



Discovering Cafayate

Exploring the Argentine region some call the next Mendoza

BY JILL ROBINSON / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAVIER PIERINI — Summer 2018

O

verhead, telephone wires crowded with bromeliads hang like garlands and small green parrots chatter. It's 7 a.m. in Salta, in northwest Argentina. With bicycle frames and tires stashed in the back of the car, we depart the elegant, 100-year-old House of Jasmines estancia on Ruta Nacional 51, a two-lane road that sounds much more grand than its appearance. It's ideal for cycling because it's quiet, with minimal traffic, and well paved.

Shortly after we set out, I learn just how little cowboy life has changed in the Argentine countryside in the past three centuries. We pass by three gauchos traveling on horseback, followed by a jaunty fawn-colored dog with wary eyes. Two clad in traditional pancake-size *boinas* (berets) and baggy *bombachas* (trousers) clutch maté calabashes in their fists, sipping the beverage through a *bombilla* (metal straw). Ruta 51 is no tourist show.

After 90 minutes of driving, we stop at Posta de las Cabras, a dairy farm with a restaurant that specializes in homemade cheeses and delicious desserts, which I taste while my guide, Paola Sartori, assembles the bicycles. After she preps them and fills our water bottles, and I check my cycling helmet, we're ready to mount the bikes and begin our pedaling journey. Our destination: the Cafayate wine region, Argentina's epicenter of high-altitude viticulture. Set in the Calchaquí Valleys amid dramatic desert and mountain landscapes, this region isn't as developed as Mendoza, its popular sister to the south. But wine lovers are beginning to notice Cafayate, with visitor numbers doubling between 2012 and 2016, winery production growing, and a higher demand for local wines in external markets.

Vineyards in the area range from 5,400 to 10,000 feet above sea level, and the grapes that flourish here (bonarda, cabernet sauvignon, malbec, syrah, tannat, and torrontés) produce intense and concentrated wines due to the warm, sunny days and cool nights. While malbecs are most popular, as in Mendoza, many winemakers consider cabernet sauvignon and tannat blends the region's strong future.

Paola and bespoke tour operator Gray & Co. are my keys to Cafayate. Putting guest satisfaction first, they've talked with me extensively about my likes, dislikes, and desires for this journey, which will encompass four days of cycling. They have arranged everything — hotels, bikes, tastings, meals, and the selection of moderate cycling routes that offer a chance to discover the region and its wines more closely. I've hardly raised a finger, but now I do have to pedal.

DAY ONE

The road from Posta de las Cabras gradually climbs all the way to the small town of Cafayate, nearly 54 miles south, with a few downhill breaks. Taking in the scenery from a bicycle saddle makes for a more sensory experience than in a car, where windows keep scents and textures at bay. Along the route, in the Quebrada de las Conchas, red rock canyons open up to azure skies like a miniature Grand Canyon.

"Just like malbec," says Paola, pointing at the earth's deep red color. Despite the morning hour, the thought of a glass of wine makes my mouth water. But first, we have to get to Cafayate.

We follow the Rio de las Conchas, a river that will curve along with the road most of the way to our destination. *Camino Sinuoso* signs along our route sound far sexier than the English translation: “winding road.” As we dip into the canyon, the landscape changes. Rugged mountains wear a cloak of gray-green vegetation, while rock features thrust up out of the earth at an angle, the layers of minerals visible like pages in a book. Light red is iron oxide; dark red, zinc; light green, copper; and blue, cobalt.

A series of geological features prompts us to pull off the road onto the dusty shoulder as we encounter each one. The Garganta del Diablo (Devil’s Throat), a rock gorge with ropes of tillandsia bromeliads clinging to the towering walls, and the Amphitheater are located near each other. We walk through the narrow opening in the cliffs that widen like a keyhole into the Amphitheater, and the sound of a small wooden flute being played in the entrance lifts up into the air to bounce off the curved walls.

At Tres Cruces, a short distance down the road, we switch from two wheels to two feet to follow a trail to an overlook, where the vastness of the Quebrada unfolds before us. The river meanders through a valley choked with green plants seemingly out of place in this desert environment.

Past a small figure of clustered rocks in the shape of a frog, the Quebrada’s walls narrow. The same kind of chattering parrots we heard earlier in the day make their home in small niches in the cliffs, and weathered formations make the landscape appear like the pointed fairy chimneys in Turkey’s Cappadocia region.

A stiff breeze begins to whip up the rust-colored dust as we ride through the last named formation. El Obelisco, an obelisk of sandstone and clay, stands alone surrounded by sand and bright green scrubby plants. Las Ventanas, windowlike holes in the cliff faces carved by erosion, call to mind Southwestern cliff dwellings. The columns and towers of Los Castillos look like castles of pink rock.

The wind that has worked together with rain in forming the Quebrada’s features helps carry us the rest of the way into Cafayate after about five hours. Multiarmed giant Cardón cacti — similar to saguaro — are scattered through rows of vines in brick-dust earth.



Set up base at the Grace Cafayate hotel. PHOTO BY JAVIER PIERINI.

We ride down the long driveway to Grace Cafayate, a new 12-room, 20-villa luxury hotel that forms part of La Estancia de Cafayate, a secluded 1,360-acre residential and sporting estate with a golf course, two polo fields, gym, squash courts, and indoor pool. Free-standing villas have private patios with authentic *asado* grills, and the hotel’s spa and swimming pool overlook the

vines. We settle in here, our home for the next three nights. Based on my particular itinerary, we'll eat here twice, but all Gray & Co. clients can choose exactly how they want to enjoy the region — on and off the bike.

