

## BRAGG Patagonia Trip Dec. 7 – 20, 2014

This was our second trip to Patagonia; the first being in January of 2012 when we experienced part of the circuit of Torres del Paine National Park in Chile. The write-up of that trip ended with the following:

*We both really enjoyed our time in Patagonia and have already talked about doing another trip there in a few years. Mountain Travel Sobek just happens to run 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 several days of hiking would occur 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!*

Thus, we find ourselves once again heading to the tip of South America, this time on Mountain Travel Sobek’s “Hiker’s Patagonia: Hiking Adventure in Chile & Argentina” trip.

Saturday, Dec. 6: Since this trip, unlike the previous one, did NOT involve any camping, our duffels weigh only about 15 pounds each. Of course, we are wearing our hiking boots and carrying our day packs filled with our rain gear, some cold weather gear, a change of clothes, medicines, etc. so that we’ll be covered “just in case” the checked luggage doesn’t arrive when we do! Our afternoon flight from Dallas is uneventful and after not-too-long of a layover we board our overnight flight to Santiago, Chile. We had decided to splurge and basically drain Steve’s American miles account by booking business class sleeper seats for the 10.25 hour flight -- we enjoyed being able to actually sleep *flat*, complete with comfy pillow and blanket; the biz class food was also a nice addition!



Sleeper seat for a good night’s sleep!

Sunday, Dec. 7: After about an 8 hr layover in Santiago (long enough to get old really fast but not long enough to leave the airport and go into the city), we boarded the 6pm flight into Punta Arenas (which is 10pm Denver time). The flight south from Santiago to Punta Arenas continues to be one of the most scenic and majestic flights we’ve been on (a window seat is a must!) ... the flight path follows a string of snow-covered volcanos south from Santiago, then after a stopover in Puerto Montt the flight continues over the fjord-laden landscape of southern Chile and then over the Straights of Magellan into Punta Arenas – the long late spring days and not yet setting sun



mean we arrive still in daylight at about 9pm. We had a very smooth flight and only a little cross wind upon landing. We learned that some of our group weren’t so lucky: those who arrived the day before had a very bumpy flight down from Santiago and after a bumpy landing it was so windy that the telescoping jet-way could not be brought out to the plane’s door so they had to sit on the plane for almost another hour (while the parked plane continued to shimmy) until the conditions allowed them to de-plane!

After reuniting with our duffels, we were met at the airport by our lead guide Rodrigo, a 36 year old Chilean who has been guiding for 18 years. After a short drive into the city, we checked into our hotel for the night and promptly settled in for some much needed sleep.

Monday, Dec. 8: At breakfast in the hotel we connected with the rest of our group:

- Tori, 65, from Cincinnati, OH – we had hiked with Tori on our trip to Iceland in July 2013 and knew she would be on this trip as well; Tori is a widow and retired from 20+ years with Proctor & Gamble
- Roger, 70, Mercer Island, WA – a still practicing orthopedic surgeon (specializes in orthoscopic knee surgery) and a full professor at the University of WA; he is currently single and has 3 kids and 3 grandkids
- Vicki and Steve, 64 and 60, married couple from Portland, OR area - Vicki is retired from a corporate career and Steve is a practicing lawyer specializing in railroad-related injury cases; Steve has one daughter

We loaded ourselves in to an 8 passenger van (our luggage was loaded into a pulled trailer) and headed north/northwest to the city of Puerto Natales, the gateway to the *Parque Nacional Torres del Paine* (National Park of the Blue Towers). We travel along the Straights of Magellan and then head inland enjoying the sights along the way, including:

- Guanaco's, Chile's llama, we were told the saying is that Nepal has "La-ma's" while Patagonia has "Ya-ma's"!
- Nandu, the Lesser Rhea, aka Patagonian Ostrich
- Pink Flamingos
- Condors
- Sheep ranches
- Wildflowers – the late spring timing meant the wildflowers were in full bloom including large areas of beautiful purple/blue lupine

In Puerto Natales we met up with Tomas, our Assistant Guide during our time in Torres del Paine. Since our last visit to Puerto Natales in 2012 we noticed that a new skate park had been built – basically a big cement-covered hole right along the shore of the sound on which the town sits – we watched a few kids enjoying the new park on both bikes and skateboards. After a nice lunch in town it was on to the National Park where we stretched our legs on a nice 3+ mile or so hike where we were able to see some old rock paintings done by native people of the area.



Nandu - Lesser Rhea - Patagonian Ostrich



Guanaco with Towers in background



Torres del Paine National Park



We then checked into the Hosteria Las Torres, our home for 2 nights. The hotel, while inside the park, sits on private land (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 reached an agreement for public use/access).

