

Bariloche, Argentina

One awesome field trip A month in Patagonia with the Aspen-Bariloche student exchange

By Linda Lafferty - August 19, 2004

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When I was growing up in the Southwest, our local junior high and high schools made a big deal out of the end-of-the-year field trip. It was the equivalent of piling on a bus and going to a museum in Denver, with a quick stop at the zoo (which was, of course, the real highlight).

How times have changed! For their "field trip" this summer, six Aspen High School students finished their final exams and on the very next day boarded a plane for Argentina.

What was that like?

"A little stressful. Three of us came straight from the SAT exams to the airport. But I'm glad I'm here," said Andrew Preusch.

The Argentine flag, whipped by a brisk June wind. (Remember, June is a cold month south of the equator.)

"It was cool. Like we hadn't started the summer yet, and we just slid right into this experience," said Kelsi Coia.

Armed with Aspen High School International Baccalaureate Spanish, five girls - Kelsi Coia, Maddy D'Amato, Teige Muhlfeld, Lauren Wenzel, Christy Severy - and one intrepid young man - Andrew Preusch - set out for a three-week stay in Bariloche, Aspen's Argentine sister city.



Lauren Wenzel photo.

I tagged along with these 16- and 17-year-olds as the official AHS/Sisters Cities chaperone, wondering exactly what was in store for us during the next three weeks.

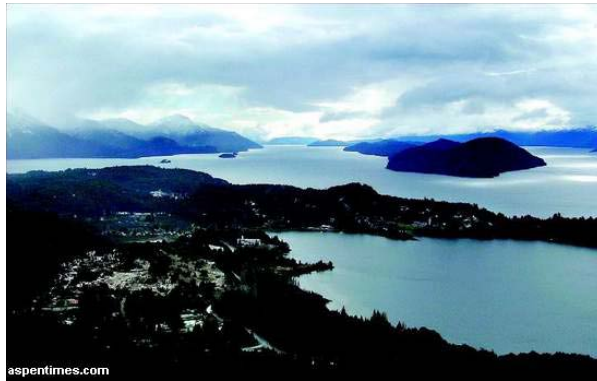
Four planes and 21 hours after taking off from the Aspen airport, we finally arrived. With only four hours of time change, there was no real jet lag for the kids, just unthrottled enthusiasm for what was to come next. Lillian Rowe, (the perfectly bilingual, British-accented) administrator of the Sister Cities Program in Bariloche met us at the airport and handed us schedules for the next three weeks.

The host families arrived from all over Bariloche to take their new "children" home. Two Bariloche teenagers who had spent the winter in Aspen swept into the airport, laughing and hugging their American friends. Soon the buzz of adolescent enthusiasm for all the plans, parties, and outings drowned out the flight announcements and caused travelers to stop and stare at the Aspen-Bariloche

contingent, babbling in a frantic mixture of English and Spanish.

After a few minutes, the Argentine families split off, each whisking their American child away to their home in Bariloche.

Teige Muhlfeld looked back over her shoulder as she was shepherded out of the airport to the family car. Later she recalled, "It just hit me - we were all dividing up and going separate ways."



We're not in Aspen anymore

The real Argentine experience, the Spanish immersion, had just begun.

I guess I expected Bariloche to look just like Aspen - so it came as a shock that this was a city of more than 100,000. Still, as I was to observe after three weeks, it has the feel of a much smaller town. Even I could walk down the main street, Mitres, and run into several people I knew within a few blocks. Having to politely stop and kiss each one, it took twice as long to do errands - but it had that friendly feel of offseason in Aspen, when you realize you still know someone in town, just vastly diluted by a whole lot of people that you don't know.

The second-most-striking feature of Bariloche is its setting on the enormous, 560-square-mile lake, Nahuel Huapi. The lake is 175 miles long and more than 27 miles across at its widest point. The city starts on the banks of the Nahuel Huapi - a Mapuche Indian name for "island of the puma" - and climbs up the foothills that eventually lead to the Andes Cordillera .

