16. Fruit trees in Los Antiguos and Chile Chico – Lake Buenos Aires / General Carrera

Guido Vittone (Los Antiguos)

Lake Buenos Aires – in Chile called Lago General Carrera – is situated at 46°30' latitude south, at an altitude of 205 metres above sea level. Its approximate surface area of 2240 sq.km makes it the largest body of fresh water in Patagonia, having a maximum depth of 590 m. The western end of the lake is close to a vast glacier or ice-field, known as the Campo de Hielo Norte, from which most of the melt water entering the lake derives. The eastern sector of the lake, coinciding roughly with the portion of the lake on the Argentine side, features the widest section (approximately 22 km), in an area of semi-arid steppes that benefits climatically from the proximity of the lake.

Lago Buenos Aires drains into the Pacific Ocean through Río Baker, no other of Chile’s rivers having an equally big discharge. During the Pleistocene glaciations, this outlet in the heart of the Andes was blocked, forcing the lake to drain eastwards into the Atlantic Ocean along the Deseado valley. In those times, the level of the lake must have been over 200 vertical metres higher than it is at present.

There is evidence that human presence in the region can be traced back nearly 10,000 years, although occupation probably was sporadic, in the light of climatic changes and frequent volcanic eruptions in the adjoining
area to the northwest. During the nineteenth century, the small aboriginal groups, who had fully adopted the use of the horse, seem to have concentrated their activities in areas located farther away from the lake; this latter region seems to have been visited only marginally, if at all.

Only from 1910 onwards did the first permanent settlers arrive at the southern shore of the lake, on both sides of the river Jeinimeni, which had been chosen a few years earlier as the natural borderline between the two countries. The region can therefore claim to be one of the last to be colonised in the entire Patagonia, being the meeting place of waves of settlers, coming from the north and the south.

The climate at the delta of the rivers Jeinimeni and Los Antiguos is temperate and semi-arid. Summer days are long, with high solar radiation and low relative humidity. The annual amount of precipitation is around 250 mm, seasonally concentrated during the autumn and winter months, in form of rain and, to a much smaller degree, as snow. Very strong winds from the West and North-west are very common during springtime. The monthly mean temperature for July is 2.7°C, and that of January 14.9°C. Extreme minimum and maximum temperatures may reach −12°C and 32°C, respectively. January is considered to be a frost-free period, occasionally including December and/or February as well.

From the shore of the lake southwards, the landscape exhibits moraines and terraces of fluvio-glacial origin, gradually ascending towards basaltic plateaux. These areas, more characteristic of the Argentine side, display only *Schinus patagonica*, a species much used as firewood during the first decades of the 20th century, and *Discaria trinervis*, a species growing only close to springs and streams. West of the river Jeinimeni, a more mountainous terrain and higher ranges of precipitation sustain *Nothofagus antarctica* and *Nothofagus pumilio*.

Human presence, as in the entire Patagonia, is signalled by the introduction of *Populus nigra var. pyramidalis*, well adapted to virtually all southern environments with water availability, and used chiefly as wind-barrier. The popular, truly a Patagonian landmark, is seconded by the genus *Salix*, with many of its species. To a much lesser degree, *Sambucus nigra* is also found, together with the ornamental species and the fruit trees to be described.