Tuesday, Dec. 9: Today we would be repeating a hike we did during our first visit to the park, an 11+ mile round trip hike to the base of “The Towers” for which the park is named. The trail was originally laid out by the father of our Assistant Guide Tomas. Tomas grew up spending his summers in the park with his family and his uncle’s family; Tomas’ uncle’s family still runs the horse concession in the park. The abundance of wildflowers was one of the first differences I noticed between this time and last, with things just being greener in general



Valley to The Towers, trail on left side

(we were about a month and a half earlier this trip so it was late spring, not summer as it was on the prior trip). Part way up to the towers, we passed through the rest hut area and



Hosteria Los Torres



Tent Platform

found something else new: platforms built for tents! With so little flat ground and this being the only camping area near the towers, the need for more tent areas was resolved by building a series of these platforms. We had mostly overcast skies on the hike up, and it even snowed as we were doing the final push of the 2600’ elevation gain up to the base of the towers. We had a chilly bag lunch while watching the towers appear and disappear in the clouds – quite a mesmerizing sight. However, we didn’t get as chilled as the brave soul who stripped

down to his boxers and took a dip in the glacier-fed lake in front of the towers! As we hiked back down, the weather improved with some sun peeking out.

A hot shower and cold soda were much appreciated upon our return to the hotel. Steve and the rest of the group then enjoyed a nice dinner in the hotel dining room while I went to bed early as I wasn’t feeling well for some reason (felt fine by next morning). We also packed up a small stuff sack with items for the next 2 nights as we would be separated from our duffels during this period and the stuff sacks would be carried by a porter to each night’s lodging.



The Blue Towers - Torres del Paine



Wednesday, Dec. 4: From this point forward, all our hiking would be in new territory for us. Today's hike was an easy 8 mile hike under mostly sunny skies along the "Los Cuernos" (the horns) trail. The trail follows the north shore of Lago (Lake) Nordenskjold – named for the Swede who "discovered" it in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Again, we are treated to lots of beautiful wildflowers and flowering bushes including 3 types of orchids, lady's slippers (3 varieties), violets, buttercups, fuchsias, the fire-bush, etc. I purchased a book on *Flowers of Patagonia* at the Los Torres hotel so I could have a reference book and a souvenir! At one point we counted 11 condors flying above us and we counted a huge 7-layer lenticular cloud above us (= high altitude strong winds).



Lago Nordenskjold



Cuernos del Paine Massif (The Blue Horns Massif)

The Los Cuernos trail was named for, and eventually runs beneath, the Cuernos del Paine massif with its vertical gray granite walls that support 2 black slate cuernos (horns). A cozy cabin at *Cabanas Cuernos* beneath the massif was our home for the night. One unique aspect of *Cabanas Cuernos* – a woodstove heated hot tub! After enjoying a shared happy hour and then dinner with our group, we all settled down for a good night's sleep. Unfortunately, this didn't happen: the wind picked up significantly and we all thought the roofs of our cabins were going to be blown off – it certainly sounded like they were!



Cabins at Cabanas Cuernos



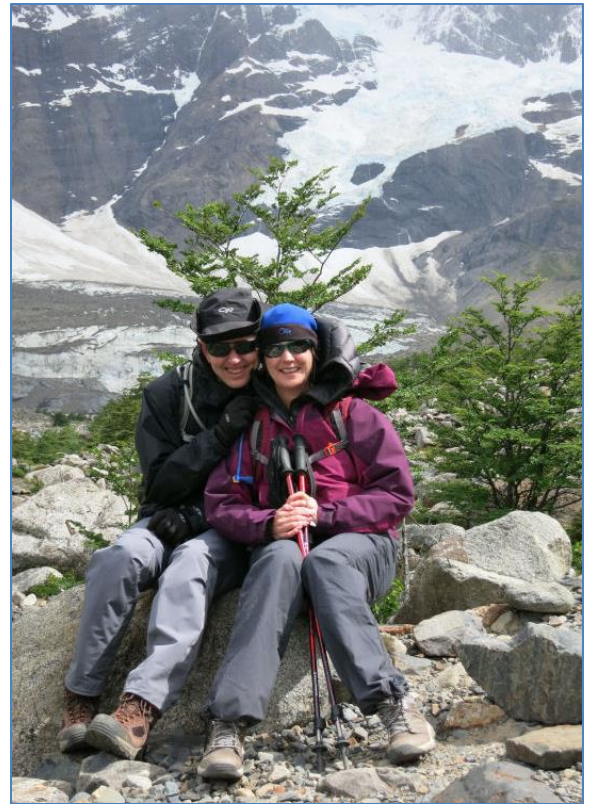
Cabanas Cuernos Hot Tub w/ Wood Stove

Thursday, Dec. 11: The Patagonian wind was still blowing strong as we ate breakfast and prepared for the day ahead. It was so strong that at one point I had to very quickly sit down on the deck bench of the dining hall or be blown over. Today we planned to hike into the *French Valley*, back out and then onto the Lodge Paine Grande where we'd spend the night. The hike to the turn-off for the French Valley continued along the Los Cuernos trail, an undulating trail with Lago Nordenskjold to our left and Cuernos del Paine Massif to our right. The wind continued to howl, mainly a head or side wind, with sporadic bursts that sounded like a freight train was barreling towards us. When this occurred, Rodrigo would yell "get ready" and we'd all assume a knee down 3 point position with our hiking poles providing us the stance



framework. Needless to say, it was a bit tough going but we eventually reached the turn-off into the French Valley. Not long after we started up that trail, we happened to see the snow billows of a just-happened avalanche on the French Glacier above the valley. We stopped at the *Italian Camp* Ranger Station (named for the Italian climbers who camped there) and were told the trail had been closed a bit farther up due to the conditions (strong winds). After a lunch stop we went as far up the trail as possible for a quick view, basically to the moraine of the French Valley glacier, then reversed our direction and headed back down the trail.

