

Mar Chiquita

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

February 2019

Outline itinerary

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

Dates

Sat 16th – Sun 24th February 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 February is a month of summer.

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, Cocoi 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 keep our eyes peeled for the localized and scarce Dinellis Doradito. A selection of summertime northern migrants will be present, including White-crested and Small-billed Elaenias, Suiriri Flycatcher, and the showy White-winged Black-tyrant.

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 while 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 but serves as an important summer retreat for the people of Cordoba city from December to March. 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, as well as the summer visitor Franklin's Gull.

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. Areas of muddy shoreline usually provide American Golden, Two-banded, the smaller Semipalmated and Collared Plovers, the attractive Ruddy Turnstone, Hudsonian Godwit, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Baird's and White-rumped Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilt and the abundant Wilson's Phalarope. 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 level of water 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 Common Snipe.

After a full morning exploring the Dulce River delta we will retrace our steps 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 and 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 noisy flocks of Chaco Chachalaca, Dark-billed and Striped Cuckoos, 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. After dinner there will be an optional night walk in search of the beautiful Little and Scissor-tailed Nightjars.

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 Tityrant, Greater Wagtail Tyrant and Ultramarine Grosbeak.

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 will be another optional night where we will try for Ferruginous Pygmy and Tropical Screech-Owls.

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, White-collared and Andean Swifts, plus a local race of 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 the endemic and scarce 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, Cinereous Harrier 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.

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 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 will make the short drive to the local airport and fly south to Trelew, a small city in the Chubut province. After picking up our bags, we will travel by coach to a coastal hotel in the Peninsula Valdés resort of Puerto Piramides. The local economy is dependent on two marine species – The Southern Right Whale and Magellanic Penguin, which becomes evident when leaving the airport, as their images pervade every advertisement. Both species attract thousands of visitors to the area, it is even claimed that the number of visitors to the Punta Tombo penguin colony each year exceeds figures for the Galapagos Islands!

The journey takes approximately two hours, thanks to the long straight roads typical of the area. From the coach we will have our first sightings of Lesser (Darwin's) Rhea and family parties of Elegant Crested-Tinamous running along the roadside. After getting settled into the hotel, an afternoon drive and walk nearby will give us a fine sample of the smaller birds typical of Patagonian grassland, such as Canasteros, Earthcreepers and Sierra-Finches.

Day 2

Puerto Piramides

The small resort of Puerto Piramides is situated on the south coast of Peninsula Valdés overlooking the Nuevo Gulf, where high concentrations of Southern Right Whales can be found from June to December. In the late afternoon, or possibly during the following day, we will undertake a short boat trip along the cliff lined coastline where gulls, oystercatchers and cormorants nest.

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 peninsula's interior would be best described as moorland, with extensive thickets of scrub and scattered marshy pools. The flora of this habitat is particularly interesting, and we will take the time to identify key species. Guanaco, an attractive camelid species, are present in small herds. Another resident mammal, the Patagonian Hare or Mara, is frequently seen in family groups. Maras are odd-looking creatures with long thin legs, plump bodies and deer-like heads. They live in colonial burrows, the occupants grazing on vegetation at a safe distance from their burrow, which they rush back to when alarmed.

Patagonian Mockingbird, Carbonated and Mourning Sierra-Finches and Yellow Finches are typical of this habitat. Other more elusive passerines occurring in the scrub include Band-tailed Earthcreeper, Rusty-backed Monjita and Grey-bellied Shrike-Tyrant. Open patches are frequented by Southern Lapwing, Long-tailed Meadowlark and Rufous-backed Negrito plus the rare Tawny-throated Dotterel and Least Seedsnipe.

We will then head for the coast, where on favoured beaches we will witness large numbers of female Southern Sealions and Elephant Seals with their young. Adult males will have dispersed out to sea earlier in the southern hemisphere spring, but there will be many young pups still present in February. Kelp Gulls and Snowy Sheathbills can be seen scavenging amongst the seals and sealions. It was here that the famous BBC footage was captured, showing Killer Whales beaching themselves while snatching seals, hopefully we will have the good fortune of seeing them! The rugged coastline is only accessible by roads to vantage points, which we will use to watch the action. On occasion young bulls will punctuate long periods of loafing to practice fighting, disturbing the scene's usual tranquillity with thunderous roaring and bellowing. 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 pools on the shoreline. Birds of prey include Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Turkey Vulture, Red-backed Hawk, Chimango Caracara and American Kestrel. A day on Peninsula Valdés invariably involves considerable time on the road, (it is over 100 kilometres from the tip of the Peninsula to the 'mainland'), but the exciting wildlife in this unspoilt wilderness make the journey well it.

Day 3

Trelew

We will spend much of the morning enjoying a more leisurely exploration of the Peninsula adjacent to Punta Piramides. A walk along the clifftop footpaths will provide interesting a few interesting seabird species. Manx Shearwaters regularly appear offshore, having migrated thousands of kilometres from their breeding grounds in Europe. We will then visit a colony of South American Terns on a nearby island, looking out for a few Rock Cormorants which also inhabit the cliffs.

Later we will drive back to Trelew, visiting a lake near the city, which is home to many waterbirds, Black-necked Swans, Chiloe Wigeon, Great and White-tufted Grebes and marsh loving passerines such as Wren-like Rushbird, Spectacled Tyrant and the beautiful Many-coloured Rush-tyrant. We will then settle into a hotel in Trelew for a two-night stay.

Day 4

Trelew

Today we will visit the huge Magellanic Penguin colony at Punta Tombo. To avoid the early morning crowds, we will take the time to enjoy some birding en route. Along the way patches of roadside scrub and bushes may produce typical Patagonian birds, such as Lesser and Patagonian Canasteros, Scale-throated and Band-tailed Earthcreepers, White-throated Cachalote, Diuca Finch, Carbonated and Mourning Sierra Finches.

After searching for these small, well camouflaged birds, we will arrive at Punta Tombo where birdwatching becomes a lot easier. It is estimated that up to one million Magellanic Penguins are present here at peak times! Visitors are permitted to enter a small section of the colony on boardwalks, where the penguins treat the humans with indifference, seemingly oblivious of the crowds and cameras. By February most of the chicks are well grown, whilst other pairs are already leaving on their pelagic trip. After enjoying the penguins, we will turn our attention to the headland with species such as Lesser Rhea, Crested Duck, the endemic White-headed Steamer Duck and Lesser Cavy, which co-habit some of the penguin burrows.

These penguins give pleasure to hundreds of visitors each day and one can only admire the skilful way the local Park Service has exploited their attraction, yet taken care to ensure that the colony is

not disturbed. As with the whales at Valdés, the penguins are a valuable commodity, and this is likely 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 19th century, 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, which somehow neglected to explain that the land was in windblown Patagonia, at that time virtually unexplored. The settlers left Britain full of enthusiasm having presumably overlooked the small-print, arriving after a horrendous sea voyage to find a landscape far removed from their expectations. Then 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 Welsh in character and a thriving industry has developed selling 'Welshness' to the many visitors who come to see this geographical oddity. 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. Overnight back in Trelew.

Day 5

Fly Trelew / Buenos Aires and back home

Morning drive to Trelew and its local airport for our flight back to Buenos Aires. After arrival in Aeroparque we will take a transfer to Ezeiza international airport for our flight bound home.

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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