Bariloche is bigger, more urban and more commercial than the little mountain village I had pictured. Still the little chocolate shops, Swiss and German restaurants and "cervecerias" reminded me that this town was founded by Europeans at the turn of the century.

It was June 6 and - since the seasons are reversed down south of the equator - that meant it was just a couple of weeks away from the winter solstice. Snow was forecast for our first night - though it was to rain continuously for many days after - and the blue of the immense lake mirrored the snowcapped peaks of the Andes. I learned, however, that the lake waters were capricious, turning gray and turbulent with whitecaps like the sea during stormy weather.

Bariloche has the green lushness of a semi-rain forest, dotted with imported pine and spruce.

"When the parrots squawk in the trees, it means they have come down from the Cerro [mountain]," explained one native Patagonian. "That indicates we will have snow in the next 24 hours."

Sure enough, 22 parrots (I counted them) chattered overhead as I headed out for a run along the road that bordered the lake. Stopping to stare at the bright green birds with red markings, I was nearly hit by a car.

Couldn't we import some of these little guys to Aspen to predict powder days? They're a lot cuter than any satellite weather map.

A typical day for students

The next day was Monday and the start of the school week. The kids were awakened at 7 - it was pitch black, since the sun doesn't really peek over the mountains until around 9 - and roused to an Argentine breakfast of "media lunas" (croissants), hot chocolate, tea or coffee.

Argentine family members accompanied the Aspen kids to their first day of class - intensive Spanish ("Castellano," as they call it in Argentina), with a class beginning at 9 a.m. at the Colegio San Patricio. At 11, the Aspen students switched classes and went to the most advanced English proficiency courses to give the Bariloche students a little help with their English



Aspenites in Argentina.
Lauren Wenzel

After classes and before the daily afternoon "field trip," the Aspen kids pounded down a lunch packed by their host families. Then they set off on daily excursions to the market, the tourism office, the bank, post office, the "rain forest" of Patagonia, a ceramics factory, and the chocolate factories, among many destinations.

At 5:30 p.m., the weary American students, tongues sagging from speaking Castellano, returned to their homes to meet their host siblings and families, who were anxious to talk to them about their day.

So, how can this experience at the age of 16 or 17, compare with my high school excursion to the zoo? The zoo is cool and you gotta love those polar bears, but these lucky kids were living and experiencing a different culture, discussing pop music, movies and politics in a foreign language. They were welcomed with open arms into the heart of a different country, culture and people. This was one awesome field trip.



Aspen's sister city of Bariloche, Argentina, is set on the huge, 560-square-mile lake, Nahuel Huapi. - Lauren Wenzel photo.

Instant progress

Despite the fact that I could never be considered a native speaker, I do speak Spanish fluently. (At least Spain's Castilian Spanish and Mexican Spanish. The Argentine familiar form "vos" - instead of "tu" - leaves me tongue-tied at best.) While I make the occasional Gringo mistakes, I get on just fine in Spanish-speaking countries and I was curious to see what kind of progress our Aspen kids would make.

After only one day, I was struck by the increase in the kids' comprehension and appreciated their spark and "ganas" (desire) as they tried to get into the game speaking Castellano.

"This experience was different from Spanish classes because we were completely surrounded by Spanish speakers and were forced to use the language at all times. We had to listen to so much

Spanish that I can understand nearly 80 percent of a fast conversation, whereas before it was maybe 30 percent," wrote Lauren Wenzel later in her evaluation of the trip.

Excursions around Patagonia

As I mentioned, each afternoon there was an excursion, led by teacher Lorraine Green. The Aspen students set out to discover the physical beauty, culture and customs of Bariloche. They were quickly introduced to Bariloche's famous chocolate - some of the best we've ever tasted (apologies to any Swiss out there) - and the rich chocolate is melted, mixed with milk and served as a thick, heavenly beverage in just about every corner of this ski resort. It was the perfect beverage for our cold, rainy stay.

