

Trip Report

FROM THE GRAN CHACO TO PATAGONIA

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AMAZING ARGENTINA

Herpetologist Cesar Barrio Amorós travels across a wonderful variety of habitats and environments while searching for South America's fascinating wildlife



Hillary sideneck turtle *Phrynops hilarii*

Argentina is home of several interesting turtles. One of the most common in the field and also introduced in many parks and gardens is Hillary sideneck turtle *Phrynops hilarii*, a large *Chelidae* with a nice smile.



Mara *Mara mara*

Maras look very peculiar, like no other rodent. They somewhat seem to be convergent with gazelles, as they have long legs and run to escape.

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY CESAR BARRIO AMORÓS

Argentina... a beautiful name for a beautiful Country! It means that it shines like silver, and it does... From its tropical north to its Antarctic south, the landscape of Argentina is one of the most diverse in South America. With 2.780.400 square kms, it is the second largest Country in the continent, after Brazil, and travel across it can take a long time by road (good buses actually), or quite a lot of money if you fly. I stayed one month and had the time to hit the roads. I came from Chile, entering the Country in Salta (in the NW part), a marvelous province with many different bioregions. I arrived in early spring and the Chaco region was completely dry. I did not see a single lizard! But the Chaco is one of the most interesting areas in South America, home of many awesome reptiles and amphibians, such as the colorful and quite toxic *Leptodactylus laticeps*, the Chaco monkey frog *Phyllomedusa sauvagii* and its little relative *P. azurea*. In a short visit to one of the most famous herpetological centers in South America, the Fundación Miguel Lillo in Tucuman, I met Esteban Lavilla, Gustavo Scrochi and Ricardo Montero, some of the most productive herpetologists in Argentina. With Scrochi we saw two very interesting species - *Phylodryas baroni*, a green and semi-arboreal snake with a pointy nose, and the southern subspecies of the Boa constrictor, *B.c. occidentalis*. There also was possible to watch several *Phrynosoma hillari* and some interesting

aquatic birds, such as a grebe I had never seen before (*Podilymbus podiceps*). After that, I decided to move to the NE to see the amazing and famous Iguazu falls. I arrived after 24 hours in bus from Tucuman to the small town of Puerto Iguazú. From there you can take a taxi or a bus to the Parque Nacional Iguazú, which covers an area of 67.620 ha. There are many very well marked paths and a little train that takes tourists to the different viewpoints of the waterfalls. Though the Iguazú falls are indeed one of the most magnificent falls in the world - and I really enjoyed the views, forest and fauna - I was quite disappointed by the thousands of tourists that were at the same point with me. It was completely impossible to be alone and enjoy the magnificence of the scenario. Always there were family groups, school groups, couples, or even huge lines of Japanese tourists taking thousands of pictures with cameras far better than mine. One of the questions I was asking myself all the time was if I could take a better and different picture from the thousands around me. But I saw that no one was taking care of the fauna. Especially I was very impressed by the local and endemic great dusky swifts *Cypseloides senex*, which were flying so close to the waterfalls, and sometimes, diving into the water curtains, where their nests were sited. I discovered a spot, a small creek with a hanging bridge, where I could stay for a long time spying the swifts,