We hooked back up with the Los Cuernos trail and continued on it. After a bit, we came across our first sighting of some of the burn area from the 2011-12 wild fire that had interrupted our complete circuit of the park back then. While the beech trees still showed the damage done by the fire, the ground beneath the trees was once again full of green grass and wildflowers – nature was healing itself. The wind continued to blow, and blow hard with frequent still harder gusts. At one point I was mid-step and suddenly found myself picked up and thrown into the side of the hill we were hiking along. Steve was behind me and saw my flight; he jumped on top of me to make sure I didn't fly away again! No harm done but certainly a weird experience. The wind bursts also created water spouts on the lake alongside of which we were hiking – watched time and again these spouts be created and then moved across the lake by the wind. We were told that the wind needed to be a least 80 kph (approx. 50 mph) for these spouts to occur.



French Glacier in the background –  
the wind is blowing hard!

Although we had only hiked about 8 miles, it had been into and against very strong winds causing us to feel a bit battered by the time we reached our unheated 2-bunk room at *Lodge Paine Grande*, located on the shore of Lago (Lake) Pehoe. A hot shower, a cold soda, and our warm long underwear began to revive our spirits and bodies. Happy hour with good Chilean wine and snacks alongside a well-stoked wood stove moved things along even farther as we comfortably watched arriving hikers having to walk at an angle and several their tents being blown off their stakes.



Burned beech trees



Water Spouts forming on lake from strong winds



Friday, Dec. 12: This morning we hiked from Lodge Paine Grande to *Lodge Gray* on the shores of Lago (Lake) Gray, a 7 mile hike. The wind is still blowing fairly hard as we head out and up as the trail climbs to *Laguna Los Patos* (Duck Lake). From there we continue on, with the wind, to a viewpoint *Glacier Olguin*. We escape the wind as we hike down into a valley filled with wildflowers, including purple and white Foxgloves – this is the only place in the park where these flowers grow.



Olguin Glacier in background



Foxglove



Patagonia Wild Pea



The 3 varieties of Lady Slippers found in Torres del Paine National Park

We eat lunch at Lodge Grey which is decorated for Christmas, complete with a Christmas tree. It is then time to say goodbye to the Torres del Paine circuit trail and board the boat for the trip across Lago Gray to our lodging for the night, *Hosteria Gray*. We reach the boat via its Zodiac tender and then instead of turning south towards the hotel, we turn north and head straight to the front of the Glacier Grey! While sipping on Pisco Sours (yum!) cooled by glacier ice no less, we enjoy the up close views of the leading edge of the glacier and its astounding blues.



