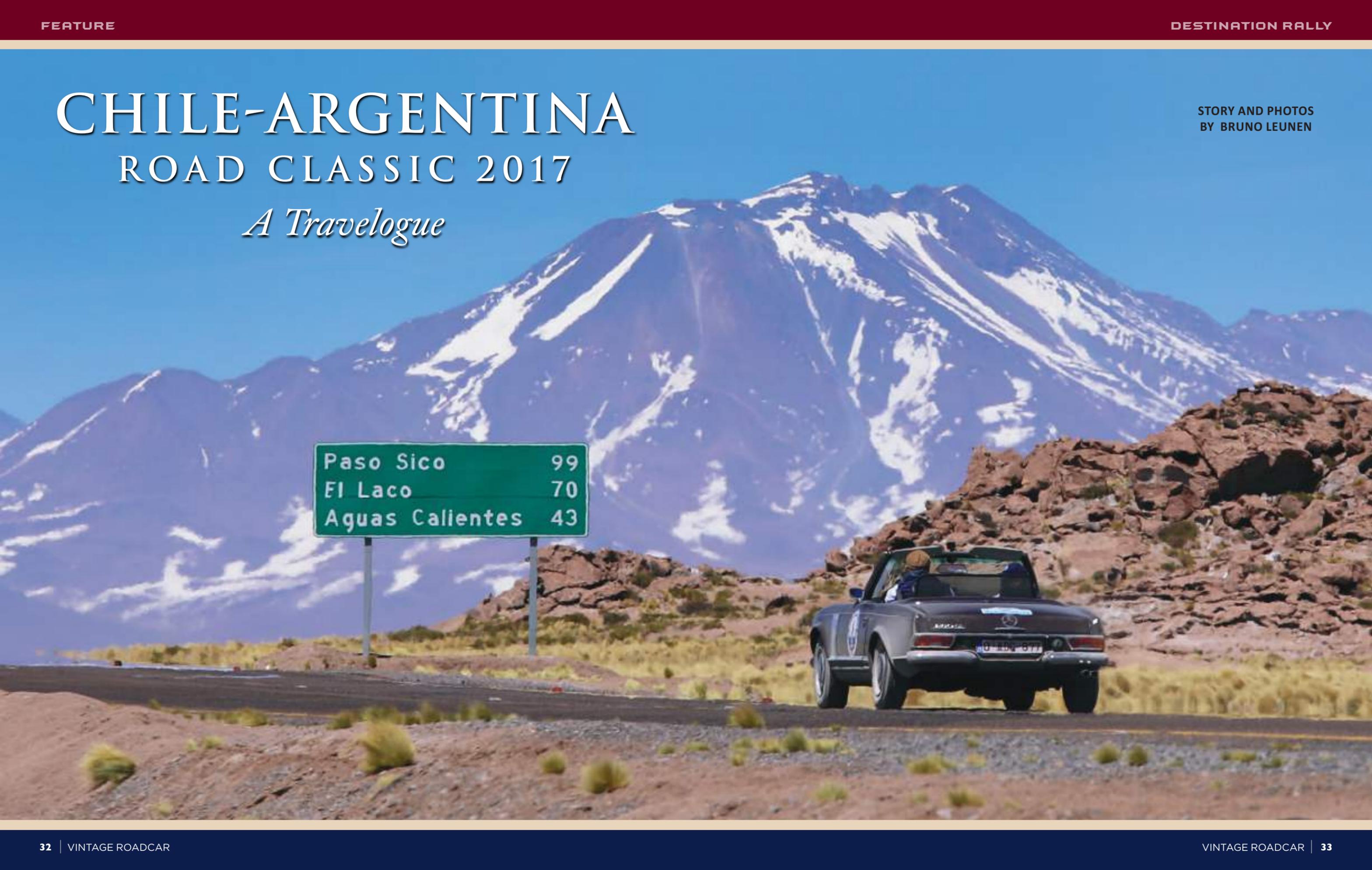


CHILE-ARGENTINA ROAD CLASSIC 2017

A Travelogue

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY BRUNO LEUNEN



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The Andes adventure started in Antofagasta, on the coast of Northern Chile with 15 cars and teams from Belgium, Finland, the U.S., Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and France. In all there were three Mustangs, two Mercedes Pagoda, a Mercedes 280 SL, a 1937 Lagonda, a 1957 Bentley, two Porsches, two Peugeot 504 convertibles, an Austin-Healey and a Sunbeam Tiger.