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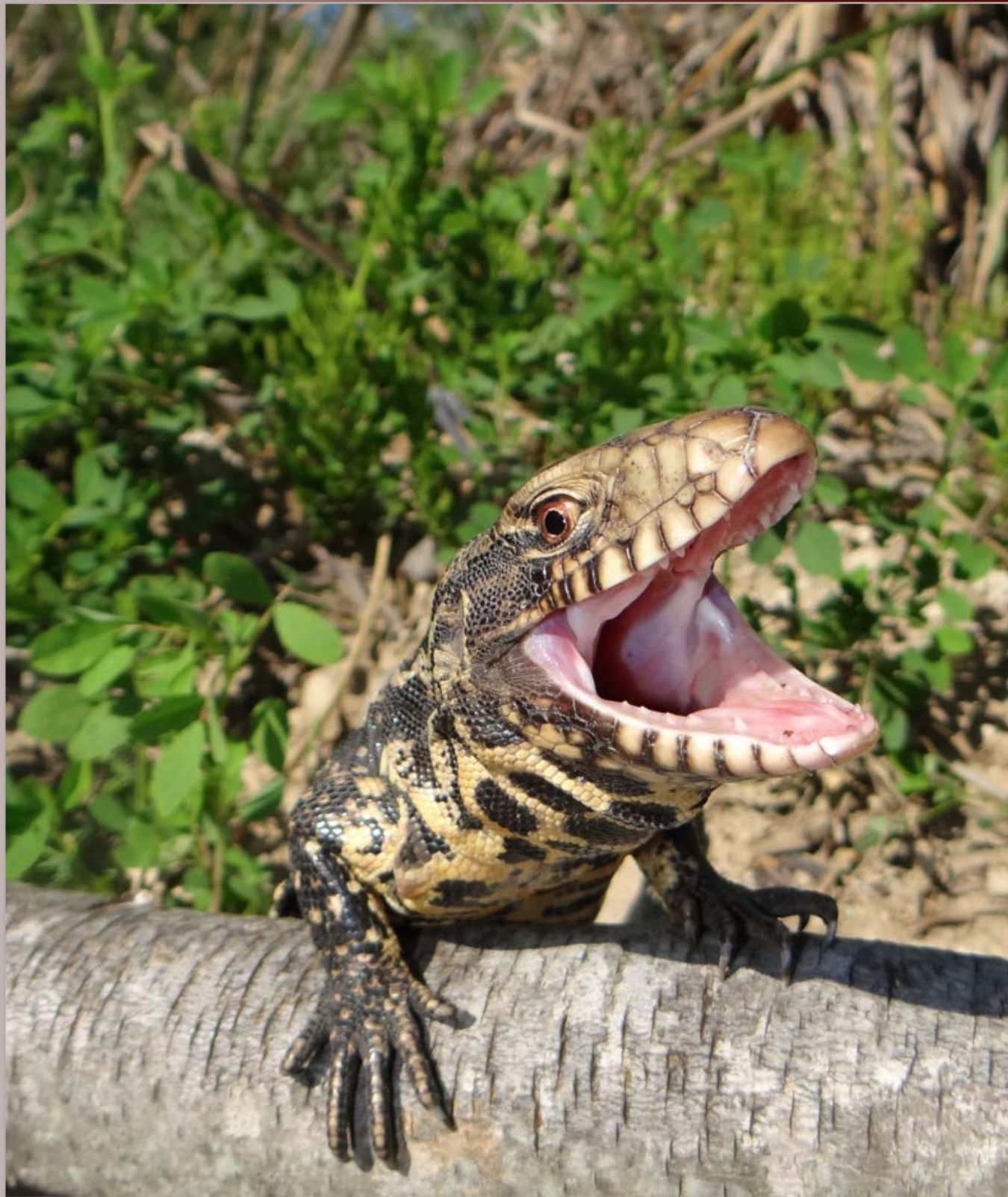
Southern Elephant seal *Mirounga leonina*

Females and calves of elephant seals are mostly resting all day long on stony beaches. They can be wary or just curious. In any case a great experience to be close by!



Baron's Green racer *Philodryas baroni*

Possibly the most bizarre snake of Argentina, the beautiful and fast *Philodryas baroni* is a rear-fanged, semi-arboreal and diurnal predator. Its relatively weak venom is not considered dangerous to humans.



Tegu *Salvator (Tupinambis) merianae*
The South American Tegu is fearless and will readily bite an unprotected hand.

with almost no people disturbing me. I spend many hours photographing the swifts in the nest, taking care of the chicks, resting while hanging in the walls, some sleeping, some vigilant, and capable to turn their necks as much as 180 degrees, like an owl, to see over their backs. Incredibly fast birds. At the human-modified paths and gardens around the falls, one could imagine being at any of the entertainment parks in the USA, with so many small shops selling all kind of fast food. There the coatimundis were kings. So abundant that they were asking for food to any tourist with cookies or empanadas. Even being forbidden to give food to animals, all tourists were enchanted by the cute faces and kind animals. That could end with some nasty bites, as these carnivores have large teeth. Another animal I was eager to find was the monitor-like South American Tegu, *Salvator merianae*. A large lizard, with powerful jaws and no fear to humans. They also were attracted to the fast food shops and waited around for their bit. I pursued one of them to take some pictures, and when it was bothered by me, it charged towards the camera, almost crashing the cover. I had later another encounter with a wild *Salvator merianae* in Buenos Aires, in a river park, the Reserva Ecológica Costanera Sur, where with my friend Fernando Licitra we caught two specimens resting under a log, and photographed one after tiring it a little.