Glacier Grey Boat



Glacier Grey



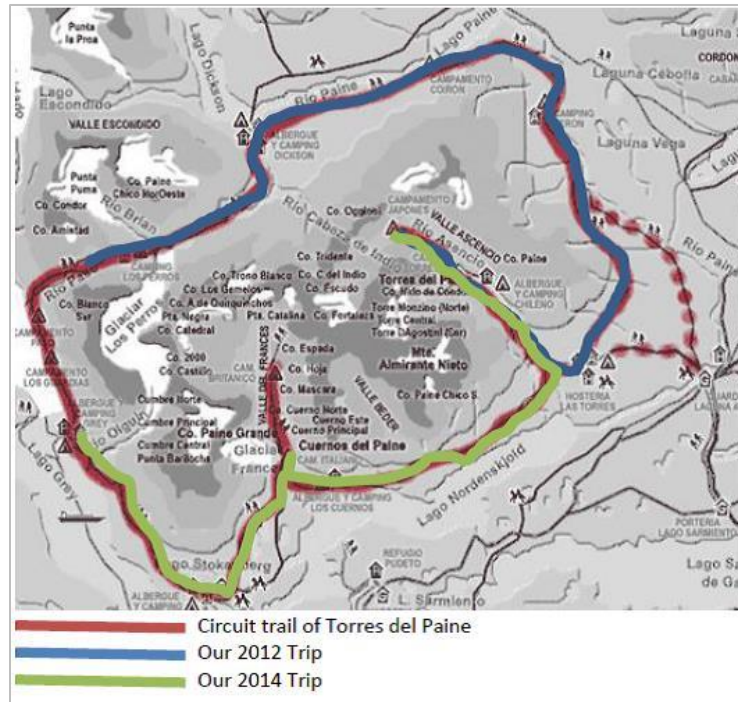
Glacier Grey in background



We couldn't think of a better way to cap off the journey of experiencing Torres del Paine National Park. We felt honored to have been able to see so much of this incredible area. From the boat we could see the area of the circuit trail that we hadn't been able to hike -- between our two visits, we had almost been able to hike the complete circuit. From our hotel, *Hosteria Grey*, we had amazing views of the lake, the glacier, Paine Grande massif, Los Cuernos, and so much more. The group celebrated the end of our Chilean adventures that evening with Calafate Sours (Pisco Sours but with the added juice of the calafate berry, found throughout Patagonia).



With our fellow hikers (L to R): Roger, me, Steve, Tori, Vicki, and the other Steve



Before crossing the border we said our farewells to Tomas, we would be getting a new assistant guide in Argentina. We had been warned that the border crossing into Argentina could result "in delays of up to a few hours." Fortunately, we were quickly processed out of Chile and then, just a bit down the road, processed into Argentina quite efficiently. Our destination was the town of El Calafate—while only about 60 miles as the condor flies northeast of Torres del Paine, but we had about a 5 hour drive as we first had to go south, then east, then north to avoid some rather large mountains. We drove mostly over steppe-like plains—quite a change from the mountains of Torres del Paine.

Saturday, Dec. 13: Now on to see more of Patagonia on the Argentina side of the region! Before heading to the border crossing, we enjoyed watching a young Patagonian Grey fox up close on the hotel grounds ... while certainly not tame, he was fairly comfortable with humans as long as we didn't get too close.



Patagonian Grey Fox



The town of El Calafate sits on the shore of Lago Argentino, a glacier fed lake and Argentina's largest freshwater lake. The lake lies within *Los Glaciares National Park*, our focus for the next several days. The park's name refers to the giant ice cap in the Andes range, the *Southern Patagonian Ice Field*, which feeds 48 large glaciers, of which 13 flow towards the Atlantic Ocean. The ice cap is the largest outside of Antarctica and Greenland. The park was created in 1937 and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981.



While Steve is taking a nap (he caught the same bug that the other Steve had), I explore El Calafate a bit and checked out some of the shops – I did buy a thimble! The town is filled with tourist shops and restaurants. Flowering rose bushes adorn some of its main street. Later, we both meet up with our group for a delicious dinner of empanadas (pastry dough filled with various meat or vegetables).

Sunday, Dec. 14: Today we visited the *Perito Moreno Glacier*, a very active glacier on the south arm of Lago Argentina. It is only one of three Patagonian glaciers that is growing (scientists don't know why in this time of global warming). The terminus of the glacier is approximately 3 miles wide, with an average height of 240 ft above the surface of the water of the lake and it has a total ice depth of 558 ft. Thanks to an engineered wooden and steel walkway system, we are able to get quite an extensive and relatively close-up view of the glaciers' terminus. At what sounds like a rifle shot (when a chunk of ice breaks away from the glacier), you quickly look to see where the calving process is occurring along the terminus' edge – when the piece hits the lake's surface you hear another resounding boom with the ice chunk's size determining the magnitude of the boom. The calving process was fascinating to both see and listen to; in fact it, became quite addicting due to its frequency – just when you started to turn away, the sound of another crack would start the process all over again. As with the Grey Glacier, the range of blues within the ice was incredible – from pale sky blue to bright electric blue to deep periwinkle blue.



Viewing walkway at Glacier Perito Moreno



Perito Moreno Glacier



At Perito Moreno Glacier

After a late lunch in the restaurant with great views of part of the glacier, we returned to El Calafate (about a 45min ride). We joined the group for a dinner at a great Argentine grill restaurant where we viewed the traditional means of grilling the meat – an entire carcass is splayed open to receive the heat of an open fire. I enjoyed an outstanding beef steak while Steve opted for a lamb dish. We finished the evening out with a stop (and purchase) at a local helado (ice cream) shop!



Argentine grilling method



Monday, Dec. 15: We left El Calafate after breakfast and headed north/northeast to the small town of El Chalten. We drive across the steppes and along the northern end of Lago Viedma – the trip takes about 3 hours. The town sits at the base of Cerro (Mt.) Torre and Cerro Fitz Roy, both popular climbing destinations.

Once in town, we meet up with Cecilia, our assistant guide for the next few days. After a hearty lunch of a traditional Andean stew called “locro” (made with corn, beef, and other vegetables), we take an easy 6 mile round trip hike to a look out and back to the park’s ranger station. Post hike we stopped for an afternoon treat of another helado and then stopped at a local outdoor gear shop (Vicky had to replace her old boots after they delaminated; her husband Steve’s boots had also delaminated earlier in the trip – he was using a borrowed pair of boots). From there we had a drive of about 40 minutes to the Fitz Roy Eco Lodge/Adventure Camp, our home for the next 2 nights.



