

# Mar Chiquita

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

August 2019

## Outline itinerary

<b>Days 1/2</b>	Depart London (LATAM flight via Sao Paulo)
<b>Day 2</b>	Arrive Cordoba, overland to Mar Chiquita lagoon.
<b>Day 3/4</b>	Dulce River wetland and delta
<b>Day 5</b>	Chaco woodland and Salinas Grandes saltflats
<b>Day 6/7</b>	Chaco and central sierras
<b>Day 8</b>	Fly home

## Dates

Sat 10<sup>th</sup> – Sun 18<sup>th</sup> August 2019

## Cost

£2,695 per person

## Grading

Grade A

## Focus

Birdwatching

## Highlights

- Three species of flamingo
- Abundance and diversity of wildfowl
- Lots of endemic species
- Diverse range of habitats, including wetland, Chaco woodland, montane and saltflat
- Led by experienced local guide



From top: Olive-crowned Crescentchest, Chilean Flamingos, Northern Marshes



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## Introduction

Mar Chiquita is 70km long and 24km across, making it the largest salt lake in South America. The lake and surrounding wetlands host huge numbers of resident and migrant birds, including half a million Wilson's Phalarope, tens of thousands of Lesser Yellowlegs, White-rumped Sandpiper and American Golden Plover. The area also harbours endangered species, including Dot-winged Crake and Crowned Solitary Eagle. Over 60% of the global population of Vulnerable Andean Flamingos and 10% of Near-Threatened Puna Flamingos overwinter here. Recently a huge nesting colony numbering in the thousands of Near-Threatened Chilean Flamingos established themselves here.

For these reasons the area has been designated a RAMSAR site, an Important Bird & Biodiversity Area (IBA) and a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve. Unfortunately, this hasn't secured the conservation of this important wetland, which continues to be threatened by deforestation, farming pressures, pollution and the construction of dams and irrigation channels. Aves Argentinas have been working at Mar Chiquita for many years, with the ambitious goal of gaining National Park designation. We hope that responsible tourism to the area will help demonstrate its global importance.

Our one-week tour first explores the avifauna of Mar Chiquita Lagoon and the Dulce River wetlands. Afterwards we will make our way to the Salinas Grandes salt pans where the endemic Salinas Monjita resides. We will search the surrounding Chaco woodland for Chaco (Crowned) Eagle and Spot-winged Falconet, keeping our eyes open for other exciting possibilities such as Red and Black-legged Seriema, the localized Black-bodied Woodpecker and the endemic Cinnamon Warbling-Finch. From here we will make our way higher up into the Sierras, in search for a selection of furnariids, including Olrog's and Córdoba Cinclodes, Chaco Earthcreeper, Puna Canastero, Crested Hornero and many more.

## Itinerary

*Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available. It should be kept in mind that we are travelling to the southern hemisphere, where August is a month of winter.*

### Day 1

### Depart London

Depart London on LATAM flight via Sao Paulo.

### Day 2

### Mar Chiquita lagoon and Miramar

Our flight via Sao Paulo will arrive at Cordoba airport at around 11:00 am. We will meet our local tour leader here before driving to the Mar Chiquita lagoon, located on the northeast corner of the Cordoba province. The drive will follow the course of the Primero River and we will take the opportunity to stop at a couple of wetlands along the way for some introductory birding, that may include Great, Pied-billed and White-tufted Grebes, Cooi Heron, Great and Snowy Egrets, White-faced Ibis and the attractive Roseate Spoonbill. Passerines we will hope for are Wren-like Rushbird, Chotoy Spinetail, Spectacled Tyrant, Sooty Tyrannulet, Yellow-throated Spinetail, Sharp-billed Canastero and Warbling Doradito. We will also keep our eyes peeled for the localized and scarce Dinellis Doradito.

