

## Don't Cry For Me, Argentina... BUT - You Can Cry For Me In Chile

The writer, a man or woman broken by a bad relationship, sets off on a journey designed to heal the soul - Tim Cahill



Left to Right: (top) Tango in Buenos Aires, Fitzroy, Cerro Torre; (bottom) Church in Puerto Natales, High above Glacier Grey, Cuernos del Paine and Lago Pehoe

This is a True Story of heartache, recovery, and success with meaning beyond the adventure. Why? Because the reason I found myself in Patagonia was sad: on December 29, 1996, John (partner of 5 years) left me, shortly after we'd both finished our Ph.D.'s. To say this was stunning is an understatement (this from the drama queen herself). But, having watched similar phenomena among colleagues and friends, I knew that big transitions often effected unpredictable casualties. By mid-January, I had been passed between friends who were feeding, comforting, and putting me up. I found myself at the home of Dr. Sara (H-less as opposed to me, SaraH - you have to get this straight or this whole story will be lost) - playing her Steinway and eating braised lamb shanks. While Sara was not someone I would, at the time, have called a long-term friend, she had been a great work friend for a couple years. I knew she was between jobs, burnt out, and wanted to go to Patagonia. And South America was appealing for a very key practical reason: summer in the southern hemisphere. Sara and I were hooked within an hour. Tickets were purchased a few days later. Beyond that, we made the thing up as we went along.



Left to Right: Sarah and Sara - departing from Sea-Tac, Rio Gallegos airport, typical campsite, hauling those packs

### The Team

Back in 1996, Sara invited me to a Seattle Mountaineers-sponsored talk by Adrian Burgess, twin brother to Al. The presentation was part of a promotion tour for their book, "The Burgess Book of Lies." While I have not read this book, I surmised that this account details these brothers' illustrious climbing career, which includes a crazy van-ride across Europe to Pakistan and large animal sacrifices while climbing in South America. Without Al there to defend himself, it was hard to tell which lies were real. Nevertheless, it was infinitely clear that Adrian perceived Al as the immature, colorful, unorganized, and unkempt sibling. At some point, Adrian put up this slide showing everyone but Al during some Himalayan ascent, pointing out that all their beautiful internal frame packs were neat and orderly. Then, for contrast, he put up a photo of Al - trailing - wearing a motley external frame pack off which EVERYTHING but the kitchen sink dangled. Adrian asked the question: does this man look like he has a clue? My point: Al and Adrian = Sara and I (at least that became our joke). Sara laughingly began this joke when we hauled up our backpacks for the first time in Argentina. Sara had her spiffy new Terraplane, no obvious gear

hanging out from the pack. I had my beat up 7+ year old REI external, crap exploding from every hook, nook, and cranny. Does this woman know what she is doing? Hell no. I've never traveled overseas like this. I've never done international trekking. And, to top everything off, I have just suffered an emotional cataclysm... how could I possibly know what I'm doing? Aside from this metaphor, though, Sara truly was the ideal traveling companion. I didn't know her well enough to be rude and we had enough open conversational ground to not get fully bored with each other. This is not to say we were not without our Adrian/AI contrasts: Sara, six years my senior, is older and more mature, has more experience climbing and trekking, and has traveled in remote parts of the world in small self-organized groups. Obviously, I am younger, naive, not savvy or confident in the big scheme of world traveling (last time I used my passport - I was sixteen and went to England for a Shakespeare tour). However, we both LOVE in-your-face mountain scenery with an emphasis on big glacier and rock. We were both jaded about science and doctoral degrees. We shared a common circle of friends and politics to talk about. Finally, we are also both feminists at one level and ardent romantics at another. One of Tim Cahill's traveling rules asserts: "Avoid psychotic travel companions... [with the corollaries]: (1) the most carefully chosen travel companions become the most psychotic and (2) psychosis is contagious." I was never able to reconcile this rule with his afore-quoted statement about the broken protagonist (especially in light of my situation). I felt, at the outset of this trip, on the verge of being a stressed and stressful traveling companion BECAUSE I was just out of a long, dependent relationship. How could one heal the soul and not be insane? Indeed, Sara deserves extreme credit for trusting me not to go berserk. Fortunately, I had - many years ago - endured a wild road trip with a psychotic friend who pined endlessly, cranking the Smiths and Doors for 3000 miles of high-speed interstate driving (but that's another story). This is not to say, of course, that I didn't drive Sara nuts a few times. But if we clashed, it was more about my youthful exuberance as opposed to some dour state of mind. Patagonia freed me up mentally and I let a lot of things go, I am happy to say. But it is a moment in time that could happen no other way and could never happen again.

"Lady Traveling Companions" was a phrase my father coyly used in reference to Sara and I prior to our departure. The demise of my relationship was, indeed, shocking to my parents who mostly liked John (except our living in sin). To have me say that I was suddenly going to Argentina with a woman they had never heard of sent them into conniptions of paranoia on many levels. They came up with EVERYTHING anyone can dream up: Are you bringing mace? Are you bringing weapons? Aren't you afraid of being attacked? Aren't you afraid of being raped? Aren't you afraid of being mistaken for (big pause) lesbians... maybe that is illegal and you will be arrested - you wouldn't want to be arrested, would you? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint them or anyone else but this isn't some coming out story. Nevertheless, I was scared of being harassed, accosted, or raped. Sara knew at least one woman who was sexually assaulted during a simple trek in Peru and that image - that potential - kept me awake a few hours one night shortly before leaving. Sara did her best to calm me down, insisting I had more reason to fear such an attack in backwoods Washington than Los Glacieres National Park, Argentina. Until I arrived in Buenos Aires and felt fully ignored for days, though, I didn't let go of that fear. The fact is, too, that Sara and I are basic no-frills gals. While inherently gorgeous, we dressed down, didn't partake in any nightlife, and kept to ourselves. After strolling the streets of Buenos Aires, I'd say that we were scrawny ugly as compared with the voluptuous, scantily clad women in that city. After a few days in the wild, we were stinky, skinny, wild-haired women with big packs, rock-hard muscles, no money, and dwindling quantities of food. I take offense to the guidebooks that warn about local guys chasing foreign women. We never felt it once! But this is not to say that we didn't feel awkward or conscious about our gender. Our first night in Buenos Aires, for example, we went to a big manly red-meat parilla (carcasses displayed prominently in full-length windows flanking the heavy wooden Germanic doors) and received horrifically indifferent treatment. Such lack of service was a common theme in most male-run establishments and so we can only surmise that either our gender or trashy appearance was to blame. In general, too, Buenos Aires was punctuated by a lot of hard-core pornography that would offend a lot of American women (and, hopefully, men). Between that and the assaulting vanity of many Argentine women (the clothes, the healing nose jobs...), we often were left slack-jawed, wanting to ask these women why, why, why? In terms of apparent perceptions regarding our traveling together, we never felt threatened or questioned. At many hotels, we were asked to fill out information sheets that included questions about marital status. Sara, who wore a faux wedding ring, filled out married and I filled out single for comparison but we never were treated differently. In cities and towns, we observed local women of all ages traveling in pairs, holding hands like girls. We were also often assaulted by the extreme public physicality of Argentine male-female couples. The constant bombardment of passionate displays was unnerving because Sara and I were both in relationship limbos of different kinds. Often, we found ourselves walking straight-faced through parks going: nope, didn't see that! Things were easier in the mountains - although we were the only women-only pair.

### **Gear and Planning**

Our Patagonian adventure was an adventure, in large part, because we put little effort into its planning. I actually had to renew my passport the month before we left - a perversely ironic experience. Why? First, I was still depressed and I looked like shit in the photo. Second, I stood there watching this strange man going through all my documents and then he's swearing me in: "Do you swear X is true, blah, blah, blah?" I remember saying, "I do" and then having to mentally back-flip into the void of marital expectations I'd previously had with John. How comically tragic (and tragically comic) that I say those words at this moment in my life, after everything that had come and gone? But it is untrue to say that we knew nothing about what we wanted to see. Both Sara and I had loose notions of the parks (Los Glacieres in Argentina and Torres del Paine in Chile), the treks, the large-scale picture of where we would land and how we would get from big point A to big point B. We each had long owned and drooled over the "Lonely Planet Guide to Trekking in Patagonia" (quickly deemed the actual "Book of Lies"). But we made no advance reservations and did not know where we would stay on a nightly basis. Generally speaking, our best source of information was Silas Wild. Before this trip, Silas knew me from my webpage and he knew Sara personally (it took this trip for him to realize Sara and I were friends). For the six years prior, Silas (a fairly famous climber) had been to Patagonia every season - mostly first ascents from the Perito Moreno Glacier (just outside Los Glacieres in Argentina). There in his office (one hall down from where I trained in graduate school - which we didn't know until this trip) - dramatic pictures of the Cuernos of Paine juxtaposed beside Fred Beckey and Terror Basin - Silas enthusiastically bestowed many words of wisdom and calm - the most foreshadowing and provocative: Patagonia will blow you away (which he meant literally). Given

Silas' advice, our gear/packing list for this trip was extremely northwest-like. Some debate did arise regarding which tent to bring; legends about the Patagonian winds prompted us to consider a North Face VE25. However, Silas laughed at this idea, insisting that tent was too heavy and no one in their right minds camped in the open. So, we brought Sara's 4 lb. Bibler, a tent she purchased used from a team who took it to Everest. Given variable stories about difficult snow crossings in Chile, I also packed both my trusty old Raichle Spirits and my new Vasques. I expected some great light of realization to hit me once I got down there... but it never did and so I suffered through Chile with a repeat performance of the "egg-blisters." Camping food was a big question as well. Silas felt that portable camping food was easy to buy in South America - but Sara and I beg to differ with this assertion. The final brush with fame I had was with UW travel nurse, Sue Harrington. Sue looked awfully familiar as I talked with her about all the diseases I could catch (but didn't). I finally just said - do I know you from somewhere? Then she asked if I had ever read her story about climbing St. Exupery (Argentina). Even so, I was annoyed with getting five shots (Hepatitis A and B, Polio booster, tetanus booster, and typhoid fever) all in one terribly emotional day in January.

Lastly, this trip - in conjunction with career shifts, John, and the expense - INFURIATED my parents. Mind you, I was (at the time) 29 years old. For 2 weeks, I had them calling up to explain to me why I ABSOLUTELY should not go. My mother even visited me in person, openly criticizing my judgment, work ethic, and educational choices. But I didn't falter to please them. To satiate their overwhelming issues, I wrote out a loose itinerary, which is both humorous and, in retrospect, interesting: Leave Seattle (2/7), Land in Buenos Aires (2/8), To Rio Gallegos and Calafate (2/9-10), Los Glaciers National Park (2/11-18), Torres Del Paine National Park (2/19-3/2), To Calafate, Rio Gallegos, and Buenos Aires (3/3-6), Buenos Aires sightseeing (3/7-8), Back to Seattle (3/4). To many people, I'm sure this reads like some well-thought-out life plan. However, to my folks - who don't go anywhere without every moment accounted for, every hotel and mode of transportation booked - this was heretical. Making matters worse, I inadvertently left the list in the car upon being dropped off at the airport. They received it a few days after we were long gone and, by then, we were incommunicado. Of note, I intentionally left the word "Chile" out of the itinerary. God forbid, Argentina was heavy enough on their minds. Chile would send them over the edge. Of course, I made a point to send them postcards from Chile with great relish.



Left to Right: Buenos Aires - Teatro Colon, Casa Rosada, our friendly fruit stand guy

### To Buenos Aires, February 9-10, 1997

Our journey from Seattle to Buenos Aires began 10 a.m. February 9 when Dr. Cara Burns, a friend and co-worker, picked me up. Surprisingly, I had slept well the night before - the prior evening a surprisingly calm and cathartic experience. I enjoyed the first (albeit not lasting) sign of a friendship with John. For weeks, I had refused to talk to him, despite the fact that he was covering my airfare. Patagonia came as a complete and tempting surprise to John - who initially and actually assumed I would crawl into some shell and never come out. Patagonia, in fact, has marked the beginning of an interesting reawakening (now there's an understatement, editorial comment 1999, 2001, 2003, and 2005). The night before I left, John brought over burgers and fries and big chocolate shakes and we talked nice. He didn't come across as manipulative and I didn't come across as "big powerful woman stomping off to Patagonia." We were both remarkably vulnerable. Having eaten so much physically and spiritually, I immediately crashed and never tied up all kinds of loose ends. Yes - the pack was basically done and checked twice. But all these little things were spread out like landmines across the living room: partial address lists, a half-packed duffel of non-hiking items, and the indecisive body-hugging wallet. When Cara showed up, I gathered everything and said - oh well. We drove to Sara's and were genuinely afraid when we saw the size of our combined gear. Owing to traffic problems, we arrived at the airport an hour later than we'd hoped. This did NOT impress my father, whose skepticism was evident in his brow as he waited at our designated meeting spot. Sara deserves many kudos for orchestrating everything between Cara's car and the ticket counter given that I became dysfunctional in the presence of my military father. Before I knew it, our bags were whisked away and we had all necessary airport paperwork for the next month. My father did not question Sara's ability. His final words were actually directed to her: take care of my daughter. He left us at the baggage check-in area. And then it was just Sara and I. We proceeded to the gate, ate some packed lunch materials, and boarded the plane within 30 minutes. Disappointingly, however, the flight was delayed because many passengers were being held in customs on their way from Japan to Disney World (we were heading first to Miami and then to Buenos Aires). After we took off, I remember little other than Mt. Stuart and the Enchantments - worrying that it could be years before I saw them again (at the time, I had just accepted a post-doctoral position in Washington D.C. to begin in June). I also remember eating ravenously - Sara teasing me for my strange relishing of airplane food. We landed in warm, humid Miami around 9 p.m. The waiting area at the gate for our flight to Buenos Aires was dominated by huge numbers of swarthy people speaking Spanish. I had more culture shock here than in Buenos Aires. We did make one major error that evening: moments before boarding began, an announcement came over that the flight was overbooked. Anyone who was willing to give up their seats stood to earn \$800 in tickets and a free night in Miami. Sara and I debated because we had no plans for the first few days in Buenos Aires... why not? Well - we were too late. Alas, our indecisiveness cost us a good night's sleep in a nice hotel, and could have saved us from a hellish flight!