Entering the town of El Chalten

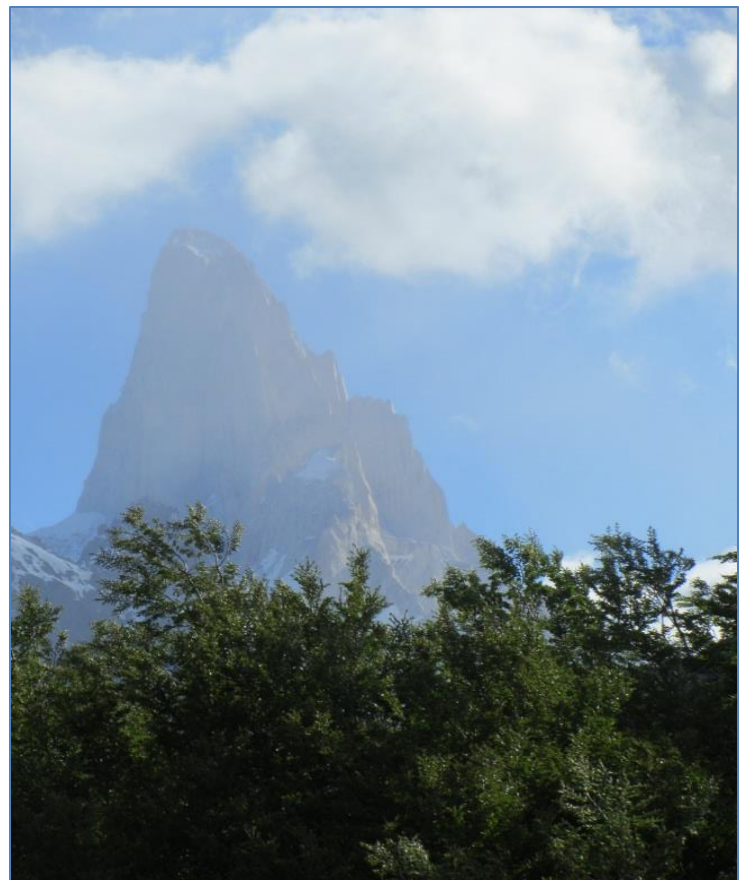


Front Door of Fitz Roy Eco Lodge –  
note the *organic shape*

The Fitz Roy Eco Camp’s main lodge is a marvel of craftsmanship. It is constructed out of wood and glass; tree trunks in their natural shapes form the vertical support structure. We stayed in cozy 2-person cabins but enjoyed happy hours and meals in the main lodge. There is a wonderful view of Cerro (Mt) Fitzroy from the lodge’s picture windows. The outline of Fitz Roy and its surrounding peaks forms the logo (see below) for Patagonia - the popular outdoor clothing company (the company’s founder did the 3<sup>rd</sup> ascent of the peak in 1968). We both have several pieces of Patagonia clothing with us on the trip!



The outline of Mt Fitz Roy and surrounding peaks forms the background of the Patagonia clothing company’s logo



Cerro Fitz Roy, at 11,171 ft it is the highest peak in Los Glaciares National Park



Tuesday, Dec. 16: A short-drive away from the Eco Lodge, we start today's planned 16 mile hike. The trail roughly follows alongside the Electrico River through grasslands and then into beech tree forests as the elevation increases. Due to the very slow decomposition cycle you see lots of downed trees amongst the living ones (the high winds in the area keep the downed wood very dry which slows down the decomposition process). Also, since we are on the eastern side of the Andes, the area has a dry climate, the result of a "rain shadow effect" (a *rain shadow* is a dry area on the lee side of a mountainous area, away from the wind - the mountains block the passage of rain-producing weather systems and cast a "shadow" of dryness behind them). So while areas in Patagonia on the western side of the Andes can receive up to 300 inches of rain a year, the El Chalten area only receives about 30 inches per year and this number decreases the farther you move east toward the Atlantic Ocean to about 8" per year at the coast.



