



The author and her friend on the summit of Catedral.

Fall Skiing in Bariloche, Argentina

A run to remember

Story and photography by Lisa Ballard

My hankering for skiing gets earlier as I get older. A decade ago, if you had asked me to buckle up my ski boots in September, I would have laughed. “I’m still waterskiing,” I would have replied, “Talk to me in December.”

After turning 50, the snow started to beckon me back more quickly after putting my skis away in late March. Skiing in March was delightful. It was warmer, sunnier, and somehow felt more freeing, perhaps because I didn’t feel buried under 10 layers of clothing. Those bitter cold, windy days melted away. Everyone seemed happier and healthier, enjoying the slopes. Was it possible to ski more often when the weather was so glorious?

I tried Mount Hood, the snowcapped volcano in Oregon that typically offers skiing through mid-August. The slush bogged me down, and the terrain was limited. The early-morning corn snow was fine, but not the slop that it became by 10am. I wanted a place that offered spring skiing, not summer skiing, if you get my snowdrift, so I ventured farther away to Chile in South America and found it. Skiing in the Andes is like the Alps, but with the seasons reversed. Our fall is their spring.



From top: Visitors in the heart of the ski resort. The entrance to the Club Hotel Catedral, with its European-style architecture. One of the many runs above tree line at Catedral.



After two trips to Chile, my South American bucket list of ski resorts started to grow. Bariloche, the most prominent ski resort in Argentina, topped the list. I had heard of it since I started ski racing as a kid. Back in the 1970s, it was a popular spot to get some early time on snow. Last September, I skipped Chile and headed to Argentina on what became a memorable skiing adventure.

THE MOUNTAIN

Bariloche is actually a catch-all name for two ski areas and a tourist town in the lakes region of Patagonia. The

town—a city, really, with a population of 164,000—is formally known as San Carlos de Bariloche. It's located at an elevation of 2,930 feet on the shores of Lake Nahuel Huapi, a 210-square-mile lake within a national park of the same name. The city is surrounded by the white-mantled southern Andes Mountains, which top out over 11,000 feet.

Bariloche is often called the Tahoe of South America because of Lake Nahuel Huapi. Lake Tahoe in California is roughly the same size. Both lakes are more than 1,000 feet deep and surrounded by big mountains. That said, I found the skiing options more similar to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where there's a small ski area in the resort town and a much bigger one a few miles away with its own lodging, dining, and shopping at its base.

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DESTINATIONS



Above: A school group in matching ski jackets strolls through the resort.

Right: The author (far left) and her friends with a view of the lakes region behind them.

The big mountain in Bariloche is called Cerro Catedral, which means “cathedral hill” in English. Similarly, the ski area that drapes across this massive alpine ridgeline is called Catedral Alta Patagonia, or “high Patagonian cathedral.” The name comes from the rock spires that define some of the bowls and chutes, but the view is what makes a skier religious.

Whenever I get on a chairlift for the first time at a ski resort, I head to the top of the mountain. The ride up gives me a sense of its slopes, and standing at that high point is an opportunity to survey my surroundings. Mostly I love being on the summit. Getting there at Catedral took three chairlift rides. The first one traveled uphill above cut trails that formed winding corridors between old-growth conifers. The brownish snow looked old and granular, with bare spots here and





Top: A ski shop in the heart of the resort.

Above: A restaurant on one of the high ridges of the mountain.

there. The snow whitened and the trees thinned by the top of the second lift. The third lift was above tree line and back to the winter that I wished for.

THE VIEW

I stared upward toward the summit ridge as I traveled higher. My heart swelled at the massive cirque that curved away toward my left, all skiable. There was acre after acre of groomed slopes, the edges of which melded into moguls. Some of the mountain was wilder. The entire scene was capped by a cloudless azure sky.

