Mendoza and its surroundings welcomed us with tree-lined streets, expansive parks, and a rhythm that felt both lively yet relaxed.

While in Mendoza, we reconnected with Yoan, a French friend Scott had met months earlier in Cartagena while taking Spanish lessons. Although we had stayed in touch over time, there was never really an

expectation that our paths would cross again. His journey was entirely different from ours, moving along its own rhythm and direction, and the trajectories of our travels never seemed likely to align again. And yet, somehow, they did.

There was something unexpectedly meaningful about seeing a familiar face after seven months on the road. Travel constantly introduces new people, new places, new experiences, but it also carries a certain ephemeral feeling. You meet incredible people fully aware that most encounters may only exist within that brief chapter of time.

At the place where we were staying, the parrilla and outdoor space quickly became the center of our evenings. Two nights with Yoan unfolded into a proper Argentine asado, with good wine, slow-cooked meat, and the kind of conversation that stretches effortlessly late into the night. Then, trading smoke and fire for wheels and vineyards, one afternoon turned into *vélo et vin* – riding bicycles through nearby wineries tasting our way through the Maipú region in Mendoza.



Beyond the city, the landscape called and we acquiesced. On a sunny Sunday as TL climbed into the Andes, the landscape gradually became drier, rougher, and more dramatic, and then suddenly, after driving through a tunnel, Lago Portrerillos appeared, a striking stretch of turquoise water fed by snowmelt descending from the Andes.



Farther into the Andes we stopped at Puente del Inca, one of the most unusual geological formations in Argentina. At first glance, it almost looks imagined rather than natural. The bridge arches over the river in layers colored by minerals carried through the thermal waters beneath it.

There are several legends surrounding the site, including stories tied to the Inca Empire, which once extended into this region. According to one legend, Inca warriors formed a human bridge across the river so their ill emperor could reach the healing thermal waters, and when they rose again, they had turned to stone, creating the bridge itself. Today, the abandoned old thermal hotel nearby gives the place an almost ghostlike atmosphere.

We continued climbing until we reached Aconcagua Provincial Park. At 22,845 feet, Aconcagua is the tallest mountain in the Western Hemisphere, and unlike the sharp, jagged drama of Patagonia, its presence feels different, broader, quieter, almost solemn. Clouds moved slowly across the summit, wrapping and unwrapping the peak. At times, gusts swept snow from the top, creating long white plumes that drifted through the sky like smoke or more like “white wind.” We spent the Sunday afternoon hiking and taking in the incredible views.





And speaking of Sunday, while staying in Chacras de Coria, we had heard that on Sunday evenings, after mass, locals gather in the plaza, weather permitting, or at the local theater to dance tango. It was a cold night and before we knew it, we were inside the local theater. The place carried a quiet sense of purpose and belonging, as though everyone had arrived there for something deeper than simply dancing. Most were dressed elegantly, women in high heels, men in pressed shirts and polished shoes, while a few others came more casually. Yet the moment the music began, those differences disappeared and everyone seemed equally ruled by the rhythm.

What struck us most was the sense of community. It was obvious that many people did not know one another, yet the evening unfolded with a sense of connection rooted in tradition. A man would cross the room toward another table, politely invite a woman to dance, and moments later the two would move across the floor with astonishing harmony, as if they had spent years dancing together instead of meeting only seconds before. There was nothing performative about it. This was not tango staged for tourists under dramatic lights, it was ordinary life in a small town.

We did not tango, but music found us on a day we had decided to do what often leads to our favorite experiences: wander without much of a plan. We set out walking through the streets toward one of the area's larger, well-known wineries, but somewhere along the way, a smaller place caught our attention, Cavas Don Guillermo.

A small winery with the gate shut. We peeked inside to see if anyone was around. That small act of curiosity opened the door to one of our favorite memories in Mendoza.

Inside, we met a man and a young woman who, we later realized, were the owner and his daughter. We asked if perhaps we could do a tasting or at least have a glass of wine. They explained that the winery was normally reserved for private events and closed to the public that day. Nonetheless, with that common warmth in Argentina, they said we were welcome to sit down and enjoy a glass.

We noticed several private rooms that were already filled with people. Outside, under the soft autumn sun, they set a table for us and casually mentioned there would be a live show later. We asked for two glasses of wine. Instead, they brought an entire bottle.



When we laughed and explained we had only wanted a glass each, the woman smiled and said, “Well... that is two very large glasses.” Then came the food. First, a massive spread of *fiambres* (cured meats), olives, marinated vegetables, beans, and cheeses, including a pesto cheese that we are still thinking about. It was already enough to become dinner on its own. We kept insisting it was too much food, but our comments went ignored.

“Perfect,” the lady replied. “We eat a lot here. We’ll bring empanadas.”

We asked them not to, but they brought four anyway. And they were delicious!

