

BRAGG Patagonia Trip Jan 23 – Feb 3, 2012

Background: Steve and I signed up for Mountain Travel Sobek's "Patagonia: Trekking the Paine Circuit" trip.

From Wikipedia-- *Patagonia is a region located at the southern end of South America, territory shared by Argentina and Chile, which comprises the southern section of the Andes mountains to the southwest towards the Pacific ocean and from the east of the mountain range to the valleys, it follows south through Colorado River towards Carmen de Patagones in the Atlantic Ocean. To the west, it includes the territory of Valdivia through Tierra del Fuego archipelago. The name Patagonia comes from the word patagón¹ used by Magellan in 1520 to describe the native people that his expedition thought to be giants. It is now believed the Patagons were actually Tehuelches with an average height of 180 cm (~5'11") compared to the 155 cm (~5'1"o) average for Spaniards of the time.*

Torres del Paine is a 180,000 hectares (approx. 695 sq miles) national park in southern Chile in its "Region de Magallanes y Antartica." The park was created in 1959 and was announced as a biosphere reserve by UNESCO in 1978. The meaning of the word "Paine" is blue in the local Tehueiche language, thus the meaning of the name of the park is "The Blue Towers."

Sunday, January 23, 2012

Flight from Denver to Dallas-Fort Worth, then 9.5 hours overnight flight to Santiago, Chile. We used our daypacks as our carry-ons while checking one large duffle each.

Monday, 1/24/12

After clearing customs in Santiago, we had a few hours to wait until our flight to Punta Arenas, so I enjoyed a traditional Chilean beverage -- a Starbucks "Te Chai Latte" then grabbed a bite of lunch. Our late afternoon flight included a stop at Puerto Montt -- could see a volcano upon our approach. We had amazing views of mountains, fjords, glaciers, and icebergs during the flight from Puerto Montt to Punta Arenas. Punta Arenas sits on the northern shore of the Strait of Magellan. Here we met our fellow trekkers, Gretchen and Stewart Jacobson from Camarillo, CA before heading into town and our hotel for the night. There, we were welcomed by our guide, Sergio Fitch-Watkins, a long-time Mountain Travel Sobek guide from Mexico City. We had a late night dinner (about 10 p.m.) with the Jacobson's at the hotel before turning in for a much needed night of sleep.

Tuesday, 1/25/12

Following a buffet breakfast at the hotel, we loaded ourselves into a van and headed out of Punta Arenas, driving along the Strait of Magellan before heading inland towards Puerto Natales. Well, inland is a bit misleading since Puerto Natales is also on the water. The tip of Chile is covered with fjords and waterways. In fact, you can't drive the length of Chile (i.e., south to north and vice versa) due to the swiss cheese nature of the lower third of the country. If you drive north from Punta Arenas you end up having to jog east into Argentina and then drive north for quite a while before you can turn back west and return to Chile and continue northward.

We traveled alongside large sheep ranches and saw Chilean cowboys and their herding dogs. Given the climate and soil, we were told that such ranches need approximately one hectare per sheep. We also saw several Nandu (Patagonian Ostrich) and learned that after the chicks are born, the male becomes the primary caretaker with one male taking care of a whole batch of chicks -- we saw several examples of this behavior. Many other species of birds also showed themselves along our journey, including condors, black neck swans, and pink flamingos. We were introduced to

Guacos, Chile's version of the llama. Since it is summer in Chile, we saw lots of young Guacos that were born earlier in the Southern Hemisphere's spring season.

We stopped in Puerto Natales for lunch and to pick up our assistant guide, Pablo, a 30 year old native of the area. Even though it is high summer, the kids on summer break were playing in their ski jackets. The wind was blowing (as it apparently usually does) and the temperature was in the low 50's.

About an hour and a half out of Puerto Natales, we entered the Torres del Paine National Park in the late afternoon. A casual 3 mile hike right out of the entrance ranger station allowed us some up close and personal encounters with a herd of guanacos. A dominant male guanaco will surround himself with his harem of females and their offspring while actively and aggressively chasing off any male who wanders into his territory.



We became better acquainted with our fellow trekkers – Gretchen and Stewart, ages 56 and 58. She is a neurosurgeon and he is a fiduciary. They have three children, two boys (ages 29 and 25, a lawyer and a Cal Berkeley history grad trying to find a job) and a daughter who is 20 and a student at UCLA.