Surrounding the wetlands is a low brushy landscape known as 'The Chaco'. Here we can readily see both Chimango and Southern Caracaras, as well as American Kestrel. Other targets are the Brushland Tinamou and Spotted Nothura - two common members of the Tinamidae family which become briefly visible when crossing the road. After a 200km drive we will arrive at the village of Miramar, situated on the south coast of Mar Chiquita lagoon. We will stay here for two nights at either the Ansenusa Hotel Spa or the Andahue Hotel, both 3-star.

Miramar is a small quiet town during most of the year, its old-fashioned houses and unpaved streets make it seem like the town is stuck in the time. It is not unusual to come across large herds of cattle being driven through the town and the influence of the slow-paced Gaucho lifestyle can be seen everywhere.

After unloading at the hotel, we will take advantage of the local coastline. The coastline surrounding the lagoon is in a constant state of flux due to seasonal changes in water level. Much of it is precipitous, though there are a couple of sandy beaches nearby, where we will search for Grey-hooded and Brown-hooded Gulls.

### Day 3

### Mar Chiquita Lagoon and Dulce River wetland

A full day will be spent exploring the southern section of Mar Chiquita lagoon. Birding is particularly excellent at the Altos del Chipion wetland (50km to the east of Miramar) and the Mistolar section (80km to the West), where we will enjoy walks along well-kept trails. One of our targets is the Chilean

Flamingo, which may require a short boat ride on the lagoon. Local intelligence will be used to decide on the best course of action.

The flamingoes can be a little unpredictable, but we will certainly see other interesting wildfowl, such as Spot-flanked Gallinule, Red-fronted, White-winged and Red-gartered Coots, and a host of herons, ducks and egrets. We will also keep our eyes open for winter migrants including the rare Rufous-chested Dotterel. Second night in Miramar.

## Day 4

## Dulce River delta

In the morning we will drive northwards exploring the freshwater Dulce River delta at various localities. Depending on weather conditions and the water level in the delta we will either take a boat trip or keep driving along the elevated dirt road in order to reach ideal birding locations such as the Limache bridge, which crosses the main course of the Dulce River. An amazing abundance and diversity of wildfowl congregate here, including both Black-necked and Coscoroba Swans, several species of duck such as Fulvous and White-faced Whistling-Ducks, Southern Wigeon, White-cheeked and Yellow-billed Pintails, Silver, Cinnamon and Speckled Teals, Red Shoveler, Lake Duck and Rosy-billed Pochard. Of special interest are the attractive Ringed Teal and the shy, unpredictable Black-headed Duck. A trio of likely Kingfishers include Ringed, Amazon and Green. Raptor targets are Cinereous and Long-winged Harriers. Limpkin and Plumbeous Rail are plentiful, and we will search for Giant Wood Rail, Spotted Rail, Purple Gallinule and South American Painted-snipe.

After a full morning exploring the Dulce River delta we will head westward into the drier Chaco woodland, where grassland gives way to sandy soil and tall spiny bushes. Spot-winged Pigeon, Eared Dove and Picui Ground-Dove are common sightings, Blue-crowned and Monk Parakeets can be found in noisy flocks of up to forty birds. Hummingbirds found here are the attractive Blue-tufted Starthroat and the more common Glittering-bellied Emerald and Gilded Sapphire. Campo Flicker, Green-barred and Checkered Woodpeckers are widespread, and we will also devote time in search of the beautiful White-fronted (Cactus) Woodpecker. From the delta we will drive for 100km to reach the locality of Cerro Colorado, where we will stop for two nights at the beautiful Casa de Campo El Palomar.

## Day 5

## The Chaco

Cerro Colorado is a small locality nearby the large salt flats of Salinas Grandes and Salinas de Ambargasta. In the early morning we will set out into Chaco habitat travelling west towards the eastern border of the Salinas Grandes. Some excellent birds in the Chaco habitat await us, including Chaco Chachalaca, Burrowing Owl, the endemic Cinnamon Warbling-finch and the rare Spot-winged Falconet. Furnariids here are Chaco Earthcreeper, Rufous and Crested Hornero, the restless Lark-like Brushrunner and Stripe-crowned Spinetail, Short-billed Canastero, Firewood Gatherer, Sooty-fronted and Pale-breasted Spinetails, Tufted Tit-Spinetail, Little Thornbird and the spectacular Brown Cacholote. Two other unique species in this woodland are Scimitar-billed

Woodcreeper and Crested Gallito. Our primary target is the endemic and attractive Salinas Monjita, which will spend a couple of hours looking for in its habitat at Ambargasta and Salinas Grandes saltflats. We will then return to our lodge in Cerro Colorado for a good rest and excellent dinner at Casa El Palomar.