This harsh but beautiful coastline borders the driest desert in the world, the famous Atacama desert. After a briefing at the hotel facing the Pacific Ocean, the teams prepared themselves for the next adventure through the Andes mountain range.

On Day One, we departed the city on highway, passing the various copper mines, including the biggest mine in the world near Calama, with its huge trucks and trains carrying their copper loads. After an easy drive through dry land and wind farms, we arrived in San Pedro de Atacama, the gateway to the Atacama Desert situated at 2,500 meters above sea level. Every car was equipped with emergency oxygen...just in case!

Upon arrival in the wonderful hotel Las Cumbres, participants had to tank up at the only gas station in the area, queuing with all the village vehicles. The Lagonda experienced "breathing problems" and needed to be tuned, while mechanics were already working hard on a Peugeot 504 convertible and a Mercedes Pagoda by the side of the road.

Everyone gets ready for the day ahead, a climb up to 3,500 meters. Temperatures are nice during the day and going straight down after sunset with it being a chilly 5° or 6° C at night.

Day Two and we pass through picturesque indian villages before reaching the Tropic of Capricorn. Time for a quick photo and losing a wheel, as the Sunbeam Tiger does while trying to U-turn on the main road. Happily the mechanics are nearby to sort out the problem. After 100 kilometers, we leave the asphalt for a nice dirt road that climbs to the high altitude lakes at 4,200 meters. Beautiful view of the Lagunas Miscanti



and Miniques. On the way we pad by a herd of Guanacos, from the Llama family. Back down for 40 kilometers to the Piedras Roquas lake and a beautiful VIP lunch in a tent overlooking the salt lake with pink flamingoes surfing on the water. On the way, one of the Porsches is experiencing altitude sickness and our mechanics are on it.

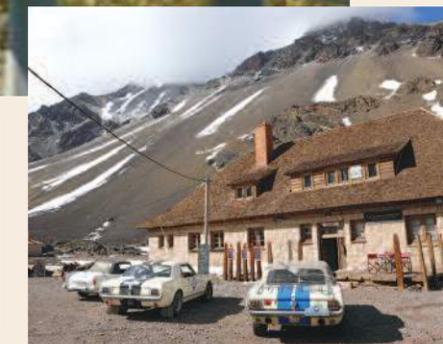
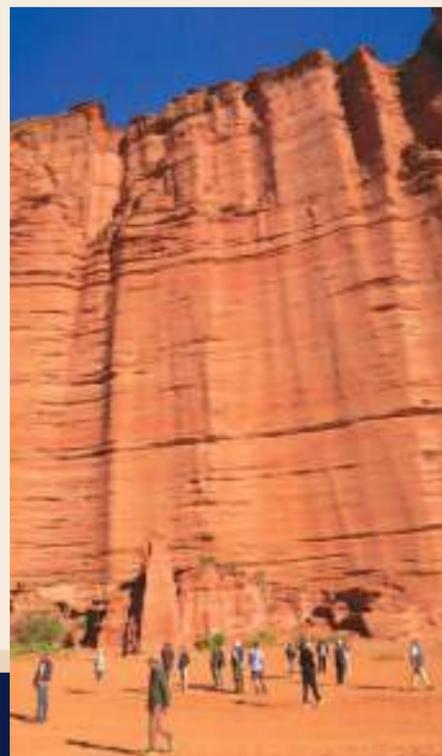
Since San Pedro is home also to the largest telescope in the world (ALMA) that night we enjoyed a special astronomic event with all the participants taking a look at our solar system, the moon, Mars, Saturn, the Milky Way and far away into the galaxy...

The next day was a tough one. Starting at 5 a.m., we left San Pedro for El Tatio, the Geysers field situated at 4,500 meters, and all that on a dirt road with a few corrugated iron sections that was hard on the cars. Surprise breakfast by the geysers was a nice cold experience, followed by a really scenic road back down to San Pedro. On the way, sights of flamingos, llamas, ducks, vizcayas, guanacos.... A quick dip at the Purimata hot springs for some, before getting back to the hotel for a rest.

Day Four was a special day as we were crossing into Argentina, driving through a pass of 2,895 meters before reaching the border. On the Argentinian side, we passed the salt lake of Grande Salinas, the cactus canyons before heading down a hairpin road to the quaint village of Purmarmarca, for a well deserved rest in a beautiful colonial hotel. That evening our mechanics were on the ball, fixing the Lagonda, Porsche and Mustangs.