In Buenos Aires, I spent some time visiting museums and giving a couple of lectures in the Museo Argentino de Ciencias

Naturales Bernardino Rivadavia, and at the Palermo Zoo. With Fernando and Emiliano Lértora, we went to the city of la Plata for a frog night lead by the beautiful and gentle herpetologist Gabriela Agostini. That night was quite awesome, as we could find several interesting species, as *Hypsiboas pulchella*, *Dendropsophus sanborni*, *Pseudis minuta*, *Scinax squalirostris* and *S. granulatus*. At dusk and night, I never experienced so many mosquitoes in my life, and that place stands out along with Palo Verde in Costa Rica and the Casiquiare River in Venezuela, as the most uncomfortable places to walk around at dusk and night! From Buenos Aires, and after a short visit to Pepe Langone and other herpetologists at the Museo de Ciencias Naturales de Montevideo in Uruguay, where I presented two lectures, I continued my trip southwards to the famous Peninsula Valdes in Patagonia.

PATAGONIA

Since I was little I have been amazed by nature in all its wonders. After exploring entomology and ichthyology, I decided to devote my main interest to herpetology. However, this does not mean that I am far from other kind of animals, and as a photographer, I like to capture all expressions of beauty and reality in the animal kingdom. One of the most renowned places on Earth to watch a high variety of animals, in large concentrations, and see them in action, is the famous Peninsula Valdés, in the Patagonia region

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Santa Fe frog *Leptodactylus laticeps*

This species - the most prominent and beautiful of this South American genus of land frogs - is also the most toxic, as its coloration announces. After touching it for a while, its mucus affects the skin (especially if one has open wounds) and provokes heavy sneezing. Do not touch!



Southern Right Whale *Eubalena australis*

Calves of Southern Right Whales like to play, sometimes jumping or just splashing their tails against the water surface.

of Argentina. It is known especially for the famous Killer whales attacking sea lions at the shore, and of course this was my first interest. But I also knew that was a great location to see many South American large mammals like guanacos, maras, sea lions, elephant seals, and different kind of whales; and birds, like penguins and rheas, as well as some mostly unknown reptiles. I arrived to Puerto Madryn, where I had three contacts that proved to make the difference in my trip. The first was my now friend Diego Barraso, herpetologist, who gave me shelter and introduced me to many investigators at the CENPAT (Centro Nacional Patagónico). There also I meet Dario Podestá, renowned photographer, and he took me out for a little ride. That ride was amazing, as we were deep inside wild Patagonia. This region is quite boring scenically, all plain, covered by small shrubs and bushes, the tallest being no more than three meters high. But it was so full of life. Many maras, those strange and graceful rodents with long legs and convergent with some small gazellas or antelopes in other continents, crossed the road, as well as European hares *Lepus europaeus* and some terrestrial birds *Eudromia elegans*. The tallest bush had a nest of a Red-backed Hawk *Buteo polyosoma*, and we stopped nearby to watch the couple closely. And indeed they arrived to check out who were those skinny critters. They never were aggressive, but quite inquisitive, coming and going, and never abandoning their nest, where at least we saw one chicken. We took advantage

of their proximity and several great pictures were taken.

But the real paradise was waiting for our arrival. On a windy cliff, we leaned out and saw a magnificent panorama. Clear waters in low tide, and many elephant seals *Mirounga leonina* on the beach, some just lying, others on the shore, others swimming (mostly the calves). Just to be there, watching from a long distance (approached by our tele zooms) was a delight... Many cormorants and giant petrels *Macronectes giganteus* flew around us, as we observed the incredible scenario. We found a difficult, steep and very risky way down, we tried going very carefully, and finally we reached the beach, surrounded by those huge elephant seals. I expected to see the adult males, those monsters I was so terrified as a child when watching Cousteau's and Attenborough's documentaries. But we saw only two young males, four meters long though. We did not want to disturb them... and walked the stony beach very carefully, slowly and in silence. Many female and young elephant seals were motionless... sleeping and ignoring us. Some others though, especially young females on the beach, were quite scared and aggressive at the same time, escaping us crawling to the sea. At the end, with patience, we could approach without scaring them, and take phenomenal photos from very close. At another interesting cliff, much closer to Puerto Madryn, a colony of sea lions *Arctocephalus australis* could also be observed from a mirador. Contrary to elephant seals (and seals in general of the

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Darwin Rhea *Rhea pennata*

One of the large animals of the plains, and one of the heaviest birds in the world, the Darwin Rhea. It used to be hunted with *boleadoras*, but currently the species is protected.



