



The Anchorena Alcornoque (*Quercus suber*) photographed in November 2013.

## The Anchorena Alcornoque

RODERICK CAMERON writes about the history and dimensions of this champion cork oak in Uruguay.

In the 2002 IDS Yearbook, a brief note mentions that member Peter Laharrague had come across an “extraordinarily large specimen of *Quercus suber*” in Parque Anchorena, just north of Colonia del Sacramento in Uruguay. It was suggested that it may be the largest cork oak in the Southern Hemisphere and a request was made to readers for information of other oaks that might match its size. Parque Anchorena is an official residence of the President of Uruguay and guided tours allow the general public to view the oak, though from a distance. In July 2013 I was able to obtain permission to measure the tree. The dimensions obtained not only confirm the tree’s champion status but also suggest that it has continued growing since Peter Laharrague measured it in January 2003. Before going into these details, it is worth dwelling briefly on the colourful story on how the cork oak came to stand where it does.

Aarón de Anchorena was born in 1877 into one of the wealthiest families in Argentina. Following an education in Europe, his youth was spent in pursuit of adventure—particularly in the fields of hunting, car racing and ballooning—and travelling around the world or to unexplored parts of his native land. By the time he was 30, his concerned mother insisted that he should settle down,

photograph © Marilyn Mulville



The Anchorena Alcornoque an exceptional specimen of *Quercus suber* growing in the Parque Anchorena in Uruguay. Above as it was in 2003 and below taken in 2013. The canopy can be seen to be thinning somewhat. The trunk of the competing *Liquidambar styraciflua* can be seen immediately to the left of the trunk of the oak.

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quite literally in fact: she would buy him an *estancia* (large farm) as an advance on his inheritance if he kept both feet on the ground and gave up his new passion for balloon flying. Aarón agreed on the condition that he should be allowed one last flight to choose the land in question from the air. The flight he proposed was an intrepid first crossing of the River Plate. Flying across a river sounds insignificant, but this is the world's widest river and opposite Buenos Aires, his chosen departure point, it is 50 km across. For this purpose he had a silk balloon shipped out from France, together with a pilot. As hydrogen and helium were not readily available in Buenos Aires, the balloon was filled with the coal gas used for street lighting. The French pilot explained that this gas would not provide the required lift and refused to take part in the flight. Aarón was not interested in the laws of physics. He asked for a volunteer from the crowd present to take the French expert's place and join him in the balloon. A hand shot up, belonging to the Director of Public Street Lighting of the city of Buenos Aires, Jorge Newbery; perhaps he felt responsible for the situation as his firm was supplying the coal gas that would hoist the craft aloft.

They set off, rising steadily to a height of 3,000 m as the southwesterly breeze carried them towards the coast of Uruguay. However, the French expert's reservations about the lack of required lift were not unfounded: while the coast was still far off, the balloon began to lose altitude. The adventurers started throwing off ballast and eventually had to release the basket in which they stood and hang on for dear life to the balloon's harness, and that is how they splashed into the shallow waters of the Uruguayan beach. Aarón liked the look of the land where they landed and true to her word his mother purchased it for him—all 11,000 hectares of it.

His wings now clipped, Aarón focused on beautifying his estate, hiring German landscape architect Hermann Böttrich to lay out the park, and importing exotic species to plant in it, including 66 species of *Eucalyptus* that Aarón personally brought from Australia. Anchorena also introduced wild boar from Europe and axis deer from India to serve as cannon fodder for his hunting parties. The former ran wild and are not exactly farmers' favourites, but the deer thrived in the park and are its picturesque denizens today. During mating season they gather under the large cork oak and the other oaks in Parque Anchorena.

It is assumed that these first plantings, which began in 1908, included a cork oak seedling that would over the following century grow into the colossus that dominates the wide expanse of lawn in Parque Anchorena, originally Aarón's golf course. The name for cork oak in Spanish is *alcornoque*, so perhaps a suitable name for this tree could be the 'Anchorena Alcornoque'. Of the many Spanish names for oaks, *alcornoque* is the closest cousin to the genus name *Quercus*. It derives from a mixture of Arabic (*al* is the definite article) and Latin (*quernus* = oaken).