## Day 6

## Chaco and Central Sierras

In the morning we will drive south to the Uritorco Mount, birding along a large section of Chaco Serrano habitat for several specialities such as the spectacular Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper and the rare Black-bodied Woodpecker. We will aim to see the Black-legged Seriema, Chaco (Spot-backed) Puffbird, the scarce White Woodpecker and Crowned Eagle. Other possibilities for the day are Variable and Great Antshrikes, Crested Gallito, Bran-coloured Flycatcher, Pearly-vented Tody-tyrant, the poorly known Straneck's Tyrannulet, Tawny-crowned Pygmy-tyrant, Yellow-billed Tit-tyrant, Greater Wagtail Tyrant and two beautiful winter visitors – Rusty-backed and Black-crowned Monjitas.

After lunch will continue southwards for around 80km to the small village of Icho Cruz, where we will stay at the Hosteria Icho Cruz for two nights. The gardens surrounding the hotel are full of flowers which act as a magnet for the spectacular Red-tailed Comet and a few species of tanager. In the evening there will be an optional night walk in search of Ferruginous Pygmy and Tropical Screech-owl.

## Day 7

## Central Sierras

Birding will commence as soon as we leave our hotel as we drive the Altas Cumbres road, which slowly climbs into the mountains. We will take full advantage of the varying altitude along the road and in Pampa de Achala and the Condorito National Park. After around 90km of driving we will summit at around 2,200m, where we will look for Andean Tinamou, Darwin's Nothura, a local race of the Puna (Cordoba) Canastero, the endemics Olrog's and Cordoba Cinclodes, Cordilleran Canastero, the attractive Olive-crowned Crescentchest and a number of Seedeaters, Warbling-finches and Ground-tyrants. Overnight back in Icho Cruz.

## Day 8

## Flight home

A second morning will be devoted to birding the Pampa de Achala in search of any missing species. We will also spend time in search of two endemics, the Carbonated Sierra-finch and the rare Steinbach's Canastero as well as a fine collection of Tinamous, Parakeets, Earthcreepers and Yellow-finches. Also noteworthy are the local races of Sedge Wren and White-winged Cinclodes. Andean Condor, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle and Variable Hawk are likely close sightings, while Golden-billed Saltator and Long-tailed Meadowlark will catch our attention as they sing from exposed perches in their grassland habitat. In the early afternoon we will drive back to Icho Cruz where we will take the chance to refresh before loading our luggage for the one-hour drive back to the Cordoba airport for our homeward flight.

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## Valdés Peninsula Extension

£1,395 per person sharing (£195 single room supplement)

We offer the chance to extend this holiday with a visit to the Valdés Peninsula, home to Southern Right Whales, colonies of Magellanic Penguin, Southern Sealion and Elephant Seal, plus a wide range of birds that are not attainable with the main itinerary.

### Day 1

### Puerto Piramides

After breakfast we drive the short distance to the local airport and take a flight southwards to Trelew on the coast of Chubut province. On arrival in Trelew we will travel by coach to a coastal hotel in the Peninsula Valdes resort of Puerto Pirámides. The local economy owes a great deal to two aquatic creatures and as we leave the airport their images are represented on almost every advertising hoarding: The Southern Right Whale and the Magellanic Penguin. Both attract thousands of visitors to the area; indeed, it is claimed that the numbers of visitors to the Punta Tombo penguin colony each year exceed the figures for the Galapagos Islands! The journey will take approximately two hours on the long straight roads typical of the area around Trelew, but our first sightings of Lesser (Darwin's) Rhea and family parties of Elegant Crested Tinamous running along the roadside will keep us busy. Once checked in and settled into our hotel an afternoon walk in the surroundings will give us a fine sampling of smaller birds typical of the Patagonian grassland such as Canasteros, Earthcreepers and Sierra-Finches.

