

2 Destinations

A special section on travel and adventure by local people. ■ July 30, 2008

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Constantly shifting clouds dramatize the granite spires of Torres del Paine in the Patagonian summer. What a thrill to hike around these mountains for three days, also enjoying wildlife, including guanaco, and rhea, a South American ostrich.

Photo by Marion Softky

PATAGONIA PLUS

Three weeks in Patagonia showed us spectacular peaks and glaciers, plus geysers, desert salt flats, penguins, waterfalls, and much, much more

By Marion Softky
Almanac Staff Writer

One overwhelming memory of Patagonia is wind: hurricane-force gusts that almost blew us off of trails and overlooks; staggering across a half-mile sand spit holding tight onto guide Victoria as winds howling down from Grey Glacier tried to topple us; and dozens of fuzzy pictures of gorgeous scenery where winds joggled the camera.

Memorable as they were, the winds made up a small portion of the experiences piled up during three weeks in Patagonia last February—the peak of summer at the other end of the world.

For those who are fuzzy on their geography, Patagonia refers to the southernmost part of South America in Argentina and Chile. It was apparently named by Magellan close to 500 years ago, after giants called “patagons,” according to Wikipedia. Apparently the natives were larger than the Portuguese who discovered them.

My friend, Barbara Dengler of Berkeley, arranged the core of our trip. We spent eight days immersed in some of the most exciting mountains on Earth: the carved granite spires and glaciers of Torres del Paine National Park in Chile, and the similar Fitz Roy range near El Chalten in Argentina.

And we did it in luxury; our backpacking days are behind us. The Explora Lodge picked us up in Punta Arenas on the Straits of Magellan, and dropped us off at El Calafate in Argentina eight days later. In between, we enjoyed elegant accommodations, fine food, and wonder-



Photo by Ian MacKinnon

Barbara Dengler, left, and **Marion Softky** pause as the rising sun illuminates the Fitz Roy range in the background. The amazing view also included the full moon setting over the 10,000-foot peaks.

ful guides who led us on superb outings during our stay.

My role was to organize the trip from San Francisco to Punta Arenas, and back from El Calafate. Since we were going so far, we decided to take in some of southern South America's other amazing attractions. High points turned out to be the Atacama Desert in Chile, the penguins near Punta Arenas, still more glaciers in El Calafate, and the incredible Iguazu Falls in Argentina.

Working through Redwood Travel in Redwood City, we had our trip meticulously organized so that we were met at the airports, carried to hotels in our price range, and organized for tours to special destinations, whether

desert geysers at dawn, Inca ruins, or city tours in Santiago and Buenos Aires.

Mountains and glaciers

The Explora van picked us up at our hotel, the Finis Terrae, in Punta Arenas for the half-day drive to Torres del Paine. After a luxurious lunch, we had time for the “moderate” hike to the Condor lookout.

The views, on that afternoon and for the rest of our stay, were amazing. The massif of carved granite spires totally dominates the surrounding landscape of rolling hills, large lakes, and rock outcroppings.

For the next three days we explored the trails and the lakes and waterfalls, always awed by the dramatic lights shining through the constantly shifting clouds. We observed at least one major landslide on the glacier flanking the main tower, and—on our last morning—a rainbow touching Torre Central.

We took the moderate hikes, not the easy ones or the strenuous all-day outings. On our second day we drove to a nearby estancia for a sumptuous lamb barbecue. Some went horseback riding, while others walked across a ridge between two highways. That walk brought us to some faded cave paintings of reddish hands.

Observing the native wildlife was a special treat. Several wild guanaco, forebears of the domesticated llama, posed

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Making arrangements

Travel agents have lots of resources these days to help arrange trips to exotic places.

I called Diane Berlin at Redwood Travel and asked for someone who knew Patagonia. I talked at length with my traveling companion Barbara Dengler and with Lynda Hoffman of Redwood Travel to decide where we wanted to go for how long, and how much we were willing to pay.

Ms. Hoffman contracted with Avanti Destinations, an international travel agency, which farmed out specific arrangements to Cocha Tours in Chile, and Eurotur in Argentina.

From the time we got off the plane at 6 a.m. in Santiago until we boarded a flight in Buenos Aires, all details of being met and moved — plus hotels, sightseeing tours and outings — were taken care of. We suffered only a couple of minor glitches.

The mountain part of our tour was handled by Explora Lodge (www.explora.com).

