

Tourism workers in Salta reinvent themselves amid virus crisis

Roughly a fifth of the working population in Salta Province makes their living from tourism. With activity non-existent amid the pandemic, many in the industry are turning their hand to new ventures in order to survive.

BY NICK EVANS

Nick Evans is a British journalist and tour guide based in Salta, Argentina. South America. Since 2008, he has been running Poncho Tours, a travel company specialising in tailor-made tours in northwest Argentina, with his wife.



JORGE PASTRANA AND OLIVIA ZAMORA IN THEIR WORKSHOP.

The people of Argentina are accustomed to economic crises, and they have developed a certain resilience. Now, in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, in one of the country's most tourism-dependent regions, workers in the travel industry are turning their hand to a myriad of new businesses as a way to survive.

The province of Salta in Argentina's north-west, which has frontiers with Bolivia, Chile and Paraguay, is a focal point for both national and international tourists, combining the stunning scenery of the Valles Calchaquies with Jujuy's Quebrada de Humahuaca, the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia and the Atacama desert in Chile.

Fifty-thousand people make a living from tourism here, roughly a fifth of the working population. Among them Pedro Quiroz, 50, who began working as a teenager with his father.

“We’ve had economic crises before, we had the cholera scare in 1992, swine flu in 2009, but nothing like this,” he told the *Times*. “This is the worst I’ve ever known. In the early days we only worked Easter Holy Week and July, [and] the only foreigners we saw were the French. But tourism has exploded since then.”

For nine years, Pedro was a minibus driver for Tastil, one of the biggest agencies in Salta, until he was diagnosed with epilepsy in 2014 and his passenger driving licence was taken away.

When his incapacity benefit was stopped a couple of years ago, he returned to working in tourism as a non-driving freelance guide.

“It’s what I’ve always loved – the contact with people, the travel. I began 2020 with high hopes,” he says.

Then came the pandemic. Perhaps spooked by the open borders and huge numbers of foreigners travelling around the province, officials in Salta imposed a provincial-wide lockdown at midnight on March 16, four days before similar measures kicked in nationwide.

Pedro and his family are now looking at other options.

“My son Pedro Jr, who works in retail, had the idea of setting up a chicken shop. People are eating less meat now because it’s expensive,” he said.

“Everyone chipped in. A cousin lent me a freezer, another lent me the scales. I run it from my house with my wife Mariela: we serve all the people in the area, and we do home delivery. It’s not to make a fortune, it’s just to make sure we can eat every day.”

The Quiroz family aren’t looking too far ahead right now. “It could take a couple of years for tourism to return properly,” said Pedro. “Even if we start seeing people

travelling in six months, it will still take a year and a half to win people's confidence again, and return to the levels of tourism we had in Salta."

'Everything disappeared'

Jessica Córdoba and Martin Figueroa have also banked on the fact that whatever happens in these troubling times, people always need to eat.

Jessica, 33, lives in Salta's premier wine town of Cafayate with her mum and brother. She worked as a guide with the Vasija Secreta, Quara and Piattelli wineries for 14 years before starting work with the Majo Viajes travel agency a year ago.

"They closed overnight and I was left without work. Everything disappeared from one day to the next," she explained.

With a love of cooking inspired by her grandmother Ramona, Jessica started producing pickles and conserves in her own home. After selling to neighbours and via word of mouth, she now sends her products to Salta city 180km away, and even supplies a local supermarket.

"I am doing what I love. I don't know if I will return to tourism even if I am able to," she said.

Martin Figueroa, 38, is nicknamed "Vicuña" because "I'm slim and I'm fast." He's certainly quick to spot an opportunity.

At the end of April, he and his wife Tamara, who used to work in catering at a local service station, made a batch of locro and empanadas to sell in the neighbourhood for the traditional Worker's Day meal of May 1.

Since then they've done up an old truck and extended delivery to other parts of the city: sandwiches and burgers during the week, local delicacies at weekends.

Instilled with a love of the English language from his early years, when his father sang Beatles songs to send him to sleep, Martin nevertheless craves a return to

work as a bilingual guide: “I want to go back to tourism, but until there’s a vaccine, who knows when?”

‘Re-inventing ourselves’

Another husband and wife team, Jorge Pastrana and Olivia Zamora, work as tour guides – he speaks English and she speaks French. Jorge is still being paid by his employers, Noa Travesias, but Olivia is entirely freelance, and so entirely without income.

Both have been forced to adapt to the virus crisis and have managed to do so with success. Jorge reactivated a family carpentry workshop which had fallen into disrepair following the death of his father last year. He now works with one of his brothers, Juan Pablo.

“I hope that if and when I can return to tourism, he can carry it on, and we will have the two businesses in tandem,” said the 46-year-old.

Olivia, 47, then puts the finishing touches to the furniture and makes her own ornaments and objets d’art.

“When I wasn’t working as a guide, I did courses on restoration of old furniture, it’s always been something that’s interested me. My father was a carpenter as well, so it’s in my blood,” she said.

One of the more leftfield ideas is the brainchild of a local celebrity, Francisco Siciliano, always a pioneer. Originally from Santa Fe, “Pancho”, as everyone in Salta knows him, came to work in the northwest 15 years ago, after studying tourism in Buenos Aires.

“I loved the area, I used to come every year,” he recalled.

His agency, Argentina Trails, specialises in intrepid mountaineering and hiking expeditions. “Our clientele is 100 percent foreign, mainly from Switzerland, UK and France, but also Austria and Japan,” he says.

Pancho is currently converting an old building close to the international airport, in the town of Cerrillos, into a nappy factory. The plan is to employ locals as door-to-door salespeople.

“There’s a terrible embarrassment about adult nappies, so we’re going to produce those as well as for babies, and even nappies for pets,” he explained.

“I’ve gone five months without work, and was investigating areas, different sectors, looking at what might work. I enjoy producing something new, setting a new venture up, and we’ll be making things that people are always going to need.”

Adapting to a crisis requires resilience, no doubt, but it’s far from in short supply among *salteños*.

“We Argentines are used to crises,” said Zamora. “We are always re-inventing ourselves.”

Read the article and answer the questions:

- 1. How many people live from tourism in Salta?**
- 2. Mention two situations previous to the coronavirus pandemic that interfered with tourism in the past.**
- 3. What Jobs has Pedro Quiróz had? What job does he have at present?**
- 4. What is Cafayate famous for?**
- 5. What did Jesica and Martín use to do? How did they reinvent themselves?**
- 6. What does it mean when the article says Olivia is “freelance”?**
- 7. What family business did Jorge reactivate after the coronavirus crisis?**
- 8. What kind of nappies is Pancho going to produce in his factory?**
- 9. What is resilience?**
- 10. What’s your opinion about the article?**