### Day 2

### Puerto Piramides

The undistinguished little resort of Puerto Pirámides is situated on the south coast of Peninsula Valdés and overlooks the Nuevo Gulf where concentrations of Southern Right Whales occur. One of the largest of the great whales, these magnificent creatures were once hunted to the verge of extinction, but numbers have gradually recovered and the population is now closely studied by scientists based on the Peninsula. Many cows spend the Patagonian summer in the waters off Valdés, and at the time of our visit we may be able to see some of the newly born young swimming with their mothers. Looking out to sea from the shore we are likely to see whales spouting and witness their huge tails projecting above the waves, like so many real-life Athena posters! Occasionally a whale will leap clear of the water and to see this spectacular performance will be one of the tour highlights. Later in the afternoon, or possibly during the following day, we will undertake a short boat trip to try and approach closer to the whales. In this way it is possible to get within a few metres but everything depends upon the cooperation of the animals and it is definitely not permitted to harass these wonderful creatures.

The vastness of Peninsula Valdés will become apparent as we spend a day visiting the principal natural history sites on the north and east coasts. Much of the interior could best be described as moorland with extensive thickets of scrub and occasional marshy pools. Unusual species of plants grow here and we will hopefully encounter parties of Guanaco, a small very attractive member of

the camel family which still occurs on Valdés but is often hunted elsewhere in Patagonia. Not surprisingly these graceful animals are somewhat shy but another resident mammal, the Patagonian Mara, is frequently more confiding. An odd-looking creature with long thin legs, plump body and deer-like head, the Mara lives colonially in burrows and the occupants graze vegetation at a safe distance from the holes ready to rush back if alarmed. A handful of birds are typical of the bushy areas: Patagonian Mockingbird, Carbonated and Mourning Sierra-Finches and Yellow Finches. Other more elusive passerines also occur in the scrub including Band-tailed Earthcreeper, Rusty-backed Monjita and Grey-bellied Shrike-Tyrant. More open expanses are frequented by Southern Lapwing, Long-tailed Meadowlark and Rufous-backed Negrito and it is in this habitat that we may find Tawny-throated Dotterel and Least Seedsnipe.

It is the coastline of the Peninsula which most excites attention and on favoured beaches we can witness large numbers of Southern Sealions and Elephant Seals, together with attendant scavenging Kelp Gulls and Snowy Sheathbills. The mammals will be females and young males, the adult males having dispersed out to sea earlier in the spring, and many young pups should be evident in November. It is on these beaches that the famous sequence was filmed showing Killer Whales beaching themselves to snatch seals, but sadly these awesome predators should be further out to sea at the time of our visit and we will need good fortune to spot one. The rugged coastline is only accessible by road at vantage points and from these we can look down on the concentration of animals. Some of the young bulls interrupt long periods of loafing to indulge in practice fights with other young pretenders and there is much roaring and bellowing to disturb the tranquility of the scene. Birdlife is relatively sparse but Rock Cormorants breed on several cliffs, Giant Petrels and Black-browed Albatrosses glide offshore and both American and Blackish Oystercatchers inhabit the shoreline pools. Birds of prey include Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Turkey Vulture, Red-backed Hawk, Chimango Caracara and American Kestrel. A day on Peninsula Valdés inevitably involves a degree of coach travel, (it is over 100 kilometres from the tip of the Peninsula to the 'mainland'), but the assemblies of animals make the journey worthwhile and a surprising variety of birds can be discovered in this unspoilt wilderness.