The flight, which departed at 11 p.m., was an interesting microcosm of Argentina: heavy smoking, never-sleeping, emotionally expressive people. Within the hour, we were eating steak (and, being the sick-minded, air-plane-food-loving woman I am - I LIKED it!). After another hour, though, we were alerted from our slumber by the captain: "if there is a doctor on board, please report to such and such location." Sara and I laughed to ourselves: "yeah we're doctors - but only if they would like us to culture something." For some reason, the potential for a bad situation was of less interest to us than a levituous laugh over our silly degrees (I'm not sure if this ignorance reflected our sleep deprivation or our too-many years of education). About a half an hour later, the captain is back: "we have a medical situation on board and will need to make an emergency landing in Bogotá. We'll be descending rapidly over the next twenty minutes. Fasten your seatbelts. " Well - we descended through a storm into one of the apparent drug-capitals of the world. For some reason, I was not phased by this. Life was finally becoming a real adventure and the prospect of saying I landed in Columbia at midnight was more interesting than scary. Everything of late, it seems, has become meaningful as potential short story material. I just wish we could have gotten our passports stamped. When we landed, it was after midnight, leaving everything to the imagination. Several official-looking medical personnel boarded the plane and wheeled out an elderly woman. The captain came on again: "We should be grounded about 30 minutes... we need to check on refueling given that we have landed at high elevation and don't know whether we can take off yet." Five hours later, we took off. For those five hours, we all seemed to exist in a state of languid dreaming - albeit often marked by the shrill and uneven tones of people talking in Spanish. I remember thinking at one point how surprised I was that this didn't freak me out. In fact, it was strangely isolating in a more positive way for me because I could hide out and just listen - enjoy people talking with emotion, the beauty of spoken words. Can you tell how delirious I was at this point? When we finally took off, it was just light (around 6 a.m.) - low clouds commingling with low buildings and abundant greenery. I tried to make sense of the scenery outside - tried to see something dangerous perhaps. Indeed, there seemed to be a moderate number of rusty, burnt out hulls of cargo aircraft or ground vehicles. But no people - all was still and quiet.

Buenos Aires was still a staggering 7 hours away. During this time, I slipped in and out of consciousness while Sara fully awoke and took to figuring out our game plan once we landed. Such was basically the way we planned most everything from this point on: a few hours or the day before, we sat down with the guidebooks, came up with a course of action (a list of hotels to check, transportation options, etc.) and then just did it. To this day, I am shocked with the effortlessness of this approach because it worked so well for us. Buenos Aires was clouded over as we lowered through white precipitate. Recent rain and/or high humidity were all obvious as we stepped from the plane. My fear of actually getting off the plane and stepping into this foreign airport was short-lived. As proved to be the case nearly everywhere, people were fairly indifferent to us - almost to the point of disappointment. The only significant shock - aside from the humidity - was the intense smoking. My nasal passages were bloody from the international flight from hell. To be assaulted by the Argentine smoking habit full force in the airport was more than they could handle. Customs proved to be an effortless task. Just as we were lining up with the flood of masses to have our baggage checked, an efficient and smiling airport attendant grabbed us, asked how long we would be in the country and what we were doing. He then ushered us through without a word. We couldn't decide if it was because we were Americans, because we were women, or because we were backpackers (by now, I was shouldering my HUGE pack, clearly a daunting visage that earned not a few stares from passerby's). I felt a small pang of fear as we entered the main terminal. But Sara lead us through the maze quickly and adeptly. Frankly, I was impressed that the place was similar to any other airport - aside from the blazing humidity and intense smoke (the concomitant presence of cigarette-wielding patrons lining the aisles). Our goals: an information kiosk for hotel accommodations, followed by a bus company desk for transportation into Buenos Aires proper (the international airport is an hour from the 20-million plus mega-city). We quickly discovered that our lack of Spanish-speaking ability may prove problematic. I had four years of middle school Spanish and Sara had no experience with the language. I held this erroneous impression - likely from my sister's experiences in Europe - that we would endure on an ample supply of English-speakers. This is an arrogant and naive assumption. Overall, we met hardly anyone who maintained even a small English vocabulary. The unfolding language problem was evident as I stood vulnerably guarding our large pile of luggage while Sara attempted to make hotel reservations. All the while, I was bombarded by an insistent Argentine cab driver with a different definition of personal space than me. He was visibly frustrated with his inability to communicate the apparent need for me to use his services. Thankfully, this was our only run in with such an individual. Sara returned soon, having successfully attained a room at our first choice hotel. We then endured an argumentative debate with the driver about the advantages of taking his company vs. the standard bus service, Manuel Tienda Leon. In the end, we were simply worn down by everything to the point that we gave in. We would later learn that the bus company had a few disadvantages that justified the extra \$4 (these included a lack of punctual service, a lengthy transfer process downtown, and general noise and chaos).

After agreeing to take the cab, we did have a few pangs of concern and regret. First, we were lead out to an unmarked vehicle. Had the guy not hung a somewhat official looking nametag on the dash, and had the car not been clean, we would have bailed for fear that we were goners. Indeed, there was an abundance of traditional cabs moving like schools of fish around the airport. Second, our high-speed ride down the wild freeway was punctuated by the driver's insistence that we now use his company's hotel instead (this is what we finally gleaned from much hand-waving and simplistic language). Although he eventually laid off, we were never certain where we were going to be dropped off until we arrived at the appropriate hotel. To Sara, the landscape of low shoddy concrete buildings - interspersed with tin-roofed shanty houses set against open greenery and trees - was second world nothingness, fulfilling her every expectation of Buenos Aires and its immense outskirts. To me, the scene was closer to my expectations of a third world country (at the time, I had never traveled outside the first world). One of the thoughts that would run through my mind at moments like this was: my mom sure wouldn't like this. I thought I was weird until Sara said almost the same thing while strolling by some huge heaps of trash in downtown Buenos Aires. I don't know whether this parental crutch says something strange about both our familial co-dependencies or whether this is a typical thing that people think about while traveling. Regardless, we were both occasionally hung up on our mothers' prudish arrogance with regards to hygiene, safety, and appearance. I missed whatever transition there was between shanty outskirts and downtown Buenos Aires proper. All of a sudden we were gliding down the Avenue de Julio, the twenty-lane thoroughfare (the widest in the world). High above, rusty, dirty neon signs and billboards towered one after another, affixed to both modern and

classically old-style buildings. Our hotel, the Goya, was one block off the great Avenue, and in walking distance of our must-see places: Teatro Colon (National Opera House), Casa Rosada (the balcony off which Eva Peron often spoke), Recoleta Cemetery (where Eva is buried), and street fairs. Having practiced our hotel phrases many times, we were equipped to waltz in and ask for "un habitacion muy tranquilo con dos camas", and then insist upon seeing it first. This well-rehearsed line went well and we felt more confident with our infant Spanish prowess. To me, the room was a little dismal - Sara insisting it was, by comparison to places she'd stayed in Nepal (for instance), the Four Seasons. It was clean and it had a bathroom. Over time (we stayed there 7 nights, flanking our trip south), the Goya began to feel like home - despite the large community of ants we found marching around Sara's bed one morning, despite the fact that the staff were not uniformly helpful (we were especially afraid of La Senora, whose Spanish would grow deliberately faster whenever we tried to explain a new problem or discuss money), despite the fact that our air conditioner seldom worked (La Senora repeatedly forgot to put back our fuses... as it was policy to remove them during the day), despite the fact that the pillows were, in the poignant words of Sara, "filled with lead shot," and despite the fact that the continental breakfasts were sparse (mini-croissants, large Saltine-like crackers, pots of hot milk and black coffee, and Tang). The hotel did have some great highpoints: one of the many desk attendants was superbly helpful and, by the end of the trip, even La Senora warmed to the point that we all said fond goodbyes with traditional Argentine kisses on each cheek and a big hug across the front desk.

Despite having not slept much for 24 hours, Sara and I did the recommended jet-lag thing: stay up until 9:30 (our usual bedtime throughout the trip). For dinner, we wandered a few blocks down the street to a "parilla" that was highly touted by the "Lying Planet Guide." As with most parillas, the entryway (through huge, dark Germanic-style wooden doors) was flanked by two huge grill areas, each sporting full-length glass windows, brick floors, and multitudes of animal carcasses (the most prominent being whole lamb splayed out on metal frames). Behind these open fire pits were huge rotisseries and grill ovens. Some parillas featured taxidermically stuffed whole bulls poised royally by the doors. The odor I associate with these places was a perfect mix of burning flesh and hair, cigarettes, and live cows. The dining room was exceptionally large, resembling a sprawling, high-ceilinged German pub. We were surprised to find that the place was virtually empty at 6:30. Of course, we would quickly discover that the Argentines don't eat until well after 8-9 (and actually may not go to sleep until 1-2 in the morning). Service was dismal and, for many moments (most while watching other patrons, all mixed-sex couples or men), we speculated that it was because we were poorly dressed and female. Nonetheless, we indulged in our first steak, bifu de chorizo (to this day, I have NO CLUE what this means). My Spanish skills faltered appreciably here - which surprised me given how much you are made to learn food items (of course, school vocabulary lessons seldom include kidney, liver, brains, and other organs that comprise components of parilla fare). In retrospect, I'm surprised we didn't wind up with some internal organ. In addition to the bifu, I ordered what I thought was some collection that included bread, appetizers, and dessert. In actuality, these items turned out to be floury bread, meat empanadas, and ice water. My big failure: I mistook hielo (ice) for helado (ice cream). We would debate this point with our indifferent waiter, all of us frustrated. Given that the misunderstanding involved sweets, the debate was just that much more elevated. We tried to take a twilight stroll but found ourselves crashing by 9 p.m. The hotel room, in the words of Sara, was like a tomb. It was deep in the heart of the building - no windows, no concept of external light. Thus, we slept deeply, the air conditioner pulsing loudly all through that first night. Of course, when our air conditioner didn't work, we were frustrated with the loud, uneven Argentine nightlife (seemingly outside our door until 3-4 a.m.). Such noise problems continued almost everywhere we stayed - much to our chagrin and sleep-deprived states.

We had one day in Buenos Aires before our departure from the downtown domestic airport to Rio Gallegos, jump-off to Patagonia (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT 2004: nowadays, you can fly direct to Calafate, avoiding one of two LONG bus rides to Los Glaciers National Park). Today (Sunday), we needed to secure bus transportation to the airport. Fortunately, the helpful hotel attendant - a kind older man who spoke some English capacity - was on duty. Not only did he arrange all bus transport to the airport with the aforementioned Manuel Tienda Leon, he then began drawing routes to good places for us to visit. It was sweltering and humid, the blue skies broken by white puffy clouds. The streets were quiet and most shops were barred and chained up. Our first destination was the nearby Teatro Colon where Sara - a big opera fan - enjoyed much Maria Callas paraphernalia. Our next destination was the Casa Rosada, a European-style square eight blocks away. En route, we met a delightful Argentine man running a fruit stand (which we visited regularly after Patagonia) and stopped at a phone company. Placing international calls seemed expensive and difficult. The best option we found was to employ these company operations with all kinds of phone booths and calling plans. While Sara talked, I curiously watched the heavily made-up women running the counter. Most looked between 18-24 and wore crotch-length stretch mini-skirts. Meanwhile, I am sitting there with bad hair, hiking boots, military style pants - looking like the phrase "your mother wears combat boots" (yup, that's me). It was no surprise we didn't get hit on. The Casa Rosada was quiet and empty for a spectacular Sunday. Palm trees - always a surprise for my eyes - swayed from strategic corners, in between ornate statues, fountains, gardens, and walkways. A flock of pigeons dynamically festooned various locales, in between frequently an old bird lady who encouraged them with seed in the bill of her cap. From here, we continued ten blocks to the San Telmo district - specifically, an arts and crafts fair at the Plaza Dorrego. Most vendors' wares consisted of uninteresting European-style antiques. In general, this began a trend that we noted with dismay: we were at a loss to find something culturally distinct. Everything was a weird mish-mash of German and Spanish. Eventually, we succumbed to a heat-induced spell of sitting in the shade of this massive tree with gigantic purple blossoms. Here, we grew intrigued with the possibility that a tango performance was about to happen. Indeed, two couples wearing black and red were milling about a sound system. The almost cartoonish man strutted about, combing his hair in an almost laughably contrived manner. But then he began to dance... (BIG SIGH). It was as though the expression on his face - its exactness, delicateness, and feeling - were translated in some unfiltered line to the dance. Of course, there was also a scantily clad, voluptuous, younger woman with him - but our eyes were possessed by this man's stunningly beautiful and expressive face. In showing my slides, I have been repeatedly amazed that most people - men and women alike - only comment on the woman because she is curvy and wearing this revealingly short red dress. Oh, though, if you had been there to watch it in real time. I don't think anyone there would argue that the man was the more passionate and gifted dancer. By the end of the 30-minute show, there was a significant crowd of people clapping, standing, and sitting around the square. Later,

we purchased a postcard with many famous tango couples on it and, among them, was this one. We continued a few more blocks beyond the fair, stopping at the small Museum of Modern Art (mostly to escape the heat). After an uneventful stroll through this dank facility, we continued on to what we hoped would be a cheap restaurant with Andean delicacies. Like many restaurants we sought out, though, it was closed. We backtracked to a bar where I gobbled down a ham and cheese sandwich and Sara drank orange juice. We then went to an excellent parilla where Sara finger-lickingly proclaimed their chicken the most outstanding (her statement was unseated at least twice later in the trip). Meanwhile, I ate a quadruple-scoop helado sundae. Service at both establishments rivaled that at the first parilla for indifference, slowness, and quality. We finally returned to the hotel, needing to retire somewhat early given that our bus would pick us up at around 8:00 a.m.