A brief ride following our hike had us arriving at "Eco Camp," our residence for 2 nights. Consisting of individual geodesic dome structures that serve as guest rooms and a larger multi-dome structure housing the bar/dining room/kitchen, Eco Camp strives to limit its ecological footprint by incorporating such environment-friendly elements as solar-heated hot water for the showers, composting toilets, and solar-powered lights. After settling into our "room" and enjoying a hot shower, we joined the rest of Eco-Camp for happy hour – appetizers and pisco sour cocktails. We were first introduced to pisco sours during a trip to Peru in 2010 and we were delighted to discover they are a classic Chilean drink as well (they are made with pisco brandy, simple syrup, egg whites, and lime juice). After dinner, we retired to our very comfortable bed in our dome – the dome includes 2 ceiling portholes and one large window from which we could enjoy the southern night sky – that is once the sky darkened. We were still adjusting to the very long days in this part of the world – the sun rises just after 6 a.m. and doesn't set until nearly 11 p.m.



Wednesday, 1/25

Today we hiked to "The Towers," a 12 mile round trip. We discovered that our hike involved trails on both private and public lands. Apparently, when the park was created in 1959, Chile tried to obtain various lands via eminent domain but the land owner went to court and ended up retaining land ownership but agreed to public use/access. Thus, we hiked on private land for almost 2 hours before reaching public land. The hike involved an elevation gain of almost 2,300 feet and took us from the plains up through the beech forest, followed by a steep climb up a rough talus and boulder field to the lake/glacier that fronted the three stone sentries for which the park was named. Multiple condor sightings, including a couple of fairly close fly-bys (gifts from the spirit world according to our guide) were a great bonus to the grandeur of the towers. Pablo, our assistant



guide, had recently scaled the north tower (left most) – a feat which took him 18 straight hours. Our hike, including a sack lunch under the shadow of the towers, took about 8 hours under mostly sunny skies. As the hike is quite popular with both trekkers and day hikers, we had plenty of company on the trail. A hot shower, pisco sours, and good dinner nicely rounded out the day.

Thursday, 1/26

Today, we began our trek around the Torres del Paine area – the original plan was to do what is called the “O” – a complete circumnavigation of the park. Unfortunately, due to wild fires that started just after the first of the year (human caused), part of the “O” had been closed, so instead we were to hike a “C” out and then return via the same route. While we carried our day packs with rain gear, water, sack lunches, and books, the rest of our gear (tents, pads, sleeping bags) were carried by porters. Also, we were given smallish dry bags for our personal items and were limited to what fit in them (the rest to be stored in our duffels at Eco Camp).



Our destination was “Seron Camp,” approximately 10 miles from Eco Camp. The route has some gentle ups and downs through grasslands and a total vertical gain of less than 700 feet -- so a nice easy stroll lasting just over 4 hours. For the entire trip, we remained on the private land portion of the park. The only excitement on the trail was the “waves” of weather we experienced – drizzle which turned to heavy rain with significant winds, followed by a period of calm winds, no rain and even sun and then the cycle repeated itself several times. Luckily, we had a calm weather window when we arrived at the camp, so we settled into our tents in dry conditions. Camp Seron consists of a single building which houses a toilet, a shower, a kitchen/eating area, and a bunk room for the staff. Trekkers set up their tents in the area around the building (there were about 40 tents in all) and can use a couple of additional outhouses as well as an outdoor sink area. Our group took advantage of the meal service provided by the camp (most of the other trekkers in camp did their own cooking – we saw a number of freeze-dried items – yum). When we go in for a late afternoon “tea” we discovered one of the staff busy making homemade bread – we enjoyed it the following morning as breakfast toast and then again on our lunch sandwiches. While the bread is baked in a modern oven, the kitchen also uses a vintage cast iron wood burning stove for both heat and some stove-top cooking. Seeing the flickering pilot light of a gas-powered refrigerator is an interesting site. A bit later we enjoyed a “happy hour” of pisco sours and appetizers before sitting down for dinner. As had become standard for the trip, we retired to our tents and sleeping bags BEFORE the sun set at around 10:45 p.m.



Friday, 1/27

A couple of Cara Cara birds greeted us this morning when we emerged from our tents. We were also greeted by hordes of mosquitos, as there was no wind. Today’s 11 mile hike traveled first along the Paine River for a bit before heading inland and then up to the “Pass of the Winds,” though today the winds were



calm - which meant lots of mosquitos were still with us. So, we headed down the trail from the pass and entered the public land portion of the park. Today, we traveled mostly through grasslands and low scrub. Ahead and to the right, we were treated to our first views of the Dickson glacier with “The Cube” rock formation rising majestically above it. After a quick lunch with the mosquitos, we continued along the rolling trail. Ahead and to the right emerged the “Fortress” and “Indian Head” formations. Luckily, as we approached our destination, Camp Dickson, the wind picked up and the mosquitos disappeared. After just over 6 hours, there was a “Chilean Switchback” (i.e., a steep trail that goes straight up/down with NO traverses) to the plateau on which we spent the night.



