

## Patagonia: Wind, waves, wild open spaces

October 25, 2023

In October 2023, we spent two weeks in the Patagonia provinces of Argentina and Chile. That destination has a reputation of extraordinary natural features, and for us, it topped the Galapagos, if that is possible. We traveled in a small group of 20, with Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT) and followed a structured itinerary which included four days on a small ship navigating the fjords and channels of Tierra Del Fuego, air, and bus travel between other destinations. Instead of a day-by-day diary, we will instead organize these notes and pictures by broad themes and observations.

**Overall Experience:** The grandeur and majesty of Patagonian nature are beyond awesome. We expected a rich experience of zodiac boat rides, hikes, and picturesque landscapes, but what we experienced was beyond all expectations. The waterways were lined with sea mountains, the weather was extremely variable, the water surfaces ranged from heaving swells with white caps to lake flat, the temps generally in the 40's & 50's. The total immersion in nature was balanced by several days in the lively cities of Buenos Aires, Ushuaia, Puerto Natales and El Calafate. A great trip which we recommend to everyone.



**Glaciers:** We visited 5 glaciers, four by zodiac boats, loaded 10 passengers at a time, to bounce across the waves and through the salt spray to near the base of the glaciers. The face of each glacier was hundreds of feet high, and the glaciers spread back into the valleys and icefields behind. In many cases, we witnessed and heard the glaciers “calve” ...small chunks falling into the water. At several glaciers we could walk on short (or longer) hikes nearby. All glaciers were beyond impressive, against which we humans feel tiny and insignificant. Being in the presence of these massive rivers of ice made us feel exalted. The best of all was the Perito Moreno, a relatively short bus ride from El Calafate, Argentina.



Pia Glacier



Perito Moreno Glacier

**Mountains:** While the snow-covered mountains surrounding the Tierra Del Fuego channels were consistently impressive over the days on our ship-board days, the sharp mountains of the Torres Del Paine were otherworldly. Incredibly raw and jagged. Our trip leader had never seen the tops of some of the mountains...far more often, they are in the clouds and rain. Phenomenally impressive, seen from many sides. And the park provides multiple walking trails, with options of 4 miles (which we took) and much longer ones of 3 days up to 10 days for dedicated hikers.



Tierra Del Fuego



Torres Del Paine

**Unimaginable time frames:** The tops of the Torres Del Paine mountains are about 8,000 feet high. Besides being incredibly sharp, they are made up of visible layers of sedimentary and granite rock. The topmost layer was once the bottom of a vast inland sea. Meaning that those

8,000 feet have dramatically eroded over an estimated 30 million years. It is hard to imagine that time frame, and the power of water, ice and erosion. Many of the water channels of Tierra Del Fuego are faults, cracks in earth's crust, created over millions of years.



Strata

**Vastness of space:** Patagonia is immense...and far away from Boston. Our first stop was Buenos Aires, via a connection in Miami. Total travel time in-flight: 12 hours, which is very tiring. However, there was no jet lag, as the time zone at our destination was only 1 hour different. Two days later we had to fly another 3 ½ hours from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia, in the Tierra Del Fuego.