### **Across the Pampas (Eventually), February 11, 1997**

After a less than stellar night's sleep, we hauled our amazing quantities of gear downstairs. Manuel Tienda Leon arrived on time, remarkable given that the previously sleepy streets had now taken on a startlingly bustling weekday form. Unfortunately, the bus took us on a circuitous route en route to picking up others. It then dropped us off at a central office where we had to wait for a transfer shuttle to the airport. The domestic airport is situated on the milky brown Rio de la Plata. Smaller and dingier, this airport was filled with mostly locals. A fellow bus-rider, this English-speaking military commander, warned us to watch our bags carefully! Frankly, though, I can't say the place felt much different than the international airport. After standing in a long line at the ticket counter, we were told that we had to backtrack to some other counter to actually pay for the previously reserved tickets. Two long lines later, we were on our way... sort of. I think there were twelve gates in the airport - all lined up at ground-level, one after another - the waiting areas for each well-crowded with cigarette-wielding Argentines. Over time, we slowly realized that there were two planeloads waiting at each gate at any one time - in our case, one group on flights with LAPA, and us - the Dinar crowd. This became frustratingly obvious as the LAPA folks, one planeload after another, were ushered out to flight after on-time flight. Meanwhile, the agitated Dinar folk waited over an hour for our late plane. In contrast with LAPA (not presented as an option when we made reservations in Seattle), Dinar made several stops en route to Rio Gallegos; clearly, there are more (and cheaper) options once you get there. When we FINALLY were called, we were corralled onto a standing-only bus and driven to the runway where we climbed onto the plane - jets soaring ear-shatteringly overhead as palm trees swayed alongside the tar-spattered concrete. I was the last one on board because I was so enthralled with standing in the wonderful breeze. Once I climbed into the plane (two seats on one side and three on the other), I located Sara. She insisted I take the window seat given my apparent exuberance for flying. But of course, I have a variable fear of flying and, for whatever reason, I struggled hard on this flight. Perhaps it was the fact that you could look up the body of the plane and see the cockpit through the open door. Or maybe it was the immediate take-off and flight over the big river. In between breathing calmly, I enjoyed the patterns of brown and green farms, the ragged coastline, the increasing plateaus of rolling desert - all while writing my journals. The web version of this story was loosely transcribed from these hand-written records - although I left out a lot of personal stuff that I was struggling with (of course, you may laugh freely at that statement).

Our brief stop in Comodoro Rivadavia, a town in the middle of a bleak, dry no-man's land (albeit, along a stunningly beautiful coastline), was annoying only because the descent took place through high winds and went on forever. After experiencing the wrath of Patagonian winds firsthand, I salute any pilot who can navigate a plane through such tumult! During the 20 minutes on the ground, it was painfully obvious that we were going to miss the (supposed) LAST bus to Calafate (3:00 p.m.), something we had counted on catching based on information in our travel guidebooks. We were determined to avoid a night in Rio Gallegos, which one friend called the armpit of Argentina (this term appeared between the lines in guidebooks as well). Even so, as we made the blustery descent through billowing clouds to Rio Gallegos, we succumbed to reading up on hotel possibilities. At some point, we were convinced that we could see Fitzroy and the mountains of our destiny. Unfortunately, we were convinced, too, that the gorgeous current weather meant that we were destined for crap once we hoisted the packs. From the air, Rio Gallegos appeared to be a small town in the middle of oil fields: dinosaur-style pumps bowed away, decorating the barren brown for as far as the eye could see. The airport was the size and style of a high school gymnasium. It was also decidedly colder (upper 50's) and windier. The wind, however, was refreshing and smoke-free. Our first goal - even before lining up for our luggage - was to determine whether there was ANY transportation to Calafate. To our euphoric shock, a new tour company (not listed in any guidebook at the time) called Quebec ran a late bus with available seats to Calafate, departing at 5 p.m. We almost hugged the woman behind the desk when we heard this. Sara collected our luggage while I paid for things. The Quebec folks offered to keep our stuff while we strolled around the tiny airport - mostly eyeballing the many small gift-shops. We were suckers only for maps and postcards, the latter of which we should not have purchased because cheaper ones were found in Calafate (these sold for DOUBLE the price back in the US). As for the postcards, we had been enjoying writing folks back home; in fact, postcard writing became a significant event and trip cost. I can honestly say that I spent probably \$50 on post-cards, each costing \$2-4 to buy and mail. As 5 p.m. approached, Sara and I hauled our massive pile of gear outside to the dusty strip of concrete where the tour buses picked up passengers. Given that the airport is about 10 minutes outside of Rio Gallegos proper, we never saw anything of the infamous town. Before us, spread out in all directions, was basically nothingness - the edge of a bigger nothingness known as the Pampas... a barren hue of leathery tan, interrupted only with a seam of power lines and a ribbon of potholed asphalt. Already, the huge and glorious winds were impressive. Sara, shivering, thought I was weird as I assumed a crucifix position, leaning almost fully into the uplifting wind. Such was, overall, my relationship with the Patagonian wind: fascination, uplift, rejuvenation, and sanctification.

The bus arrived 15-20 minutes late. Along with a small handful of others, we climbed onto this sort of hand-me-down-feeling luxury bus with high seats, a TV-VCR, a toilet, and a service area with water and coffee. People I've talked to since doing this trip have this strange notion that you are going to ride something out of "Romancing the Stone" (flanked by chickens and pigs). Not even close! This could have been a cheap tour in the Swiss Alps - minus the potholes and Wyoming-esque flatness. Our driver, a good-looking blue-eyed blond Argentine man, climbed on board, nonchalantly inserted a videotape, and began to drive. This was our experience with bus rides across the country - no tour lingo, safety reminders, or stopping of any kind. I don't think Sara and I really had a grasp that this was a 4-hour ride. For the first leg of the trip, it didn't matter. In Sara's case,

sleep was a priority. In my case, the Wyoming-like landscape of the Pampas: amazing cloud formations and partially visible mountains against the setting sun. Both Sara and my goals, however, were thwarted by the video. In one of many surreal moments, we had to endure Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris in "Enter the Dragon" as we made our way across the Pampas - all triple dubbed (in Spanish with English subtitles, original words lip-synched in Japanese). All I remember were Lee's lat's and Norris' grotesquely hairy back. Very disturbing. By the end, we were restless and hungry. The bathroom didn't seem to open (although I was too timid to pull hard on the door). The driver often drove painfully, painfully slowly (in contrast with guidebook assertions that tour bus driving was dangerously fast). We figured that the frequent and large potholes had something to do with our velocity. As we would discover, however, we were LUCKY to have pavement at all. At one point, we saw a flock of ostrich-like rheas run across the scrubland. At another point, this older woman fought with the driver about some unknown topic. This seemed to coincide with violent parts of the movie (not to mention Norris' hairy back) and so we figure she was annoyed by the movie. As an American, I was sort of embarrassed. But who knows what sort of bee was in her bonnet; it was just interesting to watch these two go at it, the passion and animation in both their voices. As the final light of day vanished, we came upon Lago Argentina, one of several HUGE (50 by 10 miles) inland lakes that spill out from of major lobes of the Cordilleran ice fields. Somehow, we assumed that we must be close if we could see the lake. In fact, we were still an hour away, having to wind down from a high plateau before reaching the now-dark Calafate.

Calafate's greatest feature is its central bus station, from which all buses come and go (be they from Chile or other parts of Argentina). Here, Quebec folk happily made phone calls to local hotels and secured a room for us at Del Norte. Wimping out, we opted to have a cab take us (What can I say? It was late and we were tired). Del Norte, 5-6 blocks away, was situated in what I call residential Calafate. Calafate is a tourist trap town of 3000 permanent residents. Silas described the place as Leavenworth in the 60's, before the Bavarian facelift. It reminded me of what I picture Alaskan towns to look like: dirt roads and low buildings, a little run-down but safe-feeling. My impressions of Calafate will always be extremely warm. It was the town we grew to know the most intimately, which says a lot for Patagonia and its strange and elusive culture. Del Norte was a mostly pleasant surprise. The single young woman who ran the place was helpful and patient. Unlike most Argentine women we'd seen, she was tough-looking, casually dressed, and met your eyes without hesitation. This woman represented why we liked Calafate so much - there wasn't this blazing vanity and indifference like we experienced in Buenos Aires. There was more personality, more people who said hello, more clothing (because it was cold). We settled into our room, disturbingly adjacent to the main desk and beneath the stairs to the upper rooms. Sara was terrifically impressed with Del Norte based on our first night there. I didn't find it to be some earth-shatteringly good place, despite the fact that I liked the owner a lot. Maybe it was because Sara got the double bed and I got the single. Or maybe Sara just liked the "real" shower, one that did not necessitate squeegee-ing post-bathing (I enjoyed squeegee-ing the bathroom myself). We then ventured out on foot in search of big food. A conspicuous, purple parilla had caught our eyes as we first drove into town. Ah - La Tablita, one of three oases in the desert of Argentina dining. Our mouths were still watering for more beef after that first parilla in Buenos Aires. What was even more stunning about La Tablita was the light atmosphere and service: a crew of men wearing twill pants, white shirts, and gaucho belts (10-foot long fabulously colored, tasseled woven ribbons wrapped and tied elaborately around the waist)... they paid attention to detail, met our eyes, and had more to say than one-word replies to our stammering Spanish. We were stunned. But it came at a price - the same style steaks we had in Buenos Aires (\$6) were \$10 here. We indulged on mouth-wateringly bloody steaks and potatoes, returning to the hotel in an iron- and fat-induced stupor before retiring to bed.



Left to Right: Calafate sights - Del Norte hospidaje, typical street, one of many beautiful gardens in town

### Calafate, February 12, 1997

Our plan was to stay one more night in Calafate and then head into Los Glaciers for a 7-day trek. We tried unsuccessfully to secure a room at Del Norte for the second night. The owner sent us to nearby Cerro Crystal. At first, we thought Crystal was going to be good because Del Norte recommended it. In fact, Crystal was a sort of bottom-of-the-barrel backup. While not seedy or unsafe, Crystal was nearly windowless, dank, musty, and loud all night (thanks to the indifferent staff). Illogically, it cost MORE than Del Norte. Crystal became a bane on this trip because it actually came back to haunt us. We ditched our stuff at Crystal and then proceeded into town. Our first easily-completed goal was to secure bus tickets into Los Glaciers. Next, we rooted out breakfast given that neither Del Norte or Crystal provided food. Sara, who has a penchant for pastries and fruit, located an excellent bakery where we loaded up on puff pastry rolls and crescents, some filled with jams and others with dulce leche. We ate ourselves silly. Calafate features one long main street that is perhaps ten blocks total. Most of the street is lined with touristy shops - although a historic church and tree-lined square punctuates the post-cards and knick-knacks. The bus station is perched up high, set a LONG block above the main street (annoying when you have to haul your stuff up the long set of stairs). Most residential houses are situated north of the main street, below the hill and bus station. More upscale buildings dot the upper plateau to the south of the bus station. There were three grocery stores (supermercados) in Calafate: the biggest was near the entrance to the town, next to a gas station. A smaller one was a few blocks down the main street. A third with fresh produce was across from the bus station; unfortunately, this place closed down during the course of our trip (we speculated it was a transient farmers' market). The food we needed to purchase for this leg of the trip included lunch

(dried fruit, bread, crackers, cheese, salami, candy, nuts, and - much to Sara's delight: canned fishes!), breakfast (granola), and a few dinners (pasta with instant sauce and this incredible cheese product - like dried parmesan, only WAY better) to supplement those we carried. The other big item on the list was fuel, which guidebooks insisted was easy to find. Well - it's not. We went to 5 shops ("necesitamos benzina blanca... we need white gas") but nobody had it; all insisted that there was none in town. Growing concerned, we then ran into some other backpackers and inquired about their fuel situation. Of course, they had cartridge stoves (legal to carry on planes). Finally, we made our way to the "ferreteria" (the joke was that this was where they sold Calafate's fine selection of ferrets) where U2's "She Moves in Mysterious Ways" blasted throughout the store, followed - amazingly - by Cat Stevens' "Oh Very Young." The two very fine young men at the counter fetched us a plastic bottle of white gas (2 L for \$6). We lunched at a frustrating Italian-style restaurant, La Verlika, after stumbling through a minefield of bad Spanish with an impatient waiter. My meal: overcooked square spaghetti over which was poured heavy whole cream. The only way I could down this was to heap huge quantities of cheese over each fork load. The meal was saved, in part, by an indulgent salad of fresh tomatoes with vinegar. We were also overcharged, although we called the waiter on it and got a fair deal. We actually returned to this place for dinner and, lo and behold, were overcharged a second time.

A few parting vignettes: we met a young New Yorker riding his bike solo from Punta Arenas to Peru. We would meet many interesting people on this trip, wondering often how they could take off 3+ months. During the 2-3 hour siesta (yes, the whole town closes down from around 2-5), we encountered a dozen children hurling water balloons and definitely trying our definition of personal space. Sara chose to walk in the street to avoid the line of fire; I walked down the middle of them and was, indeed, nearly smacked. Their matronly guardian was a block away, selling handmade jewelry and filling the balloons. After seeing all these kids, it occurred to me that I never saw a school in Calafate. I was also fascinated with the beautiful gardens in Calafate: exploding pink and red roses, giant patches of flaming freesia, and the most giant delphiniums I've ever seen. Lastly, the town seemed dominated by big dogs with short squatty legs. There were cats as well, the most memorable of which lay sprawled among the freesia (the look of catnip in its eyes).