When I measured the oak in July 2013 I noted the following dimensions:



The Anchorena Alcornoque photographed directly in front of the *Liquidambar styraciflua*, July 2013.

girth 5.6 m, height 23.2 m, crown spread 38.2 m (SE-NW) and 36 m (E-W). Relative to the dimensions recorded a decade earlier, the girth had expanded by 40 cm, the height was virtually unchanged and the crown spread was about 25 % larger. Even allowing for margin of error in the 2003 and 2013 measurements, it appears that the oak is still growing steadily, though it appears that the crown is thinning and is less dense now than it was in 2003. The crown spread of the *alcornoque* is problematic: while the oak was allowed to spread its branches in most directions, to the northeast it is hindered by a *Liquidambar styraciflua* planted a scarce 20 m away. When Peter Laharrague reported on the Anchorena Alcornoque to the IDS, the then Chairman Lawrence Banks wrote a letter to the then President of Uruguay, Jorge Batlle, recommending that the offending sweetgum be removed so as to unfetter the majestic cork oak that graced the grounds of his residence. The advice has not been acted on. It is a difficult decision, as there is no certainty as to how the oak would react should its longtime companion be felled.

If we compare its dimensions to those of possible competitors in the southern hemisphere, the Uruguayan tree is well in the running. The champion cork oak in Australia's National Register of Big Trees is 22.5 m high and has a circumference of 4.9 m and a crown of 22 m, in all aspects inferior to the Anchorena tree. According to the formula used by American Forests, the Australian tree scores 285 points, while the Uruguayan one scores 327. A



The *Liquidambar styraciflua* (left) can clearly be seen competing with the *Quercus suber* in July 2013.

larger cork oak is to be found in New Zealand, in Te Awamutu Cemetery in Waikato: 379 points made up by a 6.9 m circumference, 26 m height and 26.3 m crown spread. While this tree surpasses the Anchorena oak in girth and height, its crown is considerably smaller. The Tree Register has a cork oak in Tregrehan, Cornwall that stands 22 m high, and one in Standish Hospital, Gloucestershire with a circumference of 5.6 m, each respectively Britain & Ireland champions for height and girth and on a par with the Uruguayan tree. The Tree Register does not include crown spreads, so a complete comparison is not possible.

Presumably the largest cork oaks would be found in their natural habitat, but data is not so readily available. The Portuguese giant 'Sobreiro de Pai Anes' has a massive girth of 7.3 m, but is surpassed by the 'Alcornoque de la Corte del Romero' in Spain (girth: 7.5 m). However, these trees do not seem to grow as tall as the cork oaks in the UK or Southern Hemisphere and do not exceed 18 m. In terms of crown spread, the Spanish and Portuguese giants do not beat the Uruguayan tree: a study of notable trees in Andalucía, Spain, *Arboles y Arboledas Singulares de Andalucía*, lists many outstanding cork oaks and their dimensions: the largest crown spread recorded is 35 m, and the average is 22 m. I have yet to find evidence of a cork oak with a larger crown spread than this Uruguayan specimen. Should any reader know of one, the information would be welcome.

Aarón died in 1965 and he willed his *estancia* to the Uruguayan state, specifically for the purpose of serving as a residence for the head of state. (Incidentally, Aarón's volunteer companion on the fateful balloon flight, Jorge Newbery, who had never flown before, went on to become the founder of Argentine aviation—the domestic airport in Buenos Aires is named after him.) While we do not know the exact year the cork oak was planted, it is safe to say it is a century old, still in its salad days compared to the Iberian champions that have been growing for three or four hundred years. It may well be the case that its speedy growth will lead to an early demise, but till then it will continue to be a joy to behold and an interesting case study of the behavior of this species outside its native habitat.

*With thanks to Michel Timacheff, Francisco Vazquez and Nick Macer for information on noteworthy cork oaks in Europe, and to Mario Vega and María José Colo for permission to measure the cork oak in Parque Anchorena. For a full account of Aarón de Anchorena's life (in Spanish): Aarón de Anchorena, una vida privilegiada, Presidencia de la República, Montevideo, 1998.*

**Note**

A version of this article was published in *Oak News & Notes*, the newsletter of the International Oak Society, in September 2013.