We hiked up the mountain to a "refugio," a hut where the owners serve simple meals. We learned this was the center for cross-country skiing, where visitors could rent skis, explore the mountain trails, then sit by the fire and sip - what else? - hot chocolate.

Cerro Catedral, the ski mountain of Bariloche, is located about 20 kilometers out of town, similar to the distance between Aspen and Snowmass Ski Area. The road climbs up the hills, winding through a valley to the foot of the mountain. The contrast of the high Andes Cordillera peaks with the deep blue of the immense lake is breathtaking.

Family and social life

Probably the highlight of the Aspen students' visit was their time with their families. The tradition of dinner around the table, with conversation among all members of the family, is still alive and well. The Aspen kids learned traditional recipes - how to make "empanadas" (turnovers or pies) and prepare "asados" (Argentine barbecue) - all explained in Castellano. Argentines are family-oriented people, and the affection and bond between the Bariloche families and the American children was touching.

"My girl [Argentine 'sibling'] and I were very well-matched and she made me feel welcome," wrote Teige Muhlfeld in her evaluation of the trip. "I met all her friends and became friends with them also. I love all the people and made a lot of friends. I will keep in touch with them through e-mail and phone and intend to return."

"I plan to stay in touch with my family because I made amazing relationships that I plan to keep. The people there are great!" raved Andrew Preusch.

"I have obtained a new, indescribable relationship that I will cherish forever," explained Maddy D'Amato, when asked to write about her experiences. "Also, I hope to return soon - two years, hopefully."

Using high school Spanish in the 'real world'

Bariloche provided a living laboratory in which to practice the Spanish taught in Aspen High. Spanish grammar and vocabulary jumped out of the textbook and became the language of the students' lives.

"I strongly believe that the only way to acquire a language is to be submerged within the culture and lifestyle," wrote Maddy D'Amato, Aspen High School's 2004-2005 Head Girl. "You learn so much, without even knowing it. You are learning all the time - from sunrise to sunset, 24 hours a day, without even knowing it. I swear that I even dream in Spanish."

"You learn Spanish all the time," explained Kelsi Coia, who spent a good deal of time preparing meals in the kitchen with her host family. "Watching TV was always fun on the cooking channel, the names of food were easy to pick up. It was great to talk so much in Castellano because we were able to

combine all our knowledge from school together and to use it in the 'real world.'"

Advice for next year's students

"Bring along an extra bag for chocolate," wrote Christy Severy, when asked to give advice for students participating in the program next year. Severy, the only Aspen sophomore to be accepted in the program, frequented Bariloche's numerous chocolate stores and cafes with her friends in the afternoons and evenings, when she wasn't trying to fit in a run. "And don't forget your long underwear - it's cold down here."

"Don't be afraid to greet a person with a kiss," advised Andrew Preusch. "That's the custom here, to say hello with a quick kiss on a person's right cheek."

"It seems to me that the Argentines never sleep. They stay up dancing all night," marveled Lauren Wenzel. "And don't hold yourself back - the best thing about this trip is to interact with the locals and participate in everything."

What is everything? Tennis matches, barbecues, special student nightclubs, "churros" (ridged, sticklike donuts) for breakfast at the local cafes, excursions, hikes in the mountains, boat trips and slumber parties.

Aspen/Bariloche Sister Cities Program

"I absolutely fell in love with my host family and we would have dinner together every night, play sports and just live life," wrote Teige Muhlfeld.

In fact, living life and making friends was just what this group of Aspen teenagers did with gusto. At the airport as we were departing, host families hugged their Aspen "children" and cried at the parting. I got a mouthful of salty tears from a particularly tenderhearted mother who couldn't bear to put Andrew Preusch on the plane.

As she wept, I realized just how profound a relationship could be forged in three weeks. We were lucky to have established such unique friendships nearly 10,000 miles away from Aspen - friendships and memories for a lifetime.

And it beats the heck out of going to the zoo.