As the sun began to lower, local musicians arrived, and a woman started singing traditional music that drifted through the courtyard. Families applauded, wine glasses lifted, children wandered between tables, and little by little we realized we had unintentionally stepped into a Día del Trabajo celebration, May 1st, Labor Day across much of Latin America.

What began as a quick stop for a glass of wine turned into an entire afternoon folded into local life. No reservations. No expectations. Just generosity, music, laughter, and the feeling that somehow, we had been welcomed into something deeply authentic simply because we were curious enough to open a door.



And when the bill finally came, after the bottle of wine, the endless food, and the live music, we wondered how much we had spent as we never saw a menu. It totaled around twenty-five dollars... yes, you read that right twenty-five dollars!

As our days in Mendoza were coming to an end, we had another call from the mountains. We followed our heart and headed towards Villaviciencio Natural Reserve – a reserve known for its dramatic winding roads that twist through the Andes in endless curves and the historic Hotel Villaviciencio, an abandoned 1900s hotel that rises unexpectedly from the wilderness.



As soon as we arrived, a familiar sense of anticipation returned. Just like in Torres del Paine, signs warned of pumas. As the afternoon softened into evening, we began to notice the same patterns we had learned to read before. Guanacos slowly moved uphill, the dominant ones positioning themselves along ridgelines, alert and watchful.

We almost convinced ourselves it wouldn't happen. Seeing a puma in the wild is rare, a matter of timing, patience, and luck aligning for a brief moment. As we turned back, almost ready to leave, a puma crossed right in front of us, silent and calm. We watched from a careful distance as it disappeared into the brush and began to feed. Time slowed in that moment, and the memory of the encounter stayed long after the scene ended with us watching him with our drone.



Leaving Mendoza, but not the wine country, we made our way to the Uco Valley, where the landscape opens again into something vast and quietly dramatic. The Uco Valley itself is almost minimal in its offerings, at least at first glance: vineyards, mountains, and open land. But the simplicity is part of its charm. We stayed at Domaine Bousquet Winery, a place with its own story rooted in France. The owners brought their winemaking tradition from Carcassonne, a town we had visited in 2024. That connection, unexpected and somewhat recent, made the experience feel even more personal. What also makes Domaine Bousquet unique is its commitment to being a 100% organic winery.

We also visited Bodega La Azul, a place where glasses never stayed empty for long, live music drifted through the tables, and each dish arrived thoughtfully paired with wines that made the flavors feel even more alive, all set against the stunning backdrop of the Andes.

Somewhere between courses and laughter, we noticed a couple approaching us with warm smiles. They introduced themselves as Marisol and Ezequiel, visiting from Buenos Aires. What they told us next caught us completely off guard. They had been quietly taking photos of us from a distance, not out of intrusion, but because they were captivated by what they saw. To them, we looked like a couple deeply in love, fully present, and they wanted to share that they had just gotten engaged!



Something about that moment seemed fairy-tale like: two couples, at different points in their stories, intersecting over wine and sunlight. We talked, laughed, shared pieces of our journeys, and what began as a chance encounter turned into something we carried with us. Since then, we've stayed in touch, and there is already a plan forming to meet again when we reach Buenos Aires.

Travel has a way of doing that. You set out chasing landscapes, and somewhere along the way, you find people who become part of the story just as vividly.



Our next stop in the Argentina wine country was Zuccardi, where we encountered something completely different. The winery itself felt architecturally connected to the mountains. That was not a mistake. Zuccardi's philosophy is "*vinos de la piedra*," or "*wines of the stone*." The concept reflects their deep focus on the rocky soils of the Uco Valley and the belief that the mineral-rich terrain is central to the identity of their wines. Even the fermentation process is loyal to their philosophy.

Unlike many wineries that use oak barrels or stainless-steel tanks, Zuccardi uses large concrete fermentation vessels shaped almost like giant eggs. It was the first time we had ever seen wine being fermented in concrete. The idea behind it is fascinating. Concrete allows tiny amounts of oxygen to interact with the wine, much like wood does, but without adding the woody flavors or tannins that oak barrels contribute. The result is a wine that many believe expresses the purest possible reflection of the grape and the terroir itself.



Each winery approaches production differently, shaped by family history, philosophy, climate, soil, and even emotion. It is far from a run-of-the-mill process. Every decision, from the way grapes are grown to how the wine is aged, feels intentional and artistic. Touring the wineries throughout Mendoza made us realize that wine here is not simply produced, it is interpreted. Every bottle carries a story, and every winery has one of its own to tell.

And eventually, it was time to say goodbye to Mendoza. We left with full hearts, wonderful memories, new friendships, and a much deeper appreciation for the culture and landscapes of Argentina. Just like the calafate berry in Patagonia is said to guarantee your return, we could not help but wonder if perhaps the grapes of Mendoza carry a little magic of their own. Because as we drove away from the vineyards and the Andes slowly faded behind us, we already knew this was not truly goodbye.



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