The Tasting Begins

Finally, it's time to head to a winery for that glass of wine. Maybe two. We cycle a little more than 3 miles northwest from Grace Cafayate to Bodega El Esteco, whose Spanish colonial-style white facade gleams in the sun, along with the white roses that dot the grounds where there aren't vineyards. We sit in a shady courtyard and taste from a selection that runs the breadth of the winery's labels. Altimus, a winemaker's blend that changes annually, results from a meticulous personal selection of the best grapes from each harvest. The 2011 blend of malbec, cabernet sauvignon, and cabernet franc quickly becomes my favorite with its ripe, soft tannins and flavors of raisins, ripe plums, and spicy black cherries.



Argentina's iconic white grape, the floral, aromatic torrontés, results from crossing native grapes with the Spanish-introduced muscat of Alexandria, an ancient grape variety. A tour through El Esteco's production rooms reveals the different way some of the wine is fermented and aged, in giant concrete eggs. The eggs' porous concrete breathes like oak yet the wine can still develop as if in stainless steel.

Less than a mile away, in the middle of Cafayate, the family-run boutique winery El Porvenir specializes in tannat and torrontés, yet its four vineyards also have malbec, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and syrah vines, among other varieties. Of the winery's three labels, El Porvenir (also referred to as Icon) blends four red varieties that vary each year based on the best wines from each vintage. After tasting the 2013 blend, which includes tannat and has hints of fruit, spice, and powerful tannins, I can't resist buying a bottle to bring home with me. Due to the wine's excellent structure, I can save it for up to 15 years, but I know I won't be able to hold out that long.

Come nighttime in Cafayate, the main plaza thrums with music. Families walk beneath the trees, and tables from local restaurants and shops spill out into the sidewalk. A neon *Alfajores* sign beckons those who seek the confection-style cookies with sweet fillings, most notably the indulgent *dulce de leche*. A short walk takes us to Bad Brothers Wine Experience, a restored adobe home that has morphed into Cafayate's first wine bar, featuring tastes of Bad Brothers wines paired with modern small plates. The restaurant and bar are far more than a "wine bar," with rooms scattered along the edge of two patios, making the experience seem like an exclusive

house party. Tasting samples from the ultrapremium Facón collection elevates that feeling.

DAY TWO

After a good night's sleep and breakfast, I'm ready for a second day of pedaling and wine tasting. We ride south of town for about 34 miles — a two-and-a-half-hour pedal — with the landscape slowly becoming more desertlike and the soil changing from red to buff. We pass a handful of small villages and vineyards (two belonging to El Porvenir) when a building labeled Destilería catches my eye. "It's new," says Paola. "Shall we take a look?" Inside, among funky flea-market decor, we find a distillery producing grappa and aguardiente from torrontés, but the bartender also serves beer and wine. Cyclists are always in need of hydration breaks, so after a sample of the grappa and aguardiente, I buy a bottle of the latter to tuck into my cycling bag.

Our next stop lies 36 miles north, so we decide to take a break from our two wheels and pack the bikes into the car and drive to Finca Las Nubes, home to Finca las Nubes and José Luis Mounier wines, tucked into a corner of the valley up against the mountains that form a natural boundary on one side. In a region of breathtaking beauty, this perhaps ranks as the prettiest place to relax in the sunlight on the grass, where winery dogs wander from sunny to shady spots, and the view sweeps across the vineyards of Cafayate to the small town, and finally to rusty-red mountains in the distance. The 2012 Tannat Reserva tastes much smoother than many other tannat wines we've tried thus far, due to the practice of fermenting in barrels, which takes the edge off the tannins.

DAY THREE

After breakfast, one last day for a ride in the valley takes us 17 miles north to the village of San Carlos, where we visit pottery artisans Javier and Fernanda at their studio, Cielo Antiguo. At every meal in Grace Cafayate's restaurant, their plates have caught my eye, and now we have a chance to make our own. While Javier dedicates great attention to my time at the wheel, I have to admit that I prefer their designs to my creation.



Crafts in the making at Cielo Antiguo PHOTO BY JAVIER PIERINI.

Piattelli Winery, 16 miles south from San Carlos, qualifies as the most modern in Cafayate, with a sprawling stone building that could be plucked up and dropped in the Napa Valley without looking out of place. After touring the winery, we settle in for a "two terroirs" tasting, which compares Piattelli reserve wines from Cafayate with those from its sister winery in Mendoza. While I appreciate the richness of the Mendoza wines, I'm beginning to become so familiar with the distinct sense of Cafayate terroir in my glass that it's a sentimental favorite. At Domingo Molina, farther up the hill from Piattelli, we taste malbec and red blends from the barrel as we

watch the sun set over the valley, washing the red earth in golden light. The deep reds of the wine in my glass, with a taste of purple fruit and leather, seem the perfect sensorial accompaniment to the scene.

A final dinner back at Grace Cafayate consists of rich malbec wine, delicious homemade empanadas, and Argentine asado. It's not often that I'm happy to reach the end of a trip, but in this case, anticipating the ride back through the epic landscape and jagged rock formations of the Quebrada de las Conchas makes me thankful for tomorrow.

Details: Gray & Co. cycling trips to Cafayate start at \$2,000 per person per day and include luxury accommodations, meals, expert guides, customized activities, transfers, and more. 416-998-4082; grayandco.ca