Left to Right: the final bus stop, looking down after first climb, Valle de Vuelta

### **To Cerro Torre Basecamp, February 13, 1997**

While Calafate is the nearest tourist town to Los Glaciers, tiny outpost El Chalten (4 hours away by bus) represents the actual park entrance. Thus, our trip into the mountains began at some ungodly early morning hour. We rose and left earlier than we had to because we were desperate to get away from the noisy Cerro Crystal. We also booked reservations with Del Norte for two nights following our trek, leaving our duffels of non-trekking extras at said hotel while we were out in the wild (something we did a few times). In some cases, proprietors placed our belongings in locked extra rooms; in others, they stashed it in full view near the front desk (which might wrack the nerves of some trekkers). In any event, hotel owners defined your leaving things as a good sign that you were going to patronize their services later. We hauled what we thought, at the time, were frighteningly heavy packs up the hill to the bus station (nothing in comparison to the packs we hauled for the Torres del Paine Circuit in Chile). The bus to Los Glaciers was on time, with a larger group of travelers than had come from Rio Gallegos. As before, the bus was luxurious - and, more importantly, we were spared the awful experience of watching Chuck Norris' hairy back. The bus backtracked for an hour and then turned north/left at the end of Lago Argentina. The weather was not ideal (broken clouds hovered distantly at the 4000-5000 foot level, obscuring most of the mountains) - BUT it wasn't raining. Midway through the loud and bumpy ride, we stopped at an estacion (a working cattle ranch) in the middle of nowhere. Here stood a few guesthouses, a main building with tables and a bar (on which huge pies and tortes taunted us), and a public bathroom. The bathroom was adorned with a cartoon request that paper NOT be put in the toilet because it would clog the septic tank (communicated with drawings of an anthropomorphized toilet that scowled in response to hands with soiled paper). MANY places in Patagonia demanded that toilet paper be placed in wastebaskets (not toilets). Of course, it should also be noted that most places didn't have toilet paper in the first place. Thus, it is extremely important to ALWAYS have a stash of paper in your pocket. In my case: thank god for ATM receipts. Appropriately called La Leona, this family-run facility also featured the skinniest yellow tiger cat I've ever seen. Always a sucker for cats, I chased the feline down, finally settling her to a good petting (of course, she was easily distracted by insects, her only seeming meal). Meanwhile, Sara looked on with eye-rolling disdain, perhaps concerned I'd contract some awful disease (my clearly having abandoned all infectious disease protocol).

After more driving, we came upon another gigantic glacier-fed lake, Lago Viedma. Like Lago Argentina, Viedma was turquoise, fed by what guidebooks claim is THE largest glacier in South America (Glacier Viedma). At a few points en route, we could actually see the glacier's toothy front (said to be 300 feet high). Indeed, distances are terrifically deceiving in Patagonia. The whole place should come with a warning: objects are farther away than they appear - MUCH farther. Normally, one also sees the whole Fitzroy massif at this point - rising like the Tetons above the plains. Given that they remained socked in, I can truly say that said obscurity made our eventual first full-on view THAT much more stunning (and I don't use that word lightly... we were STUNNED). At some point, we struck up a conversation with a woman on the bus. As luck would have it, she was a guide who had relocated to El Chalten many years ago. At the time, she was hauling lots of preserves and desserts - things

that were looking mighty tasty. After a few interesting bridges, we found ourselves in El Chalten proper. El Chalten is the indigenous peoples' name for Fitzroy and means fire mountain because the spires are frequently enveloped in wispy clouds that look like smoke. Fitzroy, for the record, was the captain of the Beagle (as in: the ship on which Darwin was the naturalist). El Chalten doesn't have many tourist facilities (although there are tales - both in the literature and among trekkers - about some bakery with exquisite chocolate cake). We cannot answer these questions because we never got to explore the place. All tour buses stop at park headquarters for fee remittance and a talk with park officials prior to going to the main trailhead area (about 2 miles away). Park headquarters occupy what looks like an old house. Park officials - surprisingly all women - gave us some sort of welcome spiel in Spanish. Unfortunately, Sara and I were distracted by this disturbingly funny set of posters regarding human waste impact. Indeed, we had heard some legendary stories about the vast quantities of toilet paper and shit in the park. Indeed, our observations confirmed that Patagonia was NOT pristine in this regard. What we found especially amusing, though, was the disproportionately HUGE campaign against sanitary napkins and tampons, both adhered prominently to the poster boards (as though people might not be aware such things existed). Sara and I scratched our heads, laughed and just said something to the effect of - "oh yeah, blame the women... everything is always our fault. Like men don't produce a lotta shit." We piled back into the bus and continued down the dusty road. When the time came to disembark, we honestly had no clue where we were or what was happening. Where the bus silently stopped could have been in the middle of Wyoming ranch country. Had the woman guide not been there to give us directions, we would have had NO clue where we were to go or what to do. There were no signs, no statements by the driver... nothing (and we could see none of the target mountains for reference). Our new friend directed us to the trail (her directions: for Cerro Torre, go toward the white house; for Fitzroy, the yellow house). Closer inspection of said houses yielded several trails - again, none signed in any way. Stepping off the bus, we realized that the day had become much hotter (probably approaching 70°). After taping our feet, repacking here and there, and downing some very sugary products, we set out, walking sticks prodding the dusty way. Our plan was to head up to the Cerro Torre basecamp first. We were not sure if we would stay there one or two nights (this was a weather-dependent decision). After hiking briefly along the road, we cut up a side-road near said white house (next to horses, fowl, and clothes drying on lines), and then began a relentless little climb up through shrubbery and grass. As we climbed, the scenery below unfolded. Indeed, the Valle de Vuelta nearly resembled some awe-inspiring valley amidst the Alps, its silver-ribboned river glistening down the long bottom of green - distant glacier-clad peaks rising high to the north.



Left to Right: me and first big viewpoint, riverside hike in beech forest nearing basecamp, big storm over basecamp lake

After huffing and puffing for 30 minutes, we agreed to hike 10 more minutes before enjoying lunch. Today's mileage being 5 and the time being 1 p.m., we figured we had plenty of time to dawdle. Shortly thereafter, we passed the biblically charred skeleton of an enormous tree - a forbidding sign in Spanish and English: "Ode to a Careless Trekker... this was the result of a cigarette." Sara and I paid sympathetic homage - indeed, this said it all about the Argentine passion for smoking (not that it was an Argentine butt that did this). After rounding the grassy remains of a wetland, we stopped for lunch - the faint smell of horseshit lingering in the air. Fortunately, the breeze picked up as we dined on wheat flour rolls sandwiching soft flavorful cheese and the fattiest, greasiest slices of salami I've indulged in a long time. We each devoured 3 mini-sandwiches... and then there were the heavenly, almost buttery dried pears. Ten minutes after moving on, we came to a viewpoint that looked over a second valley (up which we would travel to Cerro Torre basecamp). Only one big peak - a wedge-shaped mountain with a massive angling glacier - was visible in the foreground. For the first time, it truly felt like we were in the Andes! Even at the time, saying that sounded SO SEXY. Everywhere else: a wall of clouds. At the time, we did not know that Cerro Torre was supposed to be RIGHT THERE. The way dropped maybe 300 feet through beech trees before leveling. The whole valley leading to Cerro Torre basecamp was a series of 3-4 old moraines. This meant you hiked a flat section, climbed a mound (200-400 feet), hiked more flat stuff, hiked another moraine, and so on. One flat section consisted of an acre of muddy bogs, tilled by the heavy hooves of many horses. Another flat region had these huge open grassy sections where nothing but dandelions grew. With all due respect to Patagonia, we were horrified to hear that these flowers were "the highpoint" of meadow flora in the area. We were, like: we come all the way to Patagonia and the best you can do is dandelions? In general, flora in Patagonia was somewhat disappointing. I am just used to lush forests and emerald meadows with brilliant flowers. Patagonia is more like desert scrub, deciduous trees, thorny everything (that is, when it's not miles of boot-sucking mud!). After what seemed like a long time, we neared the final big moraine. Here, we hiked alongside a gorgeous whitewater river that foamed over a wide bed of glacier-rounded stones.

We climbed the substantial heap of rocks and dirt, reaching a vast plateau of beech... and tents as far as the eye could see! A little daunted and disgruntled, we chose a decent looking site beyond the well-abused camp area and just outside the trees. After pitching the Bibler, we quickly realized that we were IN the toilet zone. Again, there are no privies (unless there is a fully operational hostel - more prevalent in Chile). Instead of outhouses, there are HUGE zones where everyone shits. Toilet paper and feces litter the ground (many people don't even make an effort to bury their waste), and the former blow in ribbon shards from heather, tree branches, rocks - wherever it gets stuck. When I eventually had to go, I had this brilliant-sounding idea that

maybe if I went up just a little higher into the rock-only zone I might escape the foulness. Eyeballing the perfect rock (behind which some semblance of privacy was had), I was reduced to gagging over the sight of half a dozen fly-infested piles of human waste. EVERY rock was similarly festooned. I eventually resorted to heading out into the more open rocky area in view of choppy Lago Torre. Amazingly, I dug myself a hole in the sand, only to hit - you guessed it - MORE SHIT! In some ways, I guess I was happy that SOMEONE was burying it. Nevertheless, I could not get over the copiousness of coprolite in the making. Some archaeologists are surely going to have a field day with this area in a few bazillion years (assuming human beings don't kill themselves in the meantime). Assuming one could overlook the feces, the view toward Cerro Torre (still nowhere in sight) was spectacular from this end-of-the-line point amongst the rocks: massive, opaque, gray-blue Lago Torre occupied a giant cirque beneath towering granite peaks on nearly all sides. Across the lake, a vast blue and white glacier calved into the rough water. Here, it felt like we were at the interface between summer and a HUGE thunderous rainstorm. Spitting rain fell suddenly and then dissipated, the clouds pulsing and throbbing indecisively. At the time, there was surprisingly little wind - but that would change (man would that change!). Our dinner that night was extremely filling by future standards. Following soup, we enjoyed a home-brought meal of spiced bulgur. Sara mixed hers with one of the beloved "canned fishes" (actually, calamari - technically not a fish) while I indulged my grains with several slices of sinful sausage (fat bits the size of marbles, I tell ya). Backpacking with Sara was educational in terms of redefining how I pack, eat, and share the load. For example, Sara was aghast that I ate (and drank) using just my thermal mug. Sara carries a mug and bowl, allowing her to eat and drink more calories simultaneously. Opposed to dehydrated meals, Sara also eats heartily and does not believe in skimping on nutrition or fat. I must say, though, that we must have TOTALLY different tastes when it comes to sugar and salt: I crave huge quantities of both but not Sara (I also drank a lot more water than Sara). Aside from food, Sara also brings many little comforts: a Crazy Creek chair, a small camping pillow, a down bag that packs down to the size of a football. After years of backpacking with strapping guys who always carried more than me, I was confronted on this trip with actually carrying my fair share. Fearing buckling knee injuries, I popped upwards of 1000 mg ibuprofen daily (for the record, I suffered no knee problems). In any event, this was NOT an easy trip and both Sara and I felt our respective ages. After dinner, the winds picked up and just kept getting bigger and bigger as we washed the dishes and then took a hopeful but ultimately unfulfilling stroll to look at the lake (above which whirled giant storm clouds, enshrouding the frustratingly mysterious Cerro Torre). Afterwards, we bedded down for the night. Just above the rush of the wind, I remember listening to the pleasant notes of a flute played in the distance. More than once on this trip, I was met with the strange trappings of music in the middle of grand mountains. Of equal surprise, I did not find this intrusion affronting or offensive. As the night wore on, and the tent wore down, and the flautist retired his/her instrument, Sara and I were acquiring different opinions about the winds. I was utterly enamored and fascinated with them (to the point that I actually took out the earplugs and just listened to their power). But Sara was deeply concerned for the welfare of her tent - particularly as we began to lose the vestibule in the pre-dawn hours.



Left to Right: no improvements come morning, main tent area (no - not Jesus Rock), hiking across the boggy "tundra"

### To Fitzroy Basecamp, February 14, 1997

At first light, we decided to move our tent to a more protected site. Because I needed to use the bathroom, I was the one who went out to describe the weather so we could gauge exactly when to execute the move. Once outside - in the giant fury of this unworldly thing we grew to worship as the fickle Patagonian weather - I was possessed by the ridiculously awe-inspiring sight of a rainbow arching across the glacier that calved into Lago Torre. Wow - to have all these elements: a glacier AND a rainbow AND a lake AND the rock base of Cerro Torre AND the wind. Back in Calafate, I'd seen what I thought were bogus, airbrushed postcards of Patagonian glaciers with rainbows. As we would see again and again, this was an outrageously common phenomenon. By the end of the trip, we were actually jaded: glacier, rainbow... no big whoop. As at the Rio Gallegos airport, I leaned back, open-armed into the uplifting wind, clucking away about the rainbow. Meanwhile, Sara impatiently called me back for a little talking to about being serious and not losing my head. In fact, I was glad that I agitated Sara because I was happy, silly, and amazed (as opposed to dour, anxious, or insane). Next, we moved our abode to the city of tents in the trees - next to what would become the familiar green tent owned by two skinny German guys we would follow around Glacieres each day (not on purpose) AND meet again in Chile. After a few more hours of napping - dreaming we would peer out to glorious sun - we crawled out of the tent. Well - it could be worse... it could be raining. But the weather was as it had been yesterday: everything in waves (sunburst, drippy fog, chilly wind, warm wind, thin spitting rain, repeat). We boiled water and Sara drank her gourmet coffee while I enjoyed some exquisite Argentine granola. Until now, I have neglected to mention the camp dog ("perro de cerro"). Perro was a skinny black mutt with longish mahogany hair, a skunk-like splash of gold down her belly, golden eyes, and a small retriever form. At first, we assumed she belonged to someone in camp. Later, we discovered that she actually lived here. This explained her bony form, anxiousness, and incessant desire to beg for scraps. As I sat stirring my tea, having just set my beautiful bowl of half-eaten cereal at my side, dirt began flying into my lap. Where is this coming from? The DOG! She was digging eagerly at some roots (sugar? Salt? bugs?) the earth flying between her hind legs. I shooed her away but she returned almost immediately and so I had to use the "Jesus Rock." The Jesus Rock was a large oval camp stone on which someone had drawn a Christ-like image. I ceremonially placed the Jesus Rock in the hole atop the irresistible roots. Frustrated, she moped away and I picked the dirt out of my cereal. Praise the lord, sort of.