## Day 3

## Trelew

We will spend much of the morning enjoying a more leisurely exploration of the Peninsula adjacent to Punta Pirámides and a walk along the cliff top footpaths may provide more views of whales, plus the chance of a few seabirds. Manx Shearwaters regularly appear offshore although one can only guess the distances they must fly to reach this remote coastline. There is a colony of South American Terns on an island a short distance from the resort and a few Rock Cormorants also inhabit the cliffs. This morning may also be devoted to a whale watching trip if conditions or lack of time had precluded such a trip during the previous day. Later we drive back to Trelew for a two-night stay and will possibly have time to visit a lake near the city where attractions include many waterbirds, Black-necked Swans, Chiloe Wigeon, Great and White-tufted Grebes and marsh-loving passerines such as the Wren-like Rushbird, Spectacled Tyrant and Many-coloured Rush-Tyrant.

## Day 4

## Trelew

We leave Trelew to spend the day visiting the huge Magellanic Penguin colony at Punta Tombo but to avoid the crowds which occur in the morning we will take our time reaching the site and look for birds en route. Along the way patches of roadside scrub and bushes may produce such typically Patagonian birds as Lesser and Patagonian Canasteros, Scale-throated and Band-tailed Earthcreepers, White-throated Cachalote, Diuca Finch, Carbonated and Mourning Sierra Finches. After looking for all these 'LBJs' it will make a refreshing change to arrive at Punta Tombo where the birdwatching becomes a lot easier. It is estimated that up to one million Magellanic Penguins can be present at peak times and there is certainly no shortage of the creatures! Visitors can enter a small section of the colony on boardwalks and of course the penguins treat the humans with massive indifference, going about their business as if oblivious to the pointing cameras or chattering children. The birds are a constant source of amusement and their braying calls resound over the sand dunes which are riddled with nest burrows. Tiny chicks should be evident in early November whilst other pairs will still be incubating eggs. When we are sated with the penguin city we can turn our attention to other occupants of the headland which might include Lesser Rhea, Crested Duck, the endemic Chubut (White-headed) Steamer Duck and Lesser Cavy, a medium-sized rodent that cohabits some of the penguin burrows. These amusing little penguins give pleasure to hundreds of visitors each day and one can only admire the skillful way the local Park Service has exploited their attraction yet taken care to ensure that the colony is not disturbed. Like the whales at Valdés the penguins are a valuable commodity and in many ways, this is their best guarantee of future survival.

Later in the day we will drive into a very different habitat as we enter the cultivated Chubut Valley. This green and fertile oasis amid the bleakness of Patagonia was created by Welsh immigrants during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and many of their descendants still converse in Welsh rather than Spanish. The story of their arrival in Patagonia is an extraordinary tale. The original group of immigrants, unhappy with the government in England, were delighted to be offered land by the Argentine government but the latter somehow neglected to explain that the land was in windblown Patagonia, which at that time was virtually unexplored and populated by hostile Indians. The settlers left Britain full of enthusiasm having presumably overlooked the small-print and arrived after a horrendous sea voyage to find a landscape far removed from their expectations. There followed years of privation during which many of the settlers died, but the survivors battled on and eventually created the farming community that exists today. Gaiman, the main town is very Welsh in character and a thriving industry has developed selling their 'Welshness' to the many visitors who come to see these geographical oddities. Perhaps the presence of the Welsh community explains the homesick Manx Shearwaters off Valdés! The change of habitat will give us some different species to look for and among these are the cliff-nesting Black-faced Ibises, handsome Burrowing Parrots and Picui Ground Doves.



## Day 5 Trelew

In the morning we will drive back to the airport in Trelew for our flight to Buenos Aires. We will then transfer to the Ezeiza international airport in Buenos Aires for our homebound flight.

## Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Argentina. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/argentina> or telephone 0870 6060290 regularly prior to travel.

## Extra Expenses

Items of a personal nature such as drinks, laundry etc. Tips (allow approx. \$20 per day).

## Food & Accommodation

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. Accommodation will be in a variety of tourist hotels with private facilities. At some of the more remote locations we use the best available hotels, but these will be somewhat simpler in style than the bigger city hotels.

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