



Down

where

it's

wetter

After a vast regeneration project, the Iberá wetlands are set to become Argentina's newest national park. We went to find out how rewilding projects are restoring its ancient landscape and biodiversity

Words Amanda Barnes • Photography Greg Funnell



The best way to see the Iberá wetlands is from the sky. At the cockpit window of a light aircraft, the flooded plains of Argentina's next national park roll out before us like a carpet threaded with blues, greens and gold. A single white boat appears like a toy or maybe an abandoned piece of litter on the vast expanse of moss-like marshland below.

From ground level, it's impossible to get a sense of the sheer size of this park, which covers 700,000 hectares of Argentina's north-west. But from 300m up, the truth of the landscape is revealed: a glorious mass of shimmering rivers, golden savannah and lush subtropical forest.

"You don't understand Iberá until you see it from above," says pilot Fernando Sosa, as he flies us over the marshlands. Until last year, his passengers were mostly biologists or volunteers who have spent the past decade restoring the delicate ecosystem of these wetlands. Today, however, the region is opening up for tourism, and he's starting to carry more curious travellers like us, who are keen to explore the soon-to-be Iberá National Park.

Meaning "shining waters" in the native Guaraní language, Iberá is one of the largest and most biologically diverse freshwater reserves in the world, home to more than 4,000 species of fauna and flora, some of which are critically endangered. It's hard to believe, looking at it today, that just 20 years ago this paradise was almost lost. It's only thanks to relentless campaigning, a small fortune and a hard-headed expat that it's been restored to its former glory – in one of South America's most exciting conservation projects.

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The island of San Alonso,
in the heart of Iberá,
shot from a light aircraft;
paisano Omar Rojas rides
home to Iberá Ruguá

"It's only with relentless campaigning that the wetlands have been restored to their former glory"

Doug Tompkins was the expat in question: a US businessman who had first visited Argentina as a young backpacker and climber in the 1960s. After making a fortune with clothing brands The North Face and Esprit, he sold his shares and returned in the 1980s, this time to stay. In 1997, he and his wife Kris (also a self-made millionaire through another clothing brand, Patagonia) visited Iberá and immediately fell in love with the landscape, wildlife and distinctive culture. However, they also saw a region at risk.

"Iberá became a provincial reserve in 1983, but most of the wetlands remained in private hands," explains photographer Rafael Abuín, who has spent five years documenting the wetlands' transformation. The classification had little effect on the way the land was treated so the Tompkins took matters into their own hands. "In order to protect the land, Doug became the private owner," Abuín continues. "No one understood why this gringo was buying all the high land and not using it for cattle. But Doug wasn't interested in the high land, he was interested in the low land."

The Tompkinses spent several years purchasing private estates in the wetlands, absorbing cattle ranches and expelling the livestock. Although it wasn't apparent to locals, they were on an unprecedented restoration mission, eventually purchasing over one million hectares between Chile and Argentina, setting up conservation and repatriation projects under their non-profit organisation, the Conservation Land Trust (CLT). »



“A luxury eco-lodge is ready to welcome the 300,000 people who are predicted to visit each year”

Today, after being the subject of legal discussion for 15 years, the wetlands are finally being accorded a status that recognises their importance. More than half a million hectares of state-owned land here is already officially designated as a provincial park, and next year, after the gradual donation of 150,000 hectares of the Tompkinses’ private land, Iberá will be declared Argentina’s newest national park.

The majority of visitors to the new park will arrive at Rincón del Socorro, where a luxury eco-lodge and restaurant are ready to welcome a predicted 300,000 people each year. This newly renovated hotel is set in an 1896 *estancia* (estate), and is surrounded by gardens filled with *ñandúes* (rhea) birds, deer and foxes – a hint of the wildlife that can be found outside the estancia walls.

Most notable are the nonchalant capybaras, who linger around the estate – often insolently blocking the path of oncoming traffic. The world’s largest rodent, the capybara might look cute and cuddly, but it has surprising physical prowess, reputedly able to run as fast as a horse and swim under water for five minutes. After its natural predators were eliminated by hunting and loss of ecosystem, the capybara has been able to run rife across the wetlands – so one of the CLT’s main aims is to redress this imbalance of the ecosystem.