Sunset at the plain wilderness of the Patagonia.



Guanaco *Lama guanicoe*

Families or groups of Guanacos are often seen among the bushes. This peculiar camelids constitute the main prey item for pumas.

family *Phocidae*), which have their hind limbs directed posteriorly, helping the tail in water propulsion, sea lions of the family *Otariidae* have their hind limbs directed anteriorly and thus functional for walking or even climbing. Males are very aggressive and massive. They have harems and defend them continuously from other younger males that try to mate with the females.

The interior of Peninsula Valdés was a complete wilderness. A windy and inhospitable land where a few families settled in the last century to breed sheep. Now, however, it is one of the most attractive destinations for wildlife tourists. In a few hours it is possible to see so many interesting animals that it is only comparable in South America with the Pantanal in Brazil and the Venezuelan Llanos. I was invited by my friends Ricardo Fabian Acquaroli and Leticia Benítez, who run a tour operator in Puerto Madryn. I was first on a whale watching tour starting in Puerto Piramides. I am used to go in this kind of tours as I myself used to be a whale guide in Costa Rica. But there, in the best day, you can maybe see 5 whales and their calves, and with a lot of luck, a male jump out of the water. In Valdés, close to the end of the whale season, which goes from June to November, we saw not less than 20 whales around the boat, mostly females with calves, and some showing their tails, splashing around us, and spying us, just emerging with their eyes to see us better. It is such a great sensation to look into a whale eye directly, so placid, so peaceful.

Tegu *Salvator (Tupinambis) merianae*

Tegus are common at the Iguazú Falls, especially around food stalls.



D'Orbigny's Banded Anole *Pristidactylus fasciatus*

Patagonia is also home for some intriguing reptiles. This is a male *Pristidactylus fasciatus*, which preys on other lizards and large insects.

They are really gentle giants, with no intention to harm us in any way. It is incomprehensible how humans almost drove such beautiful creatures to extinction.

Something that was very intriguing and also painful to watch was how sea gulls in that area learned to attack quickly the whale dorsum to make a hole to extract the fat. This is an increasing problem as every year there are many more sea gulls (due to the growing of Puerto Madryn and its huge garbage storage), and they learn from others how to take this tasteful and energy-rich piece of fat.

Of course the main goal that day was to see how the orcas attack sea lions at the shore of the beach. But my aims were diminishing at each minute. I talked about that with several friends, including photographers, investigators, and the famous Roberto Bubas, who is the person that knows best the orcas. They frequent those waters year long, but there are many families - some are residents, and others visitors. Only one family consisting of seven orcas learned how to attack pinnipeds out of the water. But such action is not often seen... To have the opportunity to watch that, one should camp or stay at some of the Estancias in the area (which are prohibitively expensive) and devote many days awaiting the action. I just had one day, and that was at the end of my trip of one month in Argentina. I hated myself for not having foreseen such a

circumstance. I saw orcas, a family following a sea channel in front of my sight, very close to an elephant seal colony. But no attacks, only greetings!

Other animals I saw quite easily from the safari tour were the omnipresent guanacos *Lama guanicoe*, proud animals, with their high neck watching the surroundings. Many were with calves. Also the second largest bird in South America, the Darwin rhea *Pterocnemia pennata*, ready to escape together with its own chicks. Maras, those strange looking long legged rodents, were in breeding season, and females were full of milk waiting to feed their offspring.

Few reptiles are known in the area, among them several *Liolaemus*, and one of the snakes I was more interested in finding, the only and southernmost viper in the Americas, *Bothrops ammodytoides*. During a short walk surrounding an elephant seal colony, I saw two - one juvenile coiled on the main path for tourists, which I photographed and removed, and another under a bridge.

A last encounter that day was also one of the most looked for. I always loved penguins, but I am too lazy to go deep into the cold. So the opportunity to see a colony of Magellan penguins *Spheniscus magellanicus* where they were swimming in the sea, walking around, and some females were guarding their newly born chicks, from a few meters away, was a really satisfying end to my trip. ●



Argentine horned frog *Ceratophrys ornata*

The large and colorful Argentine horned frog *Ceratophrys ornata* starts to be active around November, at the beginning of the austral spring. At night, surrounded by millions of mosquitoes at the Pampa, one can also see species like *Hypsiboas pulchellus*, *Pseudis minuta* and more.