Camp Dickson abuts Lake Dickson that is fed by the Dickson Glacier. There are two buildings at this camp: one contains the camp store, two toilets and two showers, the other contains the kitchen/eating area and a couple of bunk rooms. After afternoon tea we enjoyed hot showers, although since the shower stalls were not fully enclosed, we did not linger in them. From camp, we had wonderful views of The Fortress and Indian Head. We also enjoyed watching the Chilean cowboys manage a group of pack horses that had arrived with supplies for the camp. A pisco sour cocktail hour again preceded dinner. As we did at all the camps, we chatted with a number of other trekkers. Annually, the park attracts 150,000 people from across the globe – we talked with and/or were aware of folks from Chile, Argentina, Australia, England, Scotland, The Netherlands, Spain, France, Germany, Switzerland, Japan, Israel, and throughout the U.S. Most of the annual visitors are not trekkers; instead, they arrive on tourist buses and take pictures from “scenic vistas” without every really experiencing the park. Most of our fellow trekkers were decades younger than our group and were doing it on a limited budget (i.e., they were carrying heavy packs and doing their own cooking).



Saturday, 1/28

We headed out after 9 a.m., following a typical breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, yogurt, and a drink from my childhood camping trips -- hot tang! The goal of today’s 7 mile hike was Camp Perros, about 1,200 vertical feet above Camp Dickson. Leaving the plateau upon which Camp Dickson sat, we soon reached beech forests thick with ferns and other undergrowth. We saw strange growths that can entirely ring a tree – apparently the tree’s



protection to a fungus whose name translates to

“Indian Bread” – small, round, and spongy things. The beech trees grew in diameter as the miles ticked by, until we reached areas of “old growth” trees, some upwards of 300 years old.

At times, we broke out of the forest and had excellent views back to the Dickson glacier and its “Cube” crown. As we climbed higher, we traveled along a robust glacier-fed stream that noisily tumbled downward, squeezed between sheer granite walls. A sack lunch along the trail was the now-classic cheese and tomato sandwich on homemade bread, mixed nuts & dried fruit, an apple, and an ending chocolate element. The weather was quite pleasant, but as we climbed higher the temperature began to drop, especially as we reached Lake Perros and its associated hanging glacier. It was obvious that the glacier had retreated significantly – its moraine (the rock and dirt piles that get pushed ahead by the ice) is a good 100 yards away from the current glacier. Camp Perros is just beyond the Lake, nestled in the forest. Unlike the prior camps, this one only had a cold water shower (though it does have flush toilets like the other camps). Steve bravely had a quick rinse while the rest of us declined the opportunity. Also, unlike the prior camps, this one does not have an indoor kitchen/eating area. Instead, we had happy hour and then dinner in a large kitchen tent. The temperature continued to drop, so we all retired to our warm sleeping bags in preparation for an early start the next day.



Sunday, 1/29

The rain started sometime during the night and it continued at various intensities as we met in the large tent for a 6:30 a.m. breakfast. It was definitely drizzling as we headed out at 7 a.m., and quite dark due to low cloud cover. Our intended plan for the day was to hike up to Paine Pass, enjoy the view down the other side, then turn around and head back past Camp Perros and return all the way back to Camp Dickson. The trail to the pass began with a steep climb right out of camp – there are lots of “bridges” of various types and sizes to cross as the area is quite wet and muddy and littered with trees, roots, stones, and other obstacles. Before long, the lower legs of our waterproof pants were covered in mud from all the under, over, around, and through maneuvering we did. When we entered the “Low Forest,” we found large beech trees growing horizontally along the ground for several feet before slowly curving upwards. The trees were densely packed and when the slope increased, we had to really scramble up the trail. We ended up naming this portion of the trail “The Gauntlet” and certainly felt like we had run one in the continuing rain! After the Low Forest the trail traversed a large rock scree field and the rain turned to snow. Paine Pass above us played hide and seek with the ever-changing cloud cover – one moment we could see the pass area and the next it was completely hidden. As we climbed up the rock field, the snow increased in intensity. At about 500 feet below the pass (and 2 hours, 45 minutes of hiking), our lead guide Sergio made the decision to turn back and not finish the climb to the pass. He explained that the final push to the pass is quite steep and while the going up is not the issue, he was concerned about our safety on the way back down due to the increasing snow level and the corresponding slippery nature of the trail (we later learned that nearly three feet of snow fell on the pass that day). Besides, given the continuing weather conditions, the likely