To find out how, we must take a trip to San Alonso, a short flight from Rincón del Socorro, where biologists and volunteers have been working hard on various rewilding projects. This island has a small complex with basic accommodation for biologists and volunteers, plus a lodge for guests where they can learn more about the grand plans.

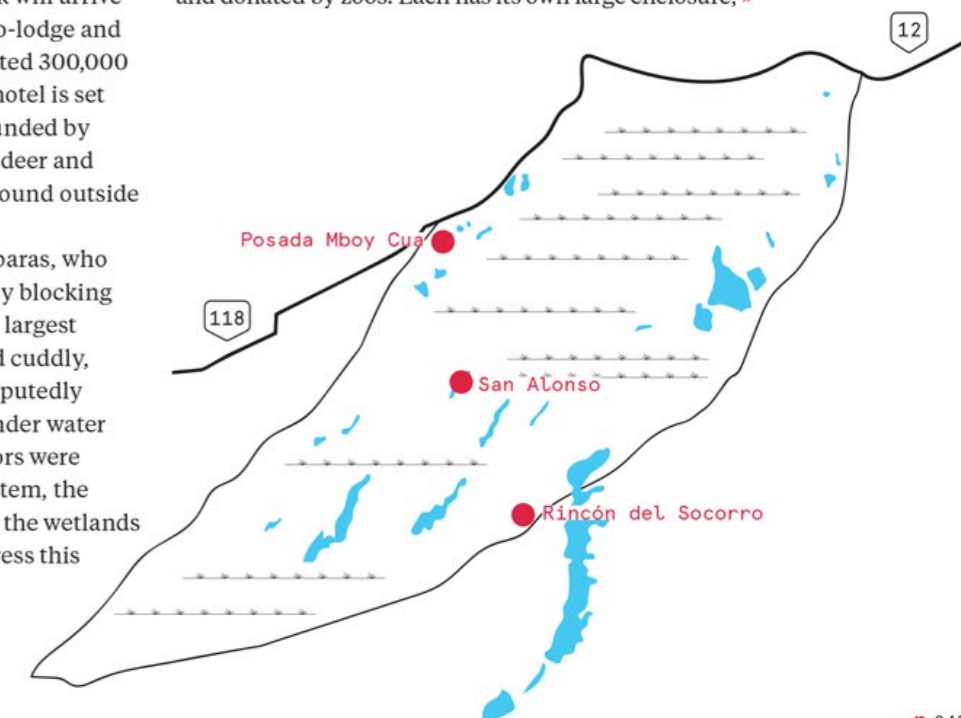
“Rewilding involves bringing back native species that have become endangered and training them to survive in the wild again,” explains Maite Ríos Noya, one of the young conservationists in charge. So far they’ve taught giant anteaters to sniff out ant nests again and macaws to fly, and repopulated the wetlands with tapir, collared peccary (musk hog) and pampas deer. The current focus is on the species at the top of the feeding chain – the one that will have capybaras shaking in their boots.

“Jaguars are endangered, there are fewer than 200 in the entire country,” explains Ríos Noya, as she drives us across the narrow island by dune buggy to see the star attraction. “Our goal is to build the population and bridge jaguar communities under threat.”

The park now has five, rescued from the black market and donated by zoos. Each has its own large enclosure, »



From above Rincón del Socorro is the park’s main point of entry; in a boat on the waters of the wetlands surrounding San Alonso





“Each jaguar has its own enclosure, where live capybaras are released in a *Jurassic Park*-style feeding frenzy”

where live capybaras are released in a *Jurassic Park*-style feeding frenzy. They’re being retrained to hunt for themselves and their cubs will be released into the wetlands, where they’ll have an estimated 600,000 hectares without coming into contact with cattle or locals. Restoring the largest cat in the Americas is set to be one of Iberá’s greatest attractions.

As the park gets ready to open and CLT’s ambitious wildlife programme reaches fulfilment, only the last – and arguably most challenging – cornerstone remains: getting the neighbours on board.

“A major problem is convincing local people to take advantage of the park and generate an income from tourism rather than agriculture,” says Hada Irastorza,

the CLT’s community outreach manager, who works with the villages surrounding the five new portals to the park.