Trail through a Beech Tree forest

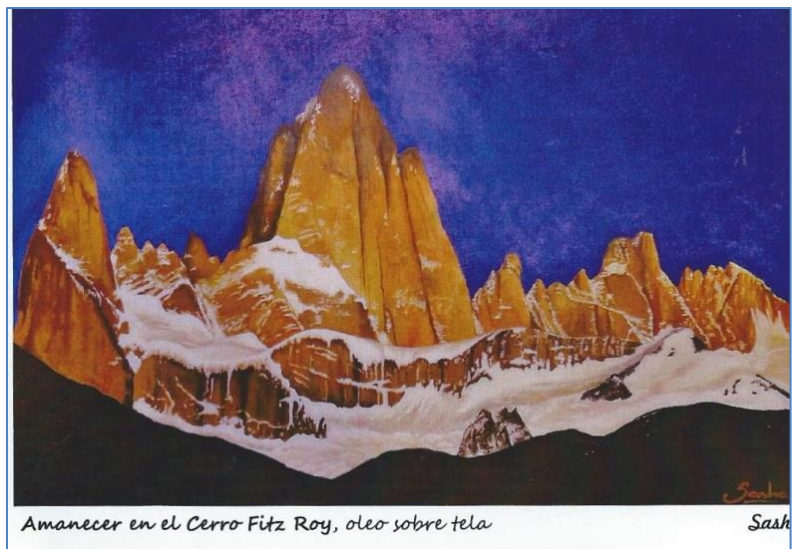


Piedra del Fraile Hut

About 5 miles in we reach the *Piedra del Fraile* (Stone Monk) hut – a popular place with the climbing population. There, our lead guide Rodrigo makes a special delivery to the young couple who are the hut's caretakers – a Koala baby-backpack for the couple's 2 year son who was promptly loaded into it and placed on his Dad's back! Inside the hut we ate our sack lunches along with much appreciated hot beverages as the temperature has fallen and the wind speed increased significantly. After lunch we battle the wind a bit farther up the trail to *Friar's Rock*, an overlook of the Glacier Marconi where we also have nice views of the west face of Mt Fitz Roy (named for the captain of Darwin's ship the HMS Beagle). Fitz Roy was originally named *Cerro Chalten*; the word Chalten

means "smoking mountain" in the area's ancient native language. The mountain does look like it is "smoking" as it makes its own clouds by the westerly wind sweeping up a steep snow-covered area. Although Mt Fitz Roy is less than half the elevation of Mt Everest (29,090), it is considered a much harder peak to climb and only a small number of very experienced climbers do so each year.

Due to safety concerns, the decision is made by our guides to abort the remaining 2.5 miles of the planned outbound hike. The concern is that the trail becomes considerably steeper above this point and with the cold temperature and strong winds the return trip would involve some very icy and slippery conditions. We have a pleasant return hike and with the hike shortened to just 11 miles we get back to the Eco Lodge a bit earlier than expected, and so enjoy a cold beverage while the wood fire fueled water heating system is fired up so we can enjoy very hot water showers! We do our nightly laundry (as we've been doing all along: synthetics dries really fast here). That night the southern sky is beautiful during a quick peek sometime in the middle of the night.



Amanecer en el Cerro Fitz Roy, óleo sobre tela

Sasha

Postcard made from painting of Cerro Fitz Roy by Sasha Silva, caretaker at Piedra del Fraile Hut



Wednesday, Dec. 17: Today's activity is a planned 16 miles hike ending up back in the town of El Chalten. The weather is a bit drizzly and overcast but a rainbow brightens our spirits as we head out. As we put the miles behind us, unfortunately the wind increases as does the cloud cover. When we reach the turn-off to the planned 5 mile round trip side valley hike to see views of Cerro Torre and Fitz Roy, the decision is made to skip it as the likelihood of having any actual scenic views is quite small. We press on to Lago Capri where we stop for a chilly lunch break and watch the water spouts dance across the lake (an indication of the high wind speed!). Hot showers await us at our hotel so we finish up the abbreviated 11 mile hike with a downhill trek into town. A good pasta dinner completes the day.

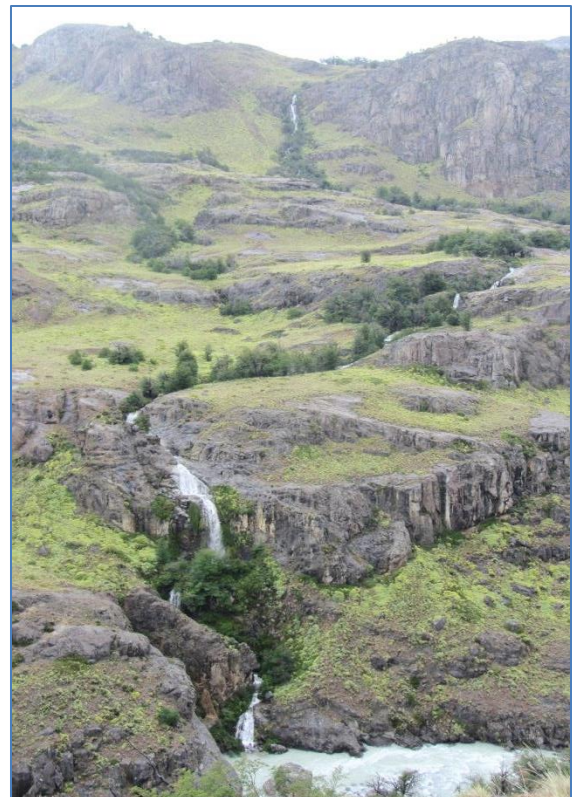


Looking down into El Chalten

Thursday, Dec. 18: It started raining hard sometime during the night and continues to do so as we gather for a pre-hike breakfast. We delay the start of today's 13 mile round trip hike in hopes the showers will let up a bit (as the weather forecast predicts) – and they actually do! There is only a light rain as we head up the trail out of town into the park's interior. Our destination is *Laguna Torre*, the base camp for *Cerro Torre* climbs, situated on a glacial lake. Along the way we are treated to some beautiful waterfalls feeding the Rio (River) Fitz Roy. Cecelia, our Asst Guide, tells us that just last week she was part of a rescue team that evacuated out a climber who had broken his leg and they were able to float him down the river part way – the first time in 10 years that water level conditions allowed for such type of transport. With the increasing rainfall, we begin to feel like we too are taking a dip in the river!