Following breakfast, Sara and I discussed our options for the day given the persistently foul weather - including consultation with others around camp. First, we visited the skeletal climbers hut - a collection of logs, limbs, debris, plastic and bones that somehow managed to house a few bunk beds, tables, candles and enough spare food to nourish a few starving mountaineers. Here, we talked with a swarthy Argentine climber dude. Appearance-wise, he merited high marks with Sara but was a little too conservative for my tastes (despite the mop of disheveled hair and big brown eyes). One of the first Argentines who spoke fluent English, this guy (we never asked his name) provided us with several pieces of sage advice: first - the weather wasn't gonna let up today (don't bother waiting for Cerro Torre, which hadn't been out in weeks). Second, he told us about a shortcut to our next goal, Fitzroy basecamp (without this, we would have to backtrack all the way to the road). Third, we were strongly advised to camp at Lago Capri - the most beautiful and peaceful place in the park... hardly anyone goes there, he insisted. Of course, we were skeptical of the latter information - having seen the fields of shit and all. Next, we met an kind Canadian man who was visiting the park for his fifth time, having NEVER seen Cerro Torre once. THIS time, he insisted, he was planting himself in his tent until she came out. Geez. We began to wonder: would we ever see these mountains? Having made the decision to move on, we packed our things and struggled to lift the packs. As we struggled (physically and mentally), we were both silently disgruntled about the potential of this whole trip in terms of perpetually bad weather. Could it be that we would pay so much, travel so far, expend so much energy - and actually see NOTHING? We tried not to think like this for long. We left in search of the shortcut to Fitzroy. It should be strongly noted that this route ain't recognized by the park, ain't signed, and ain't easy to find amidst the social trails, muddy horse prints, and many lateral moraines. It should also be noted that orienteering sucks when the map contour intervals are in large metric units (the equivalent of several hundred feet). Thankfully, we ran into our skinny German neighbors. From here on out they will be called "skinny German dudes" - not to be confused with "smiling Swiss guy with scissors," "chirpy chick," "Aconcagua-man" or any number of other unique people we met on other trails (god knows what they called Sara and I). Skinny German dudes knew exactly where the turnoff was (for the record: left of this sign that says something about packing out all basura/trash). Early in the day, the weather was hot and breezy. I'm not quite sure when the weather became ugly (which it did). I recall specifically, though, that the weather remained balmy as we ascended the shortcut trail up this forested ridge, the terrain reminding us of Olympic National Park. Near the top (perhaps 1000 feet above the valley floor), we stopped to drink and peruse the maps, the sun still shining through the trees from the south. All along the trail were gorgeous yellow lady slippers, an unusual bloom that made up for all those damn dandelions. Then, there was a sudden noise in the woods and I looked up to spy a ruby-red-headed male Magellanic woodpecker. Major SCORE! Chasing the winged beast through the woods, we eventually even spied its female partner. Things were definitely turning up!

We continued on through a flatter region, winding our way on a meandering trail that was overgrown with beech. We had been warned to always stay left - given that social trails abounded once the way leveled out (most lead to Lago Capri, the lake we would return to via a different trail on the far/north side). When we finally broke into the open, the weather became WAY UGLY. For 2-3 hours, we hiked alongside two long skinny lakes (La Madre y La Hija). All the while, 30+ mph winds and sleet drove into our down-turned hooded faces, billowing our pack-covers like sails. The worst part, though, was that the trail was a bog (said bog, it should be emphasized, was BETTER than the knee-deep mud we would encounter in Chile). When I try to imagine what Alaska's melting tundra must look, feel, and sound like, this section fulfills my expectations. As we mucked our way along, Sara and I said exceedingly little to one other. We both knew we were hatin' it big time. The best we could do was work through it. Weighed down with waterlogged boots and capes of wind and rain, we negotiated the frustrating boot-sucking path, gritted our teeth, and eventually linked up with the next official trail to the east Fitzroy basecamp. Despite everything, this was a surprisingly scenic and vast plateau of grasses and silver streams. To the west, tauntingly small lower sections of the Fitzroy massif were visible: rocks and hanging glaciers shrouded in heavy fog and swirling clouds. After joining the real trail and hiking 10 minutes to a grove of trees (where we hoped the camp would be - but it wasn't), we decided we couldn't go on anymore without eating. Sara was exceptionally good at saying "enough" and then unpacking food at such necessary times. We huddled amongst rain-drenched shrubs beneath tall trees, the rain falling in sheets all around, and ate cheese/salami sandwiches with pears. Within 10 minutes of packing up and hiking, we arrived at camp. This camp, Poincenot (named after one of the big spires next to Fitzroy), was similar to that at Cerro Torre (minus Perro and any signs of Jesus on the stones). The camp had three tiers: upper (in a dense grove of beech) served as the shit-field; middle (where we camped) was situated under less dense beech, atop a thick bed of decaying leaves; and lower, on hard dirt along the fringes of the forest, had theoretical views of Fitzroy. Given that the lower camp was occupied, we camped next to skinny German dudes. By this point, we were fed up with the weather, convinced our effort and money was going to be wasted. Fastidiously but rapidly, we set up the tent and hauled our gear inside. The rain let up somewhat, allowing us to prepare and enjoy dinner in a civil manner: a mildly spiced cous cous (with fishes or sausage), soup, and cookies. After dinner, we read and wrote postcards, lounged around, and eventually went to sleep. That night, the weather dumped and howled. The rain seemed to collect in specific quanta within cupped leaves of the beech canopy. When giant gusts of wind blew, these bowls of water spilled onto specific locations of the beaten and drenched tent. And thus began tent problem two: leakage. Sara's Bibler is a gorgeously reliable piece of technology - a one-ply goretex system that inhibits internal condensation. Thus, being awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of dripping water was of concern; actively feeling water on the tent floor was panic-inducing; realizing Sara's goose down bag was sponging up said water garnered serious questions about the rest of the trip. But there was little to be done at 3 a.m. other than move away from the edges and contain the puddles with empty stuff sack dams. After calming down, we ascertained that there was a leak at the seam, something we could seal later. Nonetheless, we slept poorly.



Left to Right: sunny views of Fitzroy from camp, Lagos Hija y Madre and, distantly, Viedma; final climb to Lago de los Tres

### Dayhiking from Fitzroy Basecamp, February 15, 1997

By 6 a.m., notions of getting out of the tent did not enter our insane and sleep-deprived minds. Sufficed to say, when Sara began making these euphoric noises around 8:30, I was only into sleeping away the day. Her exact words - which I will never forget - were a breathless series of "blue sky, blue sky, blue sky." I sat up slowly as Sara peered excitedly out the Bibler's chameleon eye extension window, dumbfounded to think that was gorgeous out there. My first instinct was to run for it - pack food and get the views before they vanished. But Sara was not into that. After hot drinks and oatmeal, we packed things for a daytrip and headed out. The Al/Adrian contrast was especially apparent in Sara and my dayhiking appearance. Sara packed a formal fanny pack, into which she stuffed her things. I assembled a hip belt from one of my sleeping bag straps and dangled everything (water, camera, ditty bag, pants, coat, gloves) off it. Sara was appalled that I put up with this mess - not to mention embarrassed to be seen with me (just a little). Our hiking goals were two-fold: first, to climb to Lago de los Tres (Lake of the Three, after the first climbing team of Fitzroy), an inspiring lake below Fitzroy that we'd seen in post-cards at Rio Gallegos; and, second, to hike to Lago Piedras Blancas (White Rocks Lake), recommended to us by the woman guide because it has one of the most spectacular hanging glaciers. The climb to Lago de los Tres took us by another climbers' hut, a bird nest assembly that bore similarities to that at Cerro Torre. Here, the trail forked - right headed up the ridge and left headed downriver to Piedras Blancas and beyond. We took the right, climbing steeply up the hogback. The way was easy to follow despite loose rock and many braiding social trails. We were following many people (there was some sort of tour group camped at Fitzroy). As we climbed, the views became stunning: we surveyed the lower plateau of lakes we slogged the day before. Ah - they looked so dry and serene by the warmth of the glowing sun (memories of the previous deluge were communicated only by the squeaking of my still damp boots). Beyond, immense Lago Viedma spread out in unreal tones of opaque turquoise. Fitzroy was eclipsed by the ridge until the final moments of the climb - which made for INTENSE drama. First, we crested a rocky false summit basin - only the upper part of Fitzroy visible as we walked a flat rocky section with silver streams and mirror pools. We then scrambled 100-200 feet of talus to reach this final ridge above the lake - full views of Fitzroy and her courtiers. Most people hung out on the ridge - but we wanted to descend to the lake so we could take pictures on this one big rock - just like in the postcards. Mostly, though, we were stunned speechless this whole time. This was like religion. No words can express our exuberance and surprise and amazement. Fitzroy appeared unreal. I had to repeat to myself over and over again: this is real, this is right in front of your face... this isn't some movie or picture in a book - this is fucking real. And it would not have been a tenth as exciting if we'd seen it blazing away from the bus during the ride in. We had somehow earned this view and it was, we agreed, worth everything. Even if we saw nothing else, this would be worth the whole trip (of course, I'm not sure if we would agree with that now). But, at the time, we were overpowered and overawed.



Left to Right: Fitzroy, me on the famous rock/Lago de los Tres, hanging glacier above Lago Piedras Blancas

We scrambled talus alongside the southern lakeshore. Here, we could look over the edge into this gaping deep valley where there lay cupped a giant lower lake, Lago Sucia. On three of the four sides, Lago Sucia was surrounded by vertical cliffs that formed the base of the Fitzroy massif; above them, the most tenuously hanging glacier I have ever seen spilled rippling ice down from the spires. Countless waterfalls plummeted from the glacier down the rock - pieces of ice littering the lake surface. The sense of depth, height, vertical, everything here was utterly amazing! We returned to our original rock on the eastern shore and ate copiously, not wanting to leave the sunny and windless tranquilidad. I would say we just sat and gaped at the Fitz for an hour before heading down. At the climbers' camp, we headed downriver - the trail mostly vanishing into a cobbled, cairn-marked way. Occasionally, a faint path seemed to cut into the steep sides of the riverbed (when the river snaked to one side or another). While not difficult, it was slower going than expected. After 45 minutes, we began to be concerned that we'd missed a turnoff. We could see this GIANT moraine (200 feet high) and knew that the lake must be cupped in there. Thus, we decided to just start ascending it. Fortunately, we ran into this climber practicing a bouldering problem on a house-sized rock.

He pointed us in the right direction (no-doubt dangling by his thumbs at the time). He said Fitzroy had only been climbed once this season, due to the most foul weather he could recall. He said that this day was the best he'd seen all summer. Talk about karma! We continued ten minutes, locating an obvious trail branch - complete with an arrow-shaped cairn. The trail to Lago Piedras Blancas follows its ex-current stream, cutting through the massive moraine (i.e. you never climb the moraine per se). The trail quickly disintegrates into major scrambling. They don't call it Piedras Blancas for nothing. Their white rocks are HUGE - some house-sized, most car-sized. They pile atop one another, creating huge crevices that would easily fit (and break) a leg, an ankle, a moderately sized child, significant parts of your ex-boyfriend, etc. Leaping from one to another, we made our way - confused a few times - up the river until we came to a marvelous opaque lake. Above the lake, THE MOST spectacularly blue glacier cascaded, rippled, swelled, calved, exploded down the rock. It was unearthly - something you associate with movies or pictures in books. There simply aren't glaciers like this anywhere I have ever been. Above the line of the glacier, the tip of the Fitz stood out against a perfectly blue sky. Sara was determined to get as close to the glacier as possible. Contouring around the round lake seemed - at first - simple. However, I cannot emphasize how deceiving distances are in Patagonia. The glacier face, which looked 10-20 feet high from afar, was actually 100-200 feet. Our goal - this distant peninsula - took forever to reach. And from the peninsular rock tip, we were still at least 1000 feet away from the ice. I was not thrilled with the intense bouldering and, frankly, got spooked when large stones shifted awkwardly. Despite reaching the end of my rope a few times, I continued all the way - surprising even Sara. We hung out, eating for a half an hour before making the shorter-feeling scramble out. The hike back to Poincenot was effortless. We were in an awesome stupor over the mind-boggling views and weather. I enjoyed a fine late afternoon of sitting in the meadows beyond the lower tier of camps - Fitzroy towering above. Later, we ate glutinously on pasta and cheese and soup. I don't remember much of the night. I think we were so blown away and exhausted that nothing would have mattered anyway.