Photo by Marion Softky

trekking guide Maria Cecilia Costa shows off the Viedma Glacier near the Fitz Roy range in Argentina. Since 1988, she has seen the glacier recede 300 feet; its face is 50 feet lower. Global warming? She thinks yes.

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for us. And five young males staged a fight. We also saw several rhea, a South American ostrich, galloping up an open field.

After three days at Torres del Paine, we joined an English couple and British-Chilean guide Ian MacKinnon for an extended tour to the equally dramatic Fitz Roy range farther north in Argentina. Fitz Roy, the dominant peak, was named after the captain of the Beagle, the ship that carried Charles Darwin on his world-changing voyage.

In El Chalten, we stayed at the El Puma Hotel, where the lawn was mowed by a resident llama with an enchanting baby.

Besides two days of gorgeous hikes, we also took a boat to the Viedma Glacier, one of hundreds that snake down from the Patagonian Ice Field. From the polished rocks, we could look into the deep blue cracks on the glacier face before they calved into the lake, sculpting icebergs that seemed to glow with an incredible glacier blue.

Mara Cecilia Costa, our local guide, has been observing the glacier for nine years.

She has seen its snout recede by 300 feet since 1999, and the height reduced by 50 feet. "The glacier receded 2 kilometers in 200 years. Then it speeded up," she said. "We really are seeing how global warming affects the glaciers in Patagonia. We're having more rain instead of snow."

Our final departure from El Chalten to El Calafate was special. We left early to see the sunrise bathe Fitz Roy and neighboring peaks in pink as a full moon set over the mountains.

Not too much later, we stopped to see a flock of six noisy cara cara birds fighting over a dead guanaco as a couple of condors stood nearby waiting their turn.

Desert, penguins, waterfalls

San Pedro de Atacama is a charming colonial city, and center for visiting the Atacama Desert in northern Chile. With some of the driest, clearest air in the world, the Atacama Desert is home to international astronomical observatories.

The night skies were incredible. After our first night at the Hotel Terrantai, we left at 5:30 a.m. to visit the Tatío geysers at dawn.

On the way we pulled off the road for some stargazing. The Southern Cross was overhead and Jupiter glowed brilliant in the eastern sky. Then an even more brilliant light seemed to burst from the

horizon. Venus rose, just for us.

It was a bumpy ride to 14,000 feet, where dozens of geysers were spewing steam plumes, as the rising sun tipped the snow-capped Andes beyond.

We walked among spouting geysers and boiling puddles, some surrounded by ice crystals in the frigid morning. One pool was big enough to lure bathers to soak in its warm waters. Nearby we stopped to observe flocks of vicuna, with babies frolicking in the desert scrub.

A visit to the salt flats the next day reminded me of the Cargill salt ponds in Redwood City. With one big exception: The Atacama salt flats support flamingoes. The elegant birds were posing, dancing, slurping up goodies from the water, and occasionally flying with ultimate grace.

Other highlights included: the Carnaval festival with costumed dancers in a local village; the weirdly desolate Valley of the Moon; and ruins of earlier peoples predating the Inca and Spanish.

One long day — a drive and two flights — took us to Punta Arenas on the Straits of Magellan. Before the Panama Canal, this was the main port between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans.

Most memorable was our zodiac ride out to Isla Magdalena, a desolate island occupied by one lighthouse and 120,000 penguins. The Magellanic penguins, about 3 feet tall, were very tolerant of the tourists trekking up the barren trail to the lighthouse. They ignored us. What a treat to be able to watch them mostly standing around peacefully.

Our other highlight was Iguazu falls, one of the most spectacular waterfalls in the world.

Actually, Iguazu is a set of waterfalls located where a plateau in Brazil meets a plateau in Argentina about 250 feet lower. The water spills from one country to the other in 275 separate waterfalls over about 2.7 kilometers (1.67 miles).

We stayed at the Sheraton Hotel, with a view of the falls and the plume of spray that rises above the Devil's Throat. We walked trails and board walks with stunning — and sometimes damp — views of falling water and jungle vegetation.

Most exciting was the boat ride up to, and under, one of the falls. You couldn't look up because the water was coming down so hard.

Our visit to Iguazu also included a bird walk and a jungle walk. We saw eagles, parrots, toucans, two tragons, the biggest woodpecker I've ever seen, and a long-tailed tyrant. Because of the size of its bill, a toucan in flight is spectacular, and amazingly graceful. ■