view at the pass would be limited at best. So, we snapped a couple of pictures and then headed back to Camp Peron, enduring the downhill version of “The Gauntlet.” We arrived back in Camp Perros a little after noon and stopped there for a chilly and partially dry lunch stop. On the hike back down to Camp Dickson, we were treated to expansive views of snow-covered mountains in all directions. The weather remained rather chilly for much of the time but warmed as our elevation decreased. After traveling a total of about 12 miles over nearly 10 hours, we arrived back in Camp Dickson at about 5 p.m. The usual happy hour, dinner, and a good night’s sleep in the tent followed.

Monday, 1/30

The return trip to Camp Seron occurred on a mostly sunny but windy day – luckily it was a tail wind! At one point on the trail we encountered an eagle perched on a tree branch, complete with a mouse in its talons. We also spotted a couple of condors. After catching final views of the Dickson glacier area, we hiked over Windy Pass and this time around experienced why it is so named. The rain began just as we completed the 11 mile stroll to Camp Seron. After getting our tent set up, we enjoyed a nice hot shower.



Tuesday, 1/31

It rained most of the night and was still sprinkling off and on as we had breakfast, struck camp, and headed back to Eco Camp. Due to the recent colder weather, we noticed that many of the stream crossings we had on the trip in five days earlier were now significantly reduced in volume (glaciers upstream weren’t melting as much). At times we encountered very strong winds – I was almost pushed over a couple of times. The rain came and went in various strengths and intervals. We enjoyed a final sack lunch on the trail – we started lunch in sunshine and then had to hurry and pack up as another rain shower arrived. We reached Eco Camp and collected our duffels that were left there, before climbing into a van for a drive to our final night in the park at Laguna Azul (Blue Lake). Along the way, we stopped at Cascades Paine for a quick photo opportunity. There we encountered our first large tourist bus – the way most of the 150,000 annual visitors experience the park. Before reaching the lake, we were treated to a very unusual sight – a group of five condors, three of which were youngsters doing flight training. The training was not going well, based on the short, altitude-losing flights we witnessed.



Our camp at Laguna Azul had stunning views across the lake to the Torres del Paine formation. We discovered the showers had very limited hot water capacity, so I enjoyed a hot shower while Steve got only a barely warm one. We enjoyed our last happy hour and dinner in the park with the spectacular towers in the background. We also said farewell to Pablo, our assistant guide.



Wednesday, 2/1

Before leaving Laguna Azul, we discovered ladybug “clusters” on bushes around the camp – something we had never seen before. The drive to Puerto Natales was full of more condor sightings. After settling into the very nice hotel, we spent some time walking around the town and checking out stores, including the local grocery store where we purchased some Calafate jam – made from a type of berry we had tasted one day along the trail where they were growing wild. That evening, we shared a final dinner with Gretchen and Stewart.

Thursday, 2/2

After breakfast, we did our final packing for the trip home. We departed Puerto Natales at noon and arrived at the Punta Arenas airport where a somewhat lengthy check-in line awaited us. We had a quick late lunch before our 3:55 p.m. flight to Santiago departed. As on the flight down, we enjoyed the birds-eye views of the landscape below, including a string of volcanoes located north of Puerto Montt and south of Santiago. At about 11 p.m. we departed Santiago for the U.S. via an overnight flight – and managed to get some sleep.



Friday, 2/3

Our morning flight from Dallas to Denver was delayed due to a major snow storm in Denver. Thankfully, our flight *did* depart, only about an hour and a half late – the vast majority of flights in and out of Denver that day were cancelled. While there was certainly snow on the ground, conditions were not too bad at the airport – the hardest-hit areas were south and west of the city. We had a somewhat slower-than-usual drive home. It continued to snow all day and evening. On the following morning, we shoveled the 17+ inches of snow that had fallen – what fun.

We both really enjoyed our time in Patagonia and have already talked about doing another trip there in a few years. Mountain Travel Sobek runs a trip that would allow us to basically complete the part of the “O” circuit in the park that we missed due to the fires, and then continue on to the Mt. Fitzroy area of Argentina where we could hike for several days before finishing the trip in Buenos Aires. Some of the folks we met and talked with on our trek had come from visiting the Fitzroy area and said it was not to be missed – so, we’ve added it to our trip list!