Leaving San Alonso island by boat, past partly submerged caimans hidden between beds of reeds and blue water lilies, you eventually arrive at San Nicolas, one of these new park entrances, and the one where the most success has been had with local entrepreneurial projects. The CLT has donated a smart campsite with the aim of encouraging villagers to cash in on the expanded park boundaries.

Take up has not been as fast as hoped, but there are some local-run businesses, such as Mboy Cua – the first lodge owned by a local family on the western frontier. The hotel offers guided nature trails visiting spider monkeys and gargantuan butterflies in a forest that is believed to be occupied by a magical dwarf, the Pompero. If the guides are to be believed, the latter is responsible for several pregnancies in the village.

Guaraní folklore and traditions also prevail in the hotel restaurant, where chef Nelson Aguirre prepares native dishes utilising the medicinal properties of the endemic flora. “This relationship between local culture and the landscape makes Iberá authentic,” Irastorza enthuses. “As an ecotourism destination, community integration is fundamental.” »



Above & right
One of the jaguars being prepared for release into the wild at Estancia San Alonso; a wild capybara near Rincón del Socorro

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This community involvement initially got off to a rocky start, unfortunately, fuelled largely by misunderstanding. Doug Tompkins' land purchases caused consternation as he often had to buy both high and low land together as a parcel, and then would leave it all to flood indiscriminately. To locals it appeared this rich businessman was swamping any opportunity for income and they were, unsurprisingly, suspicious.

"Everyone thought he was going to sell the water," laughs 25-year-old Natalia Acevedo, who grew up in a local village and today works as a conservationist. "It wasn't until decades later that we understood – or believed – his goal."

Sadly, just as Tomkin's vision of a sustainable future for Iberá is finally coming to fruition, he isn't here to see it, as he died in a canoeing accident in 2015. His life's work, however, continues and the CLT has just made history for the largest private donation of land to a state, creating five new national parks in Chilean Patagonia. Iberá National Park will now join these in the latest chapter of Tompkins' legacy. And while he has been the instigator thus far, ultimately it's the local people who will be essential to its success, as it's they who can best guide visitors through its otherwise unnavigable waters. »



From above
Swimming with horses
on the way to Omar
Roja's estancia; mate



From left: Omar Rojas, whose home is known in the local language as "the End"; detail of a horse's saddle



Other conservation projects in Argentina



Misiones Green Corridor

A habitat zone in eastern Argentina conserving one of the major Atlantic Forest remnants and its endangered pumas, ocelots, red howler monkeys and Vinaceous Amazon parrots.



Patagonian Coastal Steppe

An effort to rescue abandoned *estancias* in coastal Patagonia to protect native land species and the marine habitat for southern right whales, orcas and Magellanic penguins.



Yungas Forest

An ongoing conservation project to preserve this high-altitude cloud forest, which has several endangered species currently threatened by illegal logging, hunting and agriculture.

People like Omar Rojas, a *paisano* (gaicho) who has spent 29 years working on San Alonso and describes himself as "a student of Tompkins". Rojas offers excursions to his home in Iberá Ruguá, which translates from Guaraní as "the End". It takes several hours by horseback and canoe to arrive there: the crossing involves riding through savannah, canoeing with Guaraní families, and even swimming with bareback horses.

The journey gives us time to talk and reflect. Rojas was born in 1961 within the Iberá Park before any notion of a nature reserve existed. He has witnessed the ebb and flow of political change; has seen the flora and fauna dry up and flood back; and is part of the cultural fabric of the wetlands. So what does he think about the creation of the new national park?

"It was very polemical at the time, no one knew what Tompkins wanted," he remembers. "But, as the

waters calmed, it became clear. Through him, I understood what Iberá is."

As we arrive at "the End", and relax with a gourd of *mate*, the sun dips down and changes the colours in the sky, bringing an end to another day in the wetlands. The fireflies awaken and the birds begin a chorus of evening song; even as dusk falls these swamplands are teeming with life and intrigue. I remember my flight and ask Rojas if he has ever seen this land from above.

"I like my place here," he motions to the ground, his garden by the water's edge. "From here you can see the sun rise and set. This is real life in Iberá."

theconservationlandtrust.org, iberaexplorer.com, rincondelsocorro.com.ar, posadamboycua.com

The Esteros del Iberá wetlands are around an eight-hour drive from Buenos Aires. Book flights at Norwegian.com

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