Day Five, an easy drive of 183 kilometers to Salta, turned a bit hard for the Bentley, which had cooling problems, but was saved by a local garage owner, an owner of old cars, who checked and mended the problem—for free—courtesy of the friendly Argentinians. A quick stop in a hacienda to see the local gauchos and we enjoyed a great barbecue local style before spending the night in Salta.

Day Six got us going on one of the most scenic roads of the whole rally. Driving out of Salta and





onto the world famous Ruta National 40, the longest road in Argentina (5,194 kilometers), sort of the Route 66 of Argentina. We passed through the quaint little village of Cachi, with its white-wall houses, for a delicious local lunch at a little café. Further on, the RN 40 becomes a dirt road for the next 47 kilometers to the small village of Molinos, lost between the cactus and the mountains. The village looks like a Hollywood movie set, with the little church and the hacienda where the participants stayed overnight. For some of them, it was a chance to visit the remote museum of James Turrell, the famous American artist. Great evening at the Hacienda.

Day Seven we left Molinos for Cafayate, driving through the famous canyon, the Quebrada de las Conchas, on a dirt road but very impressive. Upon arrival, time to rest in a beautiful winery, with great wine.

The following day was tough for some, like the Sunbeam, which was losing gas due to a faulty hose, or others who had their cars taken away by tow trucks to the following stop. The road to Tafi del Valle took the others up the mountain, passing green pasture, horses running wild all the way to the Estancia La Carreras, a working cattle farm, for a cheese fondue and wonderful meat. After lunch, we drove down to the town

of Catamarca. That day the Lagonda gave up on us with brake and engine problems. The owner elected to use a rental car to finish.

Catamarca to Villa Union was a nice road to cruise, first through the Cactus canyon and then on to the wineries of Chanarmuyo, ending up in the Hotel Canyon de Talampaya. Getting ready for our next adventurous day...the two National Parks.

The first one, the canyon de Talampaya, with its high walls of red color that looks like a cathedral, was done by special bus, while the next park was done in a convoy to visit the valley de la Luna. Very impressive rock formation and col-

ors, but very dusty. As we got out of the park, the Blue Mustang caught on fire, but was quickly extinguished with only minor damage to the car, but enough to keep it from running any further. It turned out to be an electrical short that lit up the coil.

After a nice evening of Argentinian steaks and Malbec wine, recovering from a tough day, we left for the wine region of Mendoza, driving through and south of the city.

After a bit of Highway 40, we turned on a provincial road through all the beautiful wineries that have made the Mendoza name famous. A first stop at Tupungato and the Atamisque winery

with a surprise gaucho barbecue on the golf course, such a beautiful setting under the blue sky with all the cars parked on the course.

A short drive took us to one of the best hotels in South America, The Vines! Each participant had their own villa in an amazing setting with views of the Andes and the vineyards. Horse riding, massage at the Spa or wine tasting did good for all the participants for a two nights' rest.

On Day 14, we made a last-minute roadbook change to an easier route to make it easier for the mountain pass crossing. An early departure took us up Highway 40 on to Highway 7 climbing

up to 3,300 meters on a very scenic road to the border with Chile. A few car owners were waiting for the tow trucks to bring their cars to the border since it is required that they pass with their cars even though it is on a truck. The first group of cars went through the border under a blue sky and sunshine. Two hours later the last cars were covered with snow that fell suddenly—we were lucky because they closed the pass after us! We drove the famous and picturesque 28 hairpin turns, down to the city of Los Andes and arrived at the Hotel del Valle overlooking the green valley.

Day 15 was our last drive. As we left the hotel on the hill, we made our way to the ocean, pass-





ing vineyards and agricultural land on Highway 5 to Catapilco making our way to the small village of Papudo finally reaching the Pacific Ocean after 3,700 kilometers through the Andes mountains.

Further on the famous ocean front village of Zapallar provided probably the most relaxing lunch of the whole trip, as we sat in the sun eating seafood and fresh fish while a dolphin jumped out of the water in the bay. We also had pelicans wanting to share the food with us.

It took the NY Highway police to wake us up from this daydreaming and get back on the road. The owner of a local classic car museum came to escort us, in his vintage patrol car, to his place on the road back to Valparaiso.

After visiting and a few photos, we drove the last miles down to the Chilean Riviera and the city of Vina del Mar. Last stop at the Sheraton for our gala dinner by the ocean and a final trip down memory lane with all our heads full of exciting memories of this adventurous rally.

On Day 16, everyone drove in a convoy to the harbor and the container park for loading the cars back to Europe and the U.S.

All in all a fantastic adventure on the South American roads.

Destination Rally is now getting ready for the next adventure ... INDOCHINA 2018!