### To Piedras Frailles, February 16, 1997

The next day, we moved downriver to the Electrico drainage. Our camp would be at Piedras Frailles (frail/broken rocks), the jump-off for north face routes on Fitzroy. Essentially, we were traveling a crescent path around the Fitzroy massif - going from the eastern side to the northern side (about 90-120°). The morning's weather, however, was not gorgeous. Rather, we were back to foggy windy spitting rain. Packing up, we donned all our wind and rain gear - a major mistake, frankly. We would be out of all that gear within a few hours because the afternoon grew so balmy. Our path headed south, retracing the steps we took to Lago Piedras Blancas, and then continuing beyond. The confusing river path continued for a couple more miles. At one point, I took a dumb step and twisted my foot/ankle, necessitating a foot-wrap stop and major ibuprofen. Thereafter, we began crossing shiny flint-like rocks that broke in slivers (hence the camp name). Within half an hour, we came to a point where it seemed we needed to begin cutting westerly up this emerging drainage (presumably the Electrico). Indeed, the guidebooks suggested that the turnoff was hard to find and so we began to scout the scrubby terrain. In the main bed of the river, there simply were no cairns - only a series of vague trails, old footprints, and horse droppings. As we cut away from the riverbed and onto this higher plateau, the social trails seemed to explode. We followed a couple, but they dead-ended. Eventually, we saw a clear path heading in the right direction and took it. After deciding that we were on the right trail, we sat down for a long lunch (including a hefty portion of our "good luck peanut butter"). Indeed, peanut butter was impossible to find in Patagonia. Anticipating this (based on Silas' advice), I brought a jar of Skippy's extra crunchy. My desserts after all dinners consisted of two heaping teaspoons of peanut butter followed by a mouthful of honey. Mmmmm. At this point in the trek, having started to run low on salami and cheese, we had begun dipping into the peanut butter reserves (the shape of things to come!).



Left to Right: hike to Piedras Frailles camp, camp cabin, campsite/gear-drying

After lunch, we hiked 3 quick miles to camp via a flat trail through green forests. Near the end, the grand, silver Rio Electrico flowed audibly. Every so often, we heard interesting bird clicks and whistles - Austral parrots, jovial robin-sized birds that were olive green and brown, with dashes of dusty maroon. We were also passed by horses, part of a guided trekking group. The camp at Piedras Frailles was highly developed and charged fees (\$5 per person per night); like every Argentine locale, they accepted American! There was also a store, some A-frames, pit toilets, a shower, running water, wooden chairs and tables. I was unclear whether this operation was run by the park or a private concessionaire. All I know for sure: there was NO other place to camp (like, nearby and for free). The proprietor (Pablo) was a gorgeous swarthy dude with long curly hair. While Sara did not give him high marks, I found Pablo extremely easy on the eyes, despite the fact that he smoked like a stack and made racist remarks about Chileans. In between talking to Pablo in broken English, we set up camp - once again - next to skinny German dudes. The camp was poised on the lee side of this big (300 foot tall) bump, an effective windshield from the truly incessant and freezing winds coming off Lago Electrico and the icefield above. The weather then turned crappy and so we set up quickly and ate. Partway through our grim dinner, this huge French tour group showed up (the ones being stock-supported). Subsequently, we watched Pablo and his assistant set up their half a dozen North Face VE25s in this grassy field. At the time, we had no concept of the magnitude of what this operation would become. When Pablo closed down all facilities (supposed to be open from 4-11 p.m.) to cater to their every whim, we were aghast. When catering included butterflying a lamb and roasting it on an open spit - alongside cobs of corn - we were furious. Fresh fruit, searing flesh, soft bread, alcohol,

blackened vegetables... yes, part of it was hunger, jealousy, class hatred, sour grapes, you name it... but we were pissed and hungry. That night, the wind whipped up furiously and the sky spat rain intermittently. Needless to say, we fought the collapsing tent, the internal poles popping out of their holders whenever a massive gust blasted overhead.



Left to Right: Fitzroy's north face - from near the bottom of the climb, close to the "top," the end of the trail/"top"

### To North Fitzroy Vista, February 17, 1997

To our shock, the next day was fantastically clear - although we were not as moved as the previous day because the wind was howling and it was biting cold. But the clouds had been blasted from the entire vicinity, revealing the rounded north face of Fitzroy (in the southern hemisphere, north faces tend to be less severe). That was the goal: the upper moraine under Fitzroy's austere north face. Staring up at the ridgeline, we could see fresh snow high up where we would eventually climb. We were trekking, after all, in late summer. Who knew when the first snows would fall, accumulate? Maybe this was the beginning of the end. After breakfast, we inquired with Pablo as to the trail whereabouts and were directed through a corral of wooden fencing. Unfortunately, we backtracked too far and wound up on some more social trails heading into dense forest. Again, the books were unclear as to the precise whereabouts of the trail. Just as we began climbing, we noticed the French group following their adept Argentine leader up a flawlessly obvious trail. Cutting a B-line toward them, we whacked through brush and crossed a plateau of stones and meager foliage. The way climbed almost instantly once it left the plateau. The French group used a nice steady pace for a long time but we found ourselves working our way slowly through the party as various members slipped out of line. The steep trail was WAY rougher and WAY steeper than that which climbed to Lago de los Tres - but it was much more floral and beautiful, with familiar mountain flowers embedded between rocks and grass. Every high angle step revealed an expanding panorama of Electrico valley - this huge rocky massif across the way, the vast gray waves of Lago Electrico, the distant icefields and emerald valleys. And all the while - more than ANY other day in Argentina - the wind pounded us. Many, many, many times, I found myself acknowledging that the wind was truly incessant and I'd never experienced that kind of power ALL day anywhere. As we climbed, the terrain reminded me of a September hike up Sahale Arm: dulling emeralds and fading flowers, rolling dips of green interspersed with white boulders and silver tarns. While the tour group huddled behind a giant stone, we plodded up, higher and higher. Once we hit unobstructed views of Fitzroy, set above rolling meadows and high bowls of snow-dusted talus, I figured we'd stop. But Sara pressed on. I, frankly, was pooped and frustrated with the incessant winds - definitely not interested in tackling fresh snow. Nevertheless, I followed, growing steadily behind each of Sara's persistent paces. Somewhere, we passed a stunning alpine creek: classic rounded mosses defining an idyllic miniature waterfall. To the side of its shimmering pool flailed a ragged piece of soggy toilet paper! Thereafter, the trail became faint and the snow/ice began to accumulate. I grew pussyfooted and tried to convince myself I was not into having my wits frayed anymore. But the French tourists on my heels goaded me - and before I knew it, I was on the lip of a massive moraine, huddling with Sara, the Argentine leader, and a bunch of shivering French people. The moraine looked over a giant bowl that contained a small glacier (by Patagonian standards). For a brief spell, we thought it was snowing but this was not the case; rather, the winds were pounding down, rolling over the glacier, and blasting ice over the moraine lip into our faces.



Left to Right: the view north across Electrico valley, Sara jubilantly bounding down the moraine, hike attempt up the Electrico

The trip down proceeded quickly. Many sections were extremely steep, though, and I took my time given the ankle twist the day before. We observed a Patagonian ptarmigan somewhere up high (also reminiscent of Sahale). Once we returned to camp, I was beat. The notion of spending the rest of the afternoon in the sunny leeward side of the Electrico bulge was enticing. But Sara didn't want to pass up the clear weather (howsoever BIG the winds remained). Thus, we ascended the bulge to assess our options. Sara wanted to hike to the shore of Lago Electrico, our original plan for the latter half of the day. The way seemed straight-forward: a flat-looking plateau of lunar talus no more than a mile long... hell, how long could that take? Try an hour one way. With full force winds off the lake, we walked like staggeringly robotic morons into the gale. Sometimes the gusts were so powerful that we had to stop, sit, and howl with laughter (unless, that is, we were throw down crying). The terrain was also not flat; several rocky hummocks were encountered repeatedly. In fact, these were nice because of their wind-shielding

effects. Bottom line: we made it within 20 feet of the lake but the icy surf pounding off the waves prevented us from going to the shore. Ah - a glorious day in Patagonia! Our trip back, the wind at our backs, was as interesting as the hike in. We returned to another unfulfilling dinner. To quell our unsatisfied stomachs, we ate TWO bad Mountain House freeze-dried meals. Honestly, though, we were beginning to starve at this point. And all the while, another French group arrived (now there were two parties): more animal sacrifices, vegetables of our dreams, oranges to drool for, and liquor. One of the new guys took to leading a sing-along around the huge campfire well into the night. When things settled down, we slept fairly well - despite jealous ire, empty stomachs, buzzing ears, stinging eyes, and the intense desire to shower.



Left to Right: the view north across Electrico valley, Sara jubilantly bounding down the moraine, hike attempt up the Electrico

### To Lago Capri, February 18, 1997

Our final two days in Los Glaciers National Park were, by far, the most spiritually satisfying, spectacularly beautiful, and ridiculously clear. While they lacked the epiphanic excitement of that first clear day, the sights, sounds, and calmness of this extended moment of reality inspired a peaceful amazement and acceptance that here we were - the mountains were embedded in us and we were a part of them. Not knowing any of this, we awoke in a timely manner at our camp at Piedras Frailles. Sara was not keen on paying for the campsite but we forked out \$20 (having not even indulged a hot shower!). Today's hike to Lago Capri would entail 7 miles. Recall that Lago Capri had been recommended to us by the shaggy Argentine climber at the Cerro Torre basecamp. It lies to the east of some low rolling hills and ridges behind the skinny pair of lakes (Madre y Hija) by which we slogged on day two. Thus, getting their involved backtracking to the junction where the marshland shortcut intersected the main drag into Poincenot. The backtrack along the Electrico proceeded effortlessly; FINALLY, I was feeling like the pack was a comfortable part of my body. Emerging from the Electrico drainage and picking up the trail to Poincenot was a piece of cake - save this annoying field of thorny calafate. Calafate, incidentally, is an annoying bush - sort of a cross between a rose and a huckleberry. The berries, edible and used in jams, do taste similar to huckleberries - but the damn bushes have these half-inch spines everywhere. Most of Patagonia's interesting flora seems completely equipped to annoy you - whether by poking you in the shins or embedding into your socks and longjohns. Indeed, MUCH evening downtime was spent carefully picking seeds and thorns out of clothing. Invariably, there would be one that you missed and you'd lay there going crazy trying to fall asleep with some thorn in your ankle or down your bum. Anyway - at the turnoff, we lunched and rested beneath the silent blue sky - our eyes intent on this fabulous giant white wedge-like peak to the north. I think we both really forgot that we were in the middle of the Andes. While trekking in Glacieres, you often get sucked into this "where's Fitzroy?" obsession and don't appreciate the fact that the whole area is dominated by incredible icefields and mountains. We also, at this point, observed our one and only Patagonian hare at close range: the rabbit came bounding right up the trail, stopped about 10 feet from us, stared for a good long time, but then took off as I got my camera out.

We continued towards Poincenot - traversing the now-well-known rocky riverbed (where my ankle flared up again). En route, we met Aconcagua-man (i.e. Tim from Aspen) - on his way to Piedras Frailles. Tim was a contractor who had been attempting to climb his namesake (the one we gave him, that is) since November (so far, hadn't made it). He was in his early forties, sporting salt and pepper hair/beard. Sara and I gave him decent marks in the terms of appearance and personality (but I would take a lot of those back later). We talked briefly, gleaned that we would all be doing Chile's Paine Circuit next. Tim will be back, rest assured! We glided by Poincenot and across the plateau where, just a few days before, the weather had unnerved us. In this windless warmth, though, we took our time - constantly turning around to gaze upon the Fitzroy massif - which seemed larger and more breathtaking than before (paradoxical given that we were now farther away). But you know what they say: the farther back you stand, the more perspective you gain. Things got muddy as we crossed some interesting logjam bridges. In general, we found that bridge quality was inversely proportional to river size. There were times, especially in Chile, where we crossed stunningly crafted puncheon bridges over safe trickles - only to later teeter on wet piles or skinny logs over raging, wide torrents. Given our occasionally poor luck at finding turnoffs, we grew concerned that we had missed the Capri trail (indeed, we seemed to be getting SO far from the Fitz). Maybe shaggy climber guy was wrong about the Capri views - it was just its solitude he liked. Then, a huge party of Europeans (like 25 people - all wearing jeans, cotton sweatshirts, and tennis shoes) came up the trail and told us there was a well-marked branch trail 5 minutes away. In fact, a prominent wooden sign pointed the way (imagine that - a SIGN in Patagonia). The branch trail was shorter and mellower than expected (we reached camp in 15 minutes). Our first impressions of camp were not awe-inspiring: a large grove of beech trees - albeit empty and clean, a surprise after other sites. As we progressed to the farther reaches of camp - we grew stunned: sites along the edge of the forest, 50 feet above the massive lake - Fitzroy towering in the distance. After setting up the tent (around 3:30), we climbed a dirty knoll with a flat open spot and a small wooden bench. Here, we laid out sleeping pads, bags, camp chairs, peanut butter, honey, novels, and postcards. And there we sat for HOURS in the lazy warm afternoon sun - definitely one of many extreme highpoints of this whole trip. Occasionally, one of our two distant neighbors came to share the view. Eventually, we ate two freeze-dried dinners (both sucked). But we had only one more day and then we would be back at La Tablita. Ah yes - food fantasies churned as we downed lentils, rice, beans, and freeze-dried chicken parts. Despite the warm afternoon,

things cooled to freezing overnight (tomorrow, we would hike out on hoar frost). At first, we didn't notice too much, having wrapped up in sleeping bags and prepared hot tea. At twilight, Sara vanished to use a tree and returned with amazing news: a nearby knoll where the whole Fitzroy massif blazed yellow and pink and orange and blue, all reflected perfectly in the lake. We quickly moved there to watch the night alpenglow descend. We agreed to awaken for the dawn alpenglow (not that Patagonia would give us another day like this - but we could hope). I hoped as well to wake and catch a view of the deep night sky. And so we bedded down, teeth chattering. Our Argentine neighbors, in classic form, were night owls - having actually carried in a portable stereo: U2 - With or Without You/Joshua Tree. Given many things, hearing that song in that context was serious (good and bad). Slumber was interrupted many times - mostly because the salty dinner necessitated SO much water consumption (and now peeing). Somewhere around 2-3 a.m., I trudged out, shimmying my nylon and fleece booties up to the fabulous knoll. I stood 10 minutes watching the moonrise - an eerie yellow blue over Fitz. Minimal stars were visible and the color of the sky was a weird shade of jaundice and blue-black. A small tuft of clouds floated on the side of Fitz where the moon descended; it resembled a strange fire of white light and smoke against the otherwise dark velvet sky (El Chalten, indeed).

### To Cerro Torre and Leaving Glaciers, February 19, 1997

Our watches set for 6 a.m., we rose faithfully, despite extreme cold. Each moment of the next 40 minutes was worth every shiver and numb appendage. The sun alighted the main tower in gilded orange first - we watched this vast ceiling of color move down the face, growing pink and then yellow. When the lower glaciers were alighted, they assumed the color of flames. But the stone, by far, was the most awe-inspiring. And all the while: everything was perfectly reflected in Capri. Amazing. Within an hour, the sky was fully blue. We ate breakfast, discussing options for the day. Given the perfectly clear AND calm day, we decided we HAD to get back to Cerro Torre. We surmised that we were about an hour from the trailhead/bus stop and so we could pack quickly and haul ass out by 10 a.m. Because the bus pickup spot was also a hospidaje, we hoped to convince them to watch our big gear while we hightailed it back up to the Cerro Torre basecamp. We hiked out in freezing conditions and made our way down the main trail, all new terrain for us. All the while, we were distracted by the awesome, evolving faces of Fitzroy. The trail took a little longer than expected and made a surprisingly steep descent during the final 20-30 minutes. Consequently, we didn't make it to the bottom until 11 a.m. At the hospidaje, we were concerned because the innkeeper instructed us to lay our packs in full view outside the front door. But we were impressed by the excellent quality of their bathrooms... how could we not trust people with such fine lavatories?



Left to Right: Cerro Torre, trial two - hike in (first viewpoint), simultaneous view of Torre and FitzRoy, me at final lake

We blasted up the trail with a fervor not unlike the base camp god-dog (whom we saw again). We knew we would have to be back by 5:30 p.m. to catch the bus (our seats were reserved, our names on the list). Having it totally clear was a bit of a let down because we could see everything from near where we ate salami and pears before. The perspectives from the trail were quite distinct, nevertheless. For example, you can actually see Fitzroy and Torre simultaneously. We raced up the long valley, through dandelions and horse droppings and along the winding river. And then we clamored over the final moraine; it was only about 1:30 when we stood before the momentarily towering Cerro Torre, set against nothing but blue skies, blue skies. That's when Sara decided she wanted to explore and I just wanted to soak up the rays. Sara vanished, insisting that she was going to clamor around the lake but, as she admitted later, she sunk down in the rocks and spent the next couple hours staring and thinking and dozing off. What a way to spend a day in Patagonia. Wow. One of the amazing things to me about Cerro Torre was indicated to me during a slide show by Silas after the trip: the main rock face of the needle is as high as two El Capitan's. Sara and I had agreed to get going around 3 and so she ambled back my way about that time, looking sad. In contrast, I was euphoric - sadness the furthest thing from my mind. Sara went on about how she wondered if she would ever see this again. Meanwhile, I said I could totally envision coming back. We took a long moment of silence to stare one last time at the amazing spire and ice. And then we turned back, hiking out quietly. We passed many people coming in - a few climbers clanking ropes and hardware even, groups of young girls, families on horseback. We arrived at the hospidaje around 5:10 and I succumbed to a slice of apple caramel tart (for sale by the owners). Part of my indulgence was pure hunger but part was just to repay whatever forces had kept our packs intact. All around, a dozen weary, pack-laden bodies lay strewn variously, looking hungry and tired. We loaded onto the bus and began our rattling voyage away from the park. Sara was mostly asleep and, sitting there effectively by myself in some overly contemplative and pacified mood, I was hit with a major case of grief as I watched Fitzroy and Torre grow increasingly miniscule on the horizon. I actually wept - not for John or others or me or anything like that. It was just this realization that, indeed, we wouldn't see this majesty anytime soon. The realization of our time here was vanishing in the distance, like the peaks themselves. I took one photograph of this image from the bus before we turned from the range for the last time on this trip. I found myself grieving another hour - only to make the stunningly complementary realization that I wouldn't be sitting here weepy if I hadn't come in the first place. Would I have chosen never to experience such magnificence? Absolutely not - and that was a resounding certainty that gave me back my clarity, my peace. By the time we reached Calafate, it was dark. We were arriving one day early, having run out of food. Given the late hour, we were concerned that we may not be able to find a hotel room (god forbid, we would wind up at dreaded Cerro Crystal AGAIN). But, of course, we did. After such an amazing week, though, a night at Crystal would not drag us down. They did put us in a nicer

room with a little more light and less noise. It was 11 p.m. by the time we had finished showering. Even so, we raced to La Tablita, concerned that it was closing time. I guess the mountain air made us forget about the Argentine penchant for late everything. The place bustled with whole families, all consuming pounds of seared flesh. At some point, Sara remarked that she felt she was coming down with a severe head cold. I'm sure the steaks and potatoes as good as before but I was reduced to shoveling them with no sense of actual pleasure - all food fantasies somehow lost to exhaustion.



Left to Right: final view from the bus, cleaning up back in Calafate, peach can label

### Calafate Clean-Up, February 20-21, 1997

After a slightly better night at Cerro Crystal, we packed up and made the familiar walk - by the quaint houses with the gardens, squatty dogs, and chickens - to Del Norte, where we had reservations for the next two nights. By this point, Sara was in the throes of a major illness. All night, she feverishly dreamed of Del Norte - that its quiet and decent beds might cure her. Alas, our new upstairs room in Del Norte was dorm-like. After moving and unpacking, we headed into town, the bakery reminding us that we hadn't eaten breakfast yet. Our goals for the next few days were limited, permitting lots of down time: laundry, bus tickets for Chile, change money, send postcards, and do some general shopping. Of these tasks, laundry was the most problematic. Basically, there was only one laundry in Calafate. Silas insisted that a few innkeepers would do laundry (bear in mind, though, Silas has a long reputation in the area). We had two loads - one that we wanted to wash AND dry (dry = secado) and the other that we wanted to just wash. After many faltering moments of our bad Spanish, there was this big, clear moment when the meaning of "secado" was elucidated via lots of gesturing and we left thoroughly convinced we'd gotten it all straight. During the two-hour wait, we strolled through Calafate - the little town finally becoming a little boring. Our trip to the bank to change money was interesting: some mild bickering, weird man behavior, and a military looking banker behind a pane of glass that looked like it could shield plutonium rays. We then climbed to the bus station and lucked out - although we didn't know it at the time - by choosing a bus company named Zaajl, the only group who did a direct run between Calafate and Puerto Natales, Chile (jump-off for Torres del Paine National Park). Cootra, the only other bus company, runs a MUCH longer, more circuitous route (we were, unfortunately, stuck with Cootra on the LONG ride back). The difference between these two routes is phenomenal - 5 vs. 7 hours. At the time, we had planned - after trekking the Paine Circuit - to take a bus from Puerto Natalas to Punta Arenas and then back to Rio Gallegos. In general, we found that securing buses was WAY more difficult in Chile - a consequence of fewer companies, fewer running days, and more people competing for the space. In retrospect, we would strongly recommend traveling back through Calafate and buying round-trip tickets with Zaajl at the outset. When we returned for our laundry at 1 p.m. (right before the siesta), we were greeted (Sara will say that's the wrong word) by a different washerwoman. She handed us two dripping bags of clothes, neither of which smelled washed. We tried to clear this matter up - not the smell part (because that would be fruitless), just the dry part. This woman became mean - our only case of someone like that (even La Senora was authoritatively polite compared with this woman). We walked away, returning to our room where we tied lines and hung our clothes dry with the windows open and a faint warm breeze. That night began our obsession with canned peaches. Because Del Norte had a universal kitchen area, we went to the grocery for dinner. I cooked while Sara slept her cold off. We wound up with pasta and bread and a huge assortment of fruit drinks that were outrageously good. We also ended up with this HUGE can of peaches (like, Costco-sized). I realize it should have been a travesty to eat canned peaches given that it was summer - but the produce sucked. Those canned peaches were worth their weight in gold - they were THAT good. Unfortunately, Del Norte's charm dissipated that night. Despite prominent signs saying "quiet hours after 11 p.m." huge Argentine families with screaming children kept us up well into the night - pounding down the halls, cooking dinner in the kitchen after midnight (the kitchen only a few doors down from us)... no concept of the fact that people might actually be trying to sleep at 1-2 in the morning!

Our second day in Calafate was lazy. I wrote a lot of journals and slept. Just lying and sleeping in a sunny-feeling room for hours utterly rested me - body and mind and soul. I felt bad that Sara was suffering and all. But I think - had she not been sick - that we may not have rested so thoroughly. Nevertheless - with Sara out - I considered taking a cushy trip out to the Perito Moreno by myself the second day. The Perito Moreno is the ice-field/glacier that spills into Lago Argentino (you can't see either from the center of Calafate). Buses from Calafate traveled daily to the Perito and going there is, like, the big thing for non-hikers. From bus-accessible viewpoints, there are also boat tours and glacier walks wherein you hike a little and then strap on crampons for guided trips on the ice (that's what I wanted to do!). Sipton actually explored this region and described the first climb up the moraine of the Perito. But today, the weather was shitty - the winds were back again, the sky brewing with dark rain clouds. In retrospect, I should have gone because the main front of the glacier would have been out regardless. I will always put this side-trip on my miniscule regret list. But I shouldn't make too big a deal of any of this. We had a religiously spectacular time in Argentina - I wouldn't change a thing!

### **Continuation in Chile, February 21, 1997**

Our introduction to Chile was awe-inspiring in an anxious, fearful way. Steely blue clouds heavy with rain hung over the choppy sea surrounding Puerto Natales. Beyond the waves, the lower sections of the coast range - massive chains of mountains visibly white with low-elevation snow and ice - rose from the sea, conjuring up impressions of Norway's fjords. Such was the view as our bus headed finally along the water as it curved into town. Our terrifically early rise effectively blotted out all other recollections during this transition into Chile. Puerto Natales was not quite the picturesque town that the guidebooks suggested, at least not at first sight. Much of this impression likely had to do with the fact that the weather had become super-crappy and -colder, not to mention the fact that Sara was still not well. While the town seemed more populous and run-down than Calafate, we discovered a certain charm to the place within the day. There was a down-to-earth personable-ness that had been lacking in tourist-oriented Calafate. In the always-adept words of Sara: you could really tell that people lived here because - among other things - there were stores with everyday items. One thing that struck me more than any place in Argentina, too, was the presence of the military. It didn't feel threatening or anything. The young men (I'd call them boys) were all dressed in green camouflage and carrying huge guns - but they were exceedingly friendly and smiled at us sincerely. Of course, my mother would have 100% flipped out. One of my friend's moms told me, prior to our leaving, that she found Chile TOTALLY safe BECAUSE of the heavy military presence. But I am not even going to pretend that Sara agreed with me; she didn't like the idea of lethal weapons in the hands of anyone that young.

Puerto Natales was definitely larger than Calafate (15,000). It also lacked any centralized tourist area, a lifesaver in Calafate. The bus dropped us off seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Needless to say, no one offered to help with hotel reservations. As with the weather, things were chaotic. We strolled a few blocks, in search of one of the cheap hospidajes that the Lying Planet suggested. When we found said place, however, we were both extremely put off by its dilapidated and questionable exterior. I have no doubt, in retrospect, that the place was serviced by a more than friendly and hospitable family... but the idea of staying there - perhaps in someone's living room - was not appealing given our state of mind and Sara's health. Instead, we wound up in what is probably Puerto Natales' four star equivalent, the Milodon (named after the caves where now-extinct giant sloth relics were found). The Milodon was the ONLY hotel of any merit that we encountered anywhere (Chile, Argentina, or Uruguay) on this trip. The rooms were quiet and the beds were heavenly - huge lofty pillows, feather quilts. We slept like children. Before we enjoyed luxury slumbering, though, we had a lot of work to do. First, there was the business of lunch. Across the street from the Milodon was a bar that was touted as serving THE largest, cheapest portions of food in the area. Well - we'll give them that. Sara ordered big fishes and, damn, she got colossally huge fishes (the equivalent of half a 10-12 inch salmon for \$5). I ordered beef - which, although served in terrifically copious portions, did not measure up to Argentine beef. This was the first place where we truly ate with the locals: men getting off work for a beer and waitresses dressed appropriately. A television blared some godawful beauty pageant where, even in Spanish, you knew they were saying the same dumb things. We ate and left. Our bigger goal, of course, was getting camping food. We mapped out where all grocery stores were (there were quite a few). Much to our dismay, though, most food was inappropriate for hiking and the selection was poor. For dinner, we were reduced to pasta of some kind EVERY night (each package represented barely one serving). For breakfast, we found only plain oatmeal, dehydrated milk, sugar, and raisins (which, as we discovered on the trail, were made from heavily seeded grapes - not the kind of fiber we were into). For lunch, we tried our best to purchase huge quantities of candy and nuts, salami and cheese, bread and dried fruit.

When we returned to the hotel and dumped our MASSIVE food booty all over the fluffy beds, we were overwhelmed. At the time, we thought for sure we would be satiated by all those calories (well, our stomachs would be but we weren't sure about our backs). And then the rain began to pour - sheets, torrents, deluges - in biblical proportions. Not wanting to brave the weather, we slunk to the hotel dining room (another eating mistake). There were two choices: Sara's bowl of overcooked sea stew and my chicken leg/thigh with wilted papas fritas. Sara was definitely eyeballing my food. Over dinner, we were joined by a table-full of forty-something guys sporting American university sweatshirts. They turned out to be from Montana and had just retreated, tails between their legs, from Torres del Paine after four days straight of rain. Disconcertingly, they also reported the theft of one of their backpacks from, essentially, a car-camping area. One of them talked about his daughter raving about Patagonia - her stories being the driving force behind their trip. But they vowed never to return. To them, this was hell on earth. Brainwashed by images of Fitzroy awash with gilded pink, we didn't think too much of their assertions. And thus we returned to our room and bedded down in the only oasis of comfort that South America ever offered us. Sadly, we had to rise at 7 a.m. to catch our bus to Torres.

### **To Torres del Paine and Trekking in Cow Pastures, February 22, 1997**

Despite the furniture quality, the Milodon's free breakfast featured the thinnest buttered ham sandwich known to man, a chocolate-dipped cracker with marshmallow filling, soda crackers with butter, ever-present Tang, and cafe-con-leche. Where ARE those bacon and eggs when you need them? To make matters worse, the bus stop was 3 blocks from the hotel. The blue skies were broken with gray clouds and the ground was sopping wet from several pre-dawn hours of torrentially soaking rains. I sent a "fear postcard" to my good friend Jay the night before, explaining where we last were, what our condition was, and our anticipated itinerary in case we were never heard from again (note: I did not send this to my parents for fear they would assemble some international team after us - no doubt too late). Torres del Paine National Park was 2-3 hours away on mostly dirt roads (there was MASSIVE road construction underway - testimony to the severe tourism development that Chile espouses). Overall, Torres was WAY, WAY more crowded than Glacieres. Initially, we thought it was because Chile is touted to be cheaper than Argentina. Given that we did NOT find this to be the case, we cannot figure out why Torres seemed more popular (god knows - it is NOT the weather). The buses to/from Torres were full and many non-early-bird folks were turned away for lack of space. The level of park bureaucracy was elevated to a state of universal frustration. Park entrance fees and line-ups were outrageous. Once you hit the trail, nearly all backcountry sites are "developed" (a highly questionable and relative term, no doubt), meaning that there is some man-made structure (anything from a lean-to with an outhouse to a deluxe lodge). ALL require a fee - even if you have carried your own tent. Our guidebooks were woefully (WOEFULLY)

lacking in explaining these apparently-recent additions. The one-year-old map we carried, touted by the Lying Planet as the best, was bullshit. Having entered the park with little Chilean money, though, we actually got away with not paying for camping, frustrating many concessionaires en route. But I am getting WAY ahead of myself. After waiting in multiple lines - trying to imagine the legendary Cuernos (the "horn" peaks) through the low clouds - we found ourselves confused about our exact whereabouts. We were then approached by Aconcagua Tim, the Aspenite we met in Glacieres. Tim really wanted some traveling partners because the circuit's most difficult point is a snow-clad pass that is said to be hair-raising (total BS, for the record). Tim was rapidly clamoring onto some little shuttle bus (not in our plans, as our guidebook didn't even list this thing), insisting that we catch the next one and meet him at such and such trailhead. Tim was under the highly mistaken impression that this trip was costing him 50 cents. We had, like, one minute to decide - and so we ran for it. What the hell we were thinking? The fee turned into \$3-5 a head (obliterating our spare cash). Over the course of the next few days, I decided that Tim must have been filthy rich - no concept of money. Given our financial forfeiture, we found ourselves in a little van, driving a dirt road and crossing rickety bridges that were barely wide enough for said vehicle.



Left to Right: mystery drop off at Torres estacion, Sara and cool French guy, Sara contemplating the clockwise decision

I have neglected to mention another one of our recurring problems in Chile (though this has nothing to do with the country). It was actually on the bus to Puerto Natalas that we encountered "chirpy chick and company." CCC comprised a group of Americans - two couples. We (and others) could discern their location by the ever-present loudness of their leader - chirpy chick, as she became known to us (we were "sullen cynical women" by comparison). CC's partner was "tall silent blond man with beard" (now THERE was a couple waiting to just boil over). During the ride into Torres, we discovered that they were doing the circuit counterclockwise (a key factor in our decision to do the circuit clockwise. Equally frustrating, CCC had all been doing some sort of science/engineering program and were now discussing going to graduate school. CC, in particular, was going on and on and on and on about graduate school like it was the second coming of christ. Sara and I fantasized about interrupting her with, "Let me tell you a thing or two there, missy... and you can call us DOCTOR - thank you very much." Graduate school, we decided, would suck the chirpiness out of CC. Our polite resolve to say nothing was later rewarded at our second to last camp (our only run-in with them during the circuit). CCC rose at some ungodly hour - CC going full speed ahead with that blah blah blah voice. All of a sudden, silence was achieved when nearby "angry German woman" yelled at full volume: "Shut up - do you think you are the only ones here... you are NOT!" We never heard CC again. Amen. Anyway - we shared the shuttle into Torres with CCC, not to mention "nose-blowing German woman" who was sick as a dog and, throughout the drive, audibly blew vast quantities of aerosolized liquids. Sara remarked at some point that the van was like a fucking bacterial bioreactor. On a more positive note, we befriended "cool French guy" who had just begun working in Chile (doing a water-related engineering project) and was using every spare moment he had to explore the Patagonian mountains. After a short drive, we were dumped at a location that was a complete mystery to us. Our maps suggested we were at some park entrance and still had two miles to go before arriving our target trailhead. After finding Tim - and looking at his maps - we realized we had actually just driven said trail and were now AT the target trailhead. So - we could either get going on the circuit immediately (heading right), or we could daytrip up to the Torres (a steep 8-mile roundtrip hike that begin from this point). Influencing this decision: the bad weather, our uncertainty about whether Torres was more spectacular than the this section of the circuit, and CCC's decision to go up to the Torres today. We decided to eat lunch and watch the weather some more. As an aside: most information recommends doing the circuit counterclockwise because it is gentler. Clockwise, however, does put you at the pass sooner (thus if weather is good at the start, you can cross it more safely).

Two things must be noted before describing our departure: First, my pack was fucking heavy (I've NEVER carried that much weight). Second, I made a really bad decision about my boots. Because of the terrifying descriptions of the pass, I switched to from my Raichle Spirits to my heavier Vasque Superhikers. The latter were legendary in my hiking history because they gave me enormous "egg" blisters on the ill-fated Bailey Range attempt. Bottom line - repeat performance... and there will be plenty of whining later. Setting out, we traveled through scrubby fields, then along barbwire fencing, and then past many cows. All the while, the views of low and rolling hills of nothingness were boring by comparison to the high standards set in Los Glacieres. However, the trail was excellent as compared with the mess we encountered over the next four days. The scenery improved somewhat as we made our way through fields of dying flowers, meadows of gold grasses in basins surrounded by slightly more impressive hills. The weather dramatically improved around 3 p.m., although it was hard to tell if the high peaks were out given our perspective. This made Sara particularly frustrated, afraid of having endorsed the wrong choice for the day's itinerary. Oh well. We heard later that there were brief glimpses of the Torres that day - but not spectacular. ANYTHING, though, would have been better than the utterly mediocre scenery through which we hiked that day. BIG YAWN. Tim and Sara hiked increasingly ahead of me. By around 4 p.m., I knew I was getting egg blisters AGAIN. We stopped to tape my little toes but I could tell I was already beyond repair. We then debated about where to camp. We passed one pay-only camp (a small village of empty shanty huts, the only visible life - a black horse) but decided to press on. Somehow, we assumed there would be some flat places to bed down. By 6-7 p.m., we were having a hard time finding anyplace suitable. We wound up camping by this funky seep where, ah yes, there was toilet paper in the stream. The wind, of course, was picking up and we had little in

the way of tree-cover. In contrast with most nights, though, the food tasted great and we had plenty! We also borrowed Tim's seam sealer and Sara diligently painted the weak spots in the tent. She was so happy we could make these repairs, although we were intoxicated slightly by the fumes.



Left to Right: cows, the first "developed" camp shanty, sort of boring but typical trail

### To Somewhere Before Lago Perro, February 23, 1997

The next morning, "El Circuito" proved initially respectable: a decent and clear sunrise awash with striking colors (albeit against measly and scrubby hills). Then the little problems started coming out: the woody raisins we'd pre-mixed with the oatmeal, the winds that increased to 40+ mph (and sucked in a wall of clouds), the rain, the swelling toes... We broke camp early and set out, hoping to hike 10 miles to Lago Perro, the final camp before the pass. Tim and Sara immediately started hiking ahead of me. We climbed meanderingly to this gap above Lago Torro, one of two large lakes between us and Lago Perro. Torro was a LONG gray lake over which the winds seemed to pick up incredible speed and fury. Along this section, I was actually blown to the ground by the winds: I was making my final steps to this notch when the wind loosened the velcro chin strap on my hat. Sensing the hat was about to fly away, I turned my body just a little to catch it. That slight imbalance, in combination with the huge pack, was enough to take me down. After rolling on the ground and struggling to get up, I managed to right myself (thankfully OUT of view of Sara and Tim). The way from this point contoured an up and down line along the long lake. Frankly, it was exhausting hiking, reminiscent of Skyline Ridge in Olympic National Park. Trailing behind Sara and Tim, I was feeling concerned and dejected, my feet - meanwhile - rubbing raw. At one point, I met up with them just as they realized we'd taken a dead-end branch trail (to this day, I do not know HOW we missed the real trail). Consequently, we had to descend a steep, slick-with-foliage hillside 50 feet to the correct lower trail.



Left to Right: morning views, Lago Torro with infamous pass partially visible, Rio de los Perros (near camp)

And then came a moment I will never forget. By this point, I had resigned myself to the blister pain, and the fact that I was always going to be behind Sara and Tim. I wondered, though, if Sara and I might take a little longer, might even have to split from Tim. Shortly after these thoughts, I met up with Sara and Tim in this sheltered grove of beech trees. Barely sitting down, I had Tim IN MY FACE about how I had better assess right here and now about whether I could really do this trip (because we were not making sufficient progress). I can honestly feel my jaw drop even now thinking about this (as it did then). Tim then climbed up his soapbox, revealing then that he never actually reached the summit of his namesake. Rather, he had to give it up oh-so-close (just like he had to give up Denali the year before). Those were HUGE sacrifices he made but HE WAS STRONGER FOR HAVING MADE THEM. And so too would I be, provided I made the right choice to back off this trip. To this day, I don't know if this came out of the blue (I knew it came out of his ass) or if he had attempted a pre-emptive discussion with Sara on this topic. Frankly, Sara seemed just as stunned as me. Ignoring our open-mouthed expressions, Tim proceeded to hammer me with questions regarding my ability, what hurt, what didn't. When he realized that there wasn't some serious injury (ONLY blisters), Tim proceeded to yank off my boots and socks. All the while, he was goin' on and on about the dozens and dozens of blisters that he had toughed out on his way up various peaks of the world. Examination of my bare feet revealed classic egg-blisters: the whole tips of both little toes were entirely swollen with liquid, including under the nail. Coincidentally, "happy Swiss guy with scissors" showed up and made a variety of wholly unhappy sounds regarding my toes. Now, you all know what happens when scissor-wielding Swiss guy meets macho Tim: you have me being held down (in manual reach of Tim's scalp and biting reach of his arm) as Tim liberates the blisters. Liquid shot over 2 feet from the source - I'm NOT making this up. I tell you - I had to restrain myself SOOO hard from NOT ripping Tim's hair out when he did this little outdoor surgery. Of course, he then placed first aid adhesive tape DIRECTLY on the wounds and, finally, wrapped the whole thing in duct tape. As a microbiologist, I thought I was surely gonna die of septic shock in the next 24 hours. After tenderly putting back on my boots, I can only liken the pain to someone tightening a very sharp screw into an open wound. EVERY time I put on my boots

or started walking was initiated by severe pain - and this would keep up throughout the remaining trek. The pain did seem to diminish after walking a bit - but mostly because I avoided thinking about it. To this day, I am not sure what I think of making the choice to continue and bear this kind of pain. At some level, I deeply resented that I had to be "macho" in my quest to push myself. On other levels, though, I appreciated that I learned what to do with HUGE blisters mid-trip. Even if I HAD carried my Tevas (which I didn't), they wouldn't have helped because the terrain was so phenomenally bad (RETROSPECTIVE 2003 COMMENT: actually, I could have done it - I just didn't know it at the time). Hobbling post-surgery, I did my best to push ahead of Tim and Sara after we stopped to eat at a shoddy camp at the south end of Lago Torro. I was gnashing teeth and hurrying because I wanted nothing to do with Tim after our exchange of words, bodily fluid, pain, etc. We met up again in the middle of some marshy meadows where condors perched in low treetops. Before us, the way up the valley to the pass was socked in, only the lower sections of some peaks were visible. To this day, I really don't know how scenic this part of the trek is. What we saw between the ebbing clouds was interesting: there were many mountains and glaciers to the west... but we never got a sense of the actual Torres from the backside.

Here, Sara caught up with me and we rested a bit. Clearly disappointed, Sara conceded that we should encourage Tim to move on because neither of us were going to keep up with his pace. Later, she would confess that even she was having trouble with his ferocious speed. She also realized that we were not under the huge time and testosterone crunch that he was. And so we left Tim and never saw him again (thank god). Nevertheless, there is still a part of me that wants to sit Tim down and tell him how much I wanted to rip his hair out - and make sure he understood that I was entirely capable of walking the whole fucking circuit. Quietly, Sara and I moved on to what we hoped was