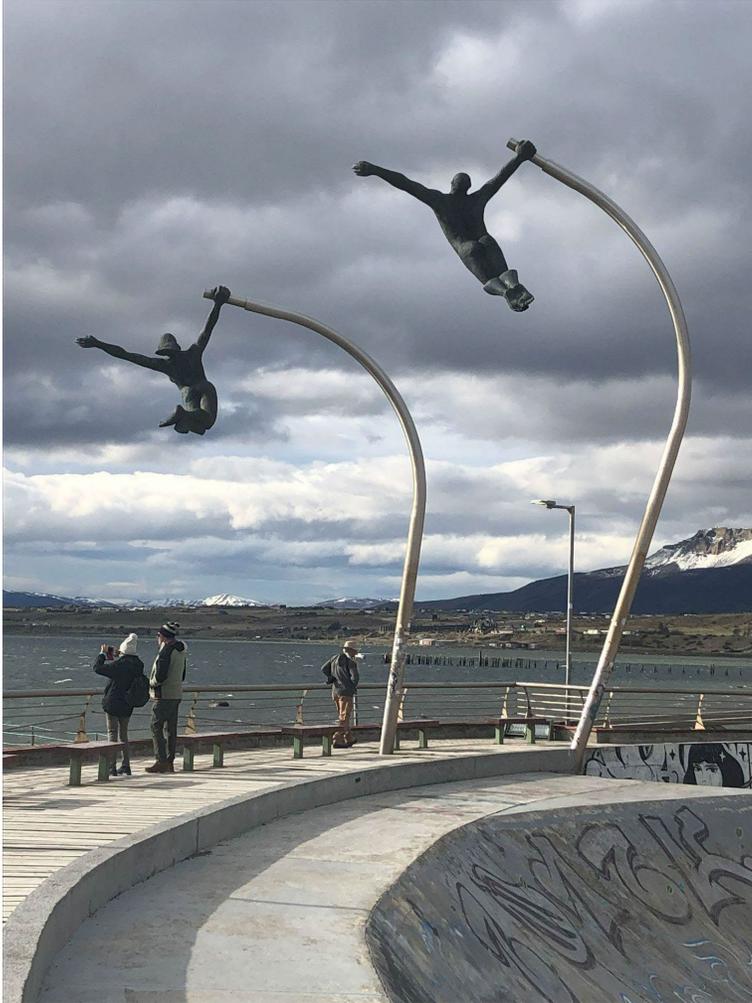
On our return flight from El Calafate to Buenos Aires, another 3 hours plus, the distance covered would have taken 40 hours by bus. Argentina and Chile are immense! And empty. The cruise began in Ushuaia, Argentina and ended in Puntas Arena, Chile. As we drove for many hours from Puntas Arena in Chile to Puerto Natales (also in Chile), the land was flat and dry with some stunted trees. We stopped at a little cluster of humble buildings for a coffee and rest room stop; that little cluster was a "town". Later, between Puerto Natales and El Calafate, we had an 8-hour bus ride, with the land even more empty and sparsely vegetated than our earlier bus trip.



Empty landscape with rheas

**Wind and Weather:** Except in the cities, the wind was incredibly strong, and non-stop. It was a physical, muscular presence throughout most of the trip, creating a constant roaring in the ears. The worst weather was on the day we visited Cape Horn, but despite biting sleet, squalls, wind and heaving seas, the ship's company managed to land us all on Cape Horn, the southernmost tip of the continent. We learned about "sucker holes," which are round vividly blue holes in the cloud cover through which the sun shines bright and strong, giving hope that the weather would improve...only to close as fast as they open. Mindful of the adage "there is no bad weather, there is only bad clothing," we were bundled up like toddlers in snowsuits, walking like penguins. Once off the water and on to the land excursion, the weather turned spectacularly clear: the skies were continuously blue and almost cloudless, with temps in the 60s & 70s for the remainder of the trip. On land, the wind was often not particularly cold, which gave the hatless ones "Patagonia hair," like fright wigs.

Puerto Natalas had remorseless wind across a large lake. They have a sculpture of two people hanging on, flying like flags in the wind, which we found amusing.



Figures in the wind

**Animals:** Never been on a safari, but the wildlife on this trip was incredible. Herds of guanacos (alpaca- like camelids), flocks of rheas (like emus), circling columns of Andean condors, darting foxes, hares, caracaras (eagles), flamingos !!, and countless other species of birds. Not to mention so many sheep that it felt like Australia. Plus, the usual feral cats and barking dogs.

**Small Group Travel:** Being part of a 20 person small group created close, short term friendships; it reminded me of going to summer camp as a teenager. Our group included mostly, but not all, retired professionals: doctors, a psychologist, an audiologist, nurses, a diplomat, lawyers, educators and an architect (me). We rotated seating among ourselves for meals, to get to know everyone and learn all the names, to share the impressions of the day, to talk about interesting careers, travel plans and life experiences.