Wet Hikers (L to R): Cecilia (Asst Guide), Steve, other Steve, Tori peeking out from behind Steve, Vicki, and Rodrigo (Head Guide)



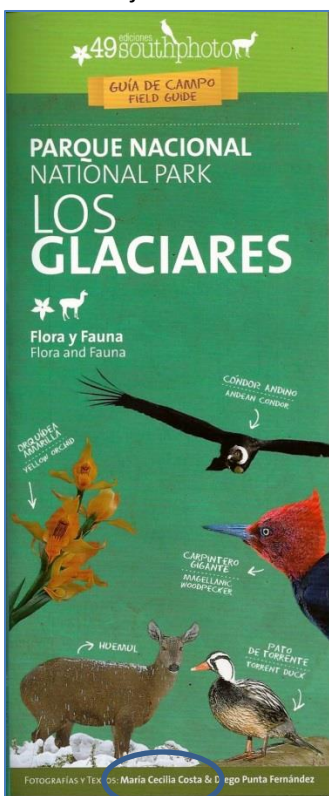
Waterfalls feeding Rio Fitz Roy



As we near Laguna Torre, the trail follows right along the river's bank and we come upon a family of Torrent Ducks. Cecilia tells us that these ducks live in waterside caves or other sheltered spots and are one of the few that can survive in fast moving mountain waters – they are powerful swimmers and divers as they feed on algae which grow on submerged rocks along a river's banks. Their bills are flexible so that as they search among the rocks for food they don't get them stuck. At one point both parent ducks jump into the water to swim to the next upstream rock – youngster doesn't look too excited about following them into the cold glacier fed river. He/she does eventually but stays in only as long as is absolutely necessary! Cecilia is well-versed in the flora and fauna of the area – she co-authored the park's guide on the subject.



**Torrent Duck Family – youngster sitting beneath Momma Duck – you can see his/her tail sticking out**



**Our Assistant Guide!**

The temperature dropped the closer we got to Laguna Torre and its accompanying *Glacier Grande*. We reach *Camp Agostini*, a base for Cerro Torre climbers. With very cold hands (our gloves have become soaked from the steady rain) we attempt to un-wrap our sandwiches and eat a quick lunch before heading onto the shore of the lake. Unfortunately, the views of *Cerro Torre*, 10,262 ft, are obscured by the cloud cover. The good news is that the rain has mostly stopped and I can put on dry fleece gloves and get my hands warmed up.



**Laguna Torre with Glacier Grande behind – Cerro Torre obscured by clouds farther back**

basically dry as we take a final walk in the beech tree forest of Patagonia. We watch a condor effortlessly riding the thermals and then watch an American Kestrel (a small falcon) madly flapping its wings against the wind so it could stay in a stationary spot while spotting a potential meal candidate. We chose an easier meal acquisition method that evening: a group dinner at *La Tapera* where we consumed large amounts of excellent Argentine food and wine and toasted a fabulous visit to Patagonia.

The return trip 6.5 mile hike to El Chalten is



*Cerro Torre, óleo sobre tela*

*Sasha Silva*

**Postcard of painting of Cerro Torre by Sasha Silva**



Friday, Dec. 19: After a short drive we are back in the El Calafate area, this time at its International Airport. We say our final goodbyes to our head guide Rodrigo and our trusty driver Sergio before boarding a mid-afternoon flight to Buenos Aires. Note: a few snowflakes are falling, just a couple of days before the official start of the Patagonian summer! However, as we deplane in Buenos Aires we know that summer in the Southern Hemisphere is nearly upon us -- we are greeted by very warm, humid air. After collecting our bags, we are met by Monica for a short van ride into the city and our hotel for the night. We arrived at the "old" international airport (now mostly used for domestic flights) which is located in the city on the banks of the Rio de la Plata (River of Silver), an up to 140 mile wide river. On the river's opposite bank is the country of Uruguay. The hotel is in the Recoleta district of Buenos Aires, a very upscale area filled with boutiques and restaurants. We gather for a late dinner (a bit after 8pm which is rather early by Argentine standards) at a local neighborhood spot for a final group dinner.