I got off the chairlift and turned to ski down, then froze, not from the weather but from the incredible view. The panorama was like nothing I had ever seen before. Sparkling lakes lay like blue mirrors to the horizon. Around the lakes, untamed layers of glaciated peaks con-



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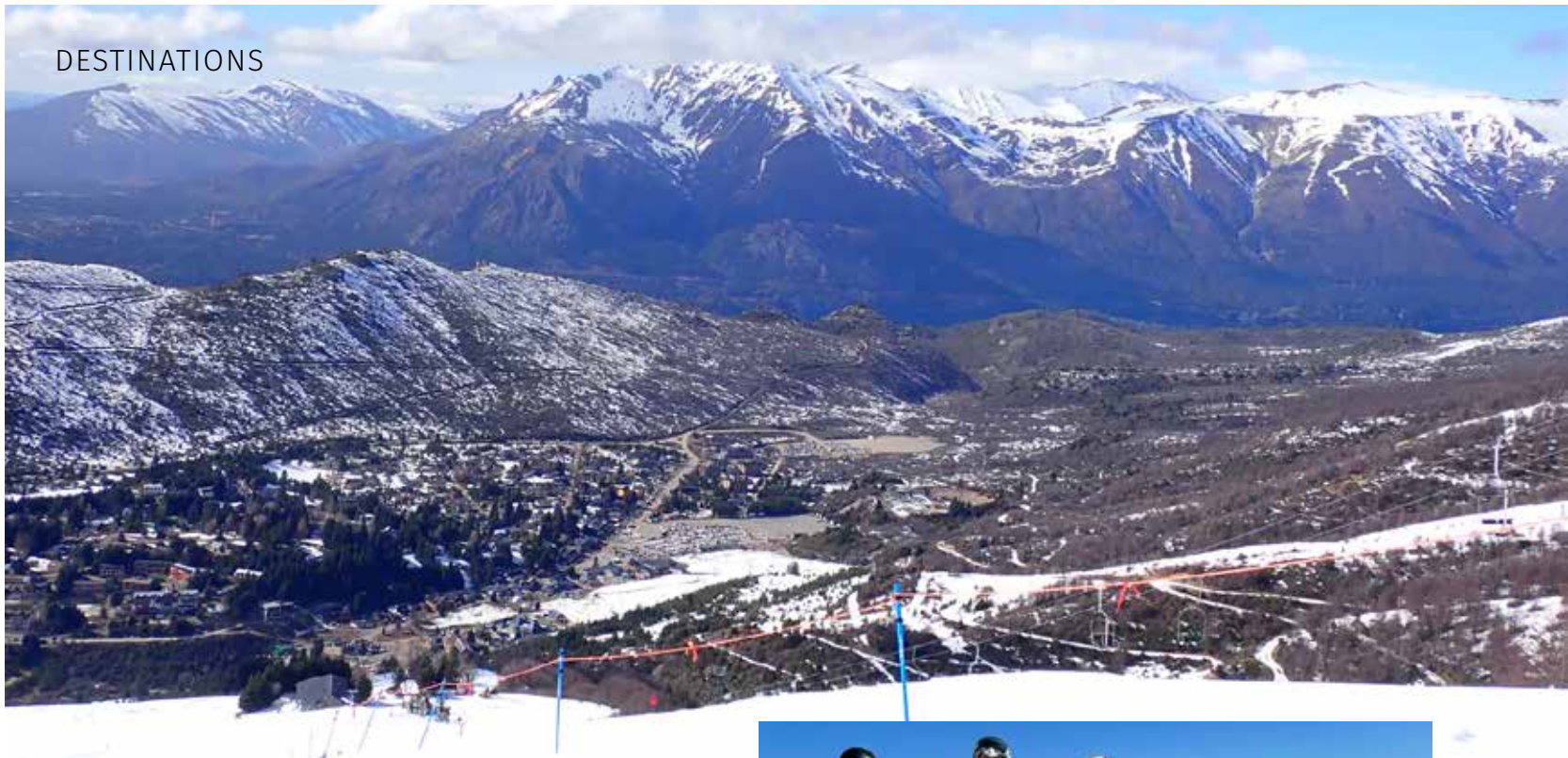


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DESTINATIONS



Above: View of the town of Bariloche from the ski slopes.