We strongly endorse small group travel.



**Bonus Experiences:** Beyond the primary experiences (glaciers and mountains) OAT incorporated other experiences to enrich our overall experience, to interact with local people, and to break up some of the long bus travel days. Horseback riding and a visit to a sheep farm were two of those. The highlight of the trip for many was the expedition to Cape Horn, 500 miles more southerly than New Zealand. The zodiacs have only a 50% chance of landing on any given day due to bad weather...we did make it to shore through high surf to climb icy stairs and walkways, through increasingly heavy sleet. After about 30 minutes, the boat's horn bellowed, the signal to abort the mission. We had to turn around about 100 feet away from the top. But we got back on board safely, without even getting our boot socks wet.

OAT also arranged two dinners with local families, and another two talks with guest speakers to learn about the Dirty War (1976-1983) during which 30,000 people disappeared, and a second one about the Malvinas/Falklands war in 1982.

The food overall was excellent, and surprisingly, even better on the ship. We had a dinner of king crab (immense crabs requiring a lot of work to dig out small amounts of crab meat) which made eating lobster seem easy. We were introduced to mate, a strong Argentinian tea which tasted like hay, drunk through a specialized straw. Not a hit.



David with mate

**Phrases heard and enjoyed:** Our lead trip leader and local guides are Spanish speakers, of course, with accented English as a second (or third etc.) language. So, we learned of glacial erotics (erratics), local scents (saints), glacial rapture (rupture), sunscream (sunscreen), and many other inadvertently hilarious sayings. We learned about FOMO (fear of missing out) and JOMO (joy of missing out). On any trip sometimes we should embrace JOMO. You don't have to do everything. An example of JOMO: skipping the tango lesson. Let the record show that we DID do everything else.

**A Peculiar Local Presence:** An early stop in Ushuaia was to the shrine of a local folklore figure and unofficial "scent" (saint), Gauchito Gil. A gaucho (cowboy) in the 1880's who, just before he was hanged for desertion from the army, told his executioner that he could cure that man's desperately ill son. Gil died but the boy survived. Since then, Argentiniains have prayed to him for good luck. We all went to the woodland shrine and dedicated an offering of beer to Gauchito, hoping for good weather and good experiences on the trip. And Gauchito delivered.



Gauchito shrine

**Unplanned Stuff:** In a fifteen day tour across long distances stuff will happen, inconvenient and annoying, but without taking away from the broad success of our trip. The handle on my suitcase broke just before the trip, our trip leader's luggage was delayed for half a day, and the next day she slipped and fell on the ship's deck, a hiker fell after tripping on her shoelaces, a camera was misplaced, a carry-on bag disappeared. Since many coats, covers and bags are black, things kept getting lost down the "Black Hole", although everything lost was eventually found. On a happier note, we reveled in our search for good beer in multiple cities. The Patagonians love their beer! The best beer was in a humble, unprepossessing bodega right across from one of the hotels.

**Planned Stuff that doesn't happen:** Our planned visit to Magdalena Island to see the breeding colony of Magellanic penguins was canceled as the high wind and waves made a zodiac trip unsafe. We had been warned that all the zodiac trips could be canceled at any time due to weather. It only happened to us once, so we were very lucky.

**Inflation:** We were advised that Argentina was in the midst of incredible inflation, and that we should bring American money to exchange for pesos at the "Blue Rate". Paid for things in cash whenever possible. Did not use our credit cards nor ATMs, which would pay at the official rate of 300 pesos per dollar. The Blue rate the day we arrived was 750 pesos per dollar. The next

day it was 800 pesos per dollar. We learned later it went as high as 1000 pesos per dollar. This meant that a pint of beer, paid for in cash and not credit cards, would effectively cost \$2.50 each, a meal for two with drinks each would cost \$15.00 or so.

**Bottom Line:** A great trip to an astounding location: lucky with weather, lucky with our amiable group, lucky with excellent local guides, and our trip leader was the best! Thank you, Gauchito!



Diane and David Peck on zodiac in front of a glacier