Chacoan waxy leaf frog *Phyllomedusa sauvagii*
 One of the most interesting species in its genus. It estivates during the dry season producing a wax with which it covers its body completely, preventing dessication.



Magellan penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus*
 There are many breeding colonies of Magellan penguins in Patagonia - some small, some of more than a million individuals.



Elephant seal *Mirounga leonina*

Females and calves of elephant seals are mostly resting all day long on stony beaches. They can be wary or just curious. Some calves will allow you to approach slowly, almost to the point of touching them (even if I do not recommend that). This calf is changing winter skin for a summer thinner one.



Baron's Green Racer *Philodryas baroni*
A green, very active and quite large serpent which is semi arboreal and which feeds on birds and rodents.



Lesser Swimming frog *Pseudis minutus*
A small aquatic frog, which can be seen at night waiting for small insects resting on floating vegetation.

Pied-billed grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*

One of the smaller grebes, quite common in the NW part of the country.



Coatimundi *Nasua nasua*

Coatimundis - common and friendly at Iguazú falls - can however bite severely.



Southern Orange-legged leaf frog *Phyllomedusa azurea*

Another species in the intriguing group of monkey, leaf or poster frogs. Smaller than the waxy frog, it can be found in high grass around pools.



Patagonian lancehead *Bothrops ammodytoides*

The only venomous snake in the area is the pit viper *Bothrops ammodytoides*. This specimen is going to shed its old skin soon - notice the clouded bluish eye.



Montevideo tree frog *Hypsiboas pulchellus*
A juvenile and unlucky *Hypsiboas pulchellus* is being preyed upon by a large fishing spider at a small pond's edge.

Notes about photography

In the past I used Sony Alpha 200, 350 and 550, each with several lenses. I was carrying a heavy backpack up to 12 kg at least for many years. In two occasions my equipment was stolen, once in Venezuela, another in Costa Rica, losing more than 10.000 US \$ in gear. I decided then to buy a simple compact camera. My choice was the super zoom Sony HX100 and I never missed any of heavy stuff. First, I could travel light! And this is an important plus when you have a lumbar hernia. Further, I need no more to change lenses - the Carl Zeiss 24-800 mm (x30 optical) was enough to take 95% of the photographs I needed.

Travelling around Argentina

Route Argentina is one of the safest countries in South America. Of course some extra caution is needed to travel with an expensive photographic equipment. The buses are comfortable if you chose bus cama, which is the equivalent of a plane First class. You can also take domestic planes from Buenos Aires to the main cities and areas of the country.

Weather Argentina lies in a temperate zone, with the four season we know in the northern hemisphere (but inverse: when is summer in the North, is winter in the South!!). (all the northernmost part of Argentina, from Salta in the West to Misiones on the East, is tropical, and then, it is never cold, but can be extremely hot and dry in summer. In the South, it is cold always, even in summer.

Accomodation The Iguazú area is well covered by hotels of all kinds, from backpacker to the highest level. There are a few paths where you can really explore the forest and see wild creatures, including (aside coatimundis) monkeys, tapirs, snakes, deers, or even jaguars! Also I did not expect to find the largest ant in the world, Dinoponera gigantea. Most of the trails are cemented or are hanging bridges over the falls. Bring comfortable shoes (not necessary heavy boots), and a raincoat or something to protect the camera from the water! Peninsula Valdés is prepared for tourism, and also offers a great variety of hotels. There many tour operators will offer you the typical safaris in a van, which is the most comfortable and quick option to have an overlook of the area. I personally recommend Ricardo and Leticia at Forastero Tours (www.forasterotour.com.ar).

Currency Currency is the Argentinean Peso, which is quite devaluated, and compared with the US dollar, comes cheaper and cheaper.

Food One of the most renowned items related to Argentina is the food, especially related to meat. Beef and sheep are prepared everywhere in the country in different manners, but all tasteful, and comparatively cheap. Pastas and Pizza are also great, due to the deep Italian inheritance.

Language Argentinean Spanish is so different from all other Spanish dialects that could be taken for a language for its own. Unfortunately, out of the touristic areas, not much English is spoken.

Health. No much worries. In the tropical area in wet season can be some tropical deseases like dengue fever. Tap water is good in general to drink.



Iguazú falls, some of the largest of the world. Several miradores are strategically located to offer the best views, but it is, however, difficult to enjoy the spectacle in solitude.