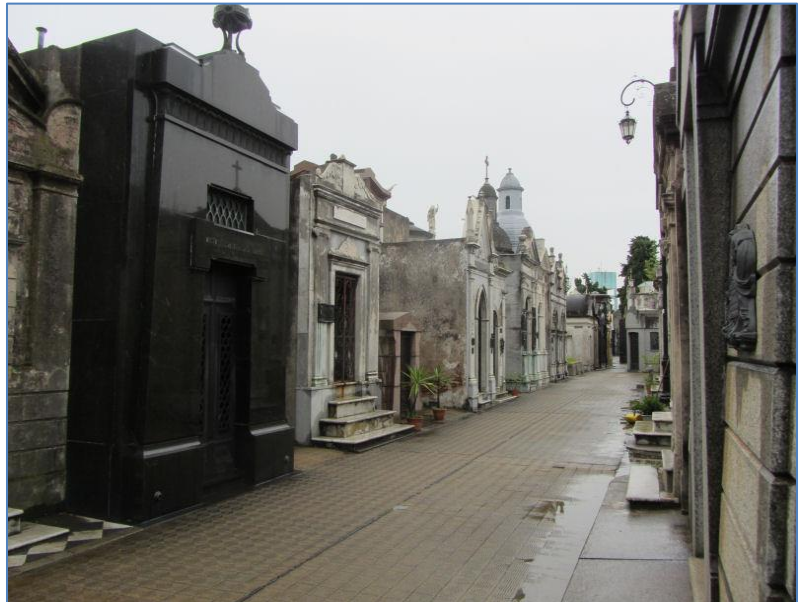


Saturday, Dec. 20: The group is now down to five as Roger caught an early morning flight back to the states. The rest of us meet up with Monica for a city-tour of Buenos Aires. It starts with a short walk down the block and around the corner of our hotel to the famous *La Recoleta Cemetery*. It contains the mausoleums/graves of notable people, including Eva Perón, presidents of Argentina, Nobel Prize winners, the founder of the Argentine Navy and a granddaughter of Napoleon. Formerly the garden of a monk's convent, it was converted to a public cemetery in 1822. The changing and eclectic architecture and decorative styles through the years since is evident as a very modern mausoleum can be found right next to a very Victorian one -- with every style in between as well. The cemetery is also known for the cats that live there -- they are kept fed by a dedicated group of local women who come daily to feed them.



One of the La Recoleta Cemetery Cats

We hop into our tour van to see some other areas of the city. Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest metropolitan area in South America (Sao Paulo Brazil is larger) and has a population of well over 15 million. Its architecture is characterized by its eclectic nature, with elements resembling Barcelona, Paris and Madrid. It is sometimes called "The Paris of



La Recoleta Cemetery

Nearby is a HUGE and very old gum tree (it was planted in 1781). Some of its branches are held up by concrete columns, one branch is held aloft by a metal sculpture of *Atlas*.



Steve assisting Atlas hold up branch of Gum tree planted in 1781



the South” and we could certainly see why as we drove down the *9 de Julio Avenue*, the widest avenue in the world, flanked on either side by European-style buildings that could just as easily be sitting on a Parisian street. We do drive-byes of the National Library, the art museum, famous Colon Theater & Opera House and the *Pink House* (Casa Rosada – the official mansion/executive office of Argentina’s President). We stop at the National Cathedral for a quick view and see a variety of different colored marbles used on its side chapels. We also stop by the Buenos Aires Park Hyatt hotel which is partially made up of a former mansion. We ogled the original ornate crystal chandeliers, over-the-top decorative plaster moldings, intricate marble floors, and more.

In need of some sustenance, Monica took us to the *Gran Café Tortoni*, founded in 1858, where we indulge in their very rich hot chocolate (served with a pitcher of hot milk to cut the richness) into which we dip churros (long, skinny fried-dough pastries). Since its opening, the café has served as a meeting place for artists and scholars (its walls are covered with the art work of some of its more famous patrons). Appropriately revived, we continue on with our city tour.

The colorful neighborhood of *La Boca* is next up. It is now a popular tourist spot with lots of shops and restaurants with tango dancers trying to draw in customers. Originally it was a very poor neighborhood where buildings were constructed with whatever materials were available and apartments housed multiple families.



The La Boca neighborhood of Buenos Aires

towered areas near the ecological reserve. We stop for a look-see at the Phillip Starck-designed interior of a grain warehouse turned high-end hotel, the Faena Buenos Aires. Then it’s back to our hotel to gather up our bags and head out to the new International Airport which is several miles outside the city. We have any overnight flight into Houston – this time we’re in the regular back-of-the-bus seats so we don’t get much sleep.

Sunday, Dec. 21: After going through customs and immigration into Houston, we have a short layover before boarding the 6<sup>th</sup> and final flight of the trip into Denver. We manage to keep ourselves awake until about 9pm (1am Argentine time).

We thoroughly enjoyed our 2<sup>nd</sup> and likely final trip to the ruggedly beautiful area known as Patagonia. We do plan to return to South America as there are other places there still on our “would like to visit” list, including: the Galapagos Islands & Ecuador, Brazil’s Iguazu Falls, and, of course, South America is the jumping off point for any visit to Antarctica!