Inset: Friends enjoy the sun, the spring snow, and the view.



INSIDER INFO

GETTING THERE

San Carlos de Bariloche airport (BRC) is located 1,000 miles south of Buenos Aires, a two-and-a-half-hour flight. There are several flights per day on Aerolíneas Argentinas, a partner with Delta Airlines, from Ministro Pistarini International Airport, also known as Ezeiza International Airport (EZE). Be sure to book the connection onto Aerolíneas Argentinas from EZE to BRC, not the metropolitan airport that requires a one-hour (or longer) taxi ride across the city.

GROUND TRANSPORTATION

Arrange a shuttle from the airport to your hotel through your hotel, especially if you have a lot of luggage. Airport taxis tend to be small cars. Ski bags might not fit.

LODGING

Walk to the slopes from the Club Hotel Catedral, the less expensive—though comfortable and charming—of the two main hotels at Catedral Alta Patagonia.

► clubhotel.com.ar

LIFT TICKETS

Purchase lift tickets at the ticket window similar to American ski resorts or in advance online. Single and multiday tickets are available. For example, a six-day adult ticket is about \$600 (or about \$100 per day, though you might pay half that if you pay in US dollars).

► catedralaltapatagonia.com/tarifario

MONEY

The Argentinian peso uses a “\$” symbol similar to the US dollar. Currently Argentina is experiencing extreme inflation. Plan to pay for everything you can in cash in US dollars. You’ll get an exchange rate that’s up to double the bank rate, which is the rate if you pay with a credit card.

TIME ZONE

Argentina is one hour ahead of Eastern time. When it’s 9am here, it’s 10am there.

WATER

In general, water in urban parts of Argentina is considered safe to drink whereas water in rural areas is not. Water at the ski resort is potable.

ELECTRICITY

In Argentina, the wall sockets are most commonly type C, and sometimes type I. The standard voltage is 220V at a frequency of 50Hz. North Americans should bring one or two converters if you want to charge your electronic devices.

tinued as far as the eye could see. I've stood on summits around the globe and peered at magnificent mountains and lakes, but nothing like the view from atop Cathedral! As I breathed in the cool, calm air, the scenery seemed to inhale with it. Cathedral filled me up before I had made a turn.

Eventually I pushed off. The slope before me was steep but groomed. I forced myself to watch the terrain ahead of my skis instead of the exceptional scenery. The snow felt like butter as I carved turn after turn. The sun had warmed it just enough to soften it, but not too much. It was perfect spring corn snow. What's more, almost entirely natural snow covered Cathedral, which softens in the spring to a more velvety texture than machine-made snow that Vermonters know best. It was a run to remember.

THE WEATHER TAKES A TURN

After that first introduction to Cathedral, the weather and snow conditions remained heavenly for a week, then winter returned. On our last day, pea soup fog engulfed the mountain. The wind picked up, and a blizzard moved in. Exposed and above tree line, the conditions were the antithesis of the first seven days. I got off the lift on the now familiar summit ridge, but could see nothing. I could hardly tell what was up or down. To get down, I followed another skier in a bright red jacket. Vertigo and unruly clumps of ungroomed snow toyed with my balance. As fun as the skiing had been, it was now frightening.

When I finally reached the top of the second chairlift, I took off my skis and walked to the lift terminal where the few skiers that had come up that day were downloading toward the base. Once on the chairlift, heading down, the fog ended where the tree line resumed. "Skiing today was crazy," I mused.

And I'm just crazy enough to return to Bariloché again. I had left too many turns undone due the fog, and that view! If skiing is one's religion, Bariloché is the place for more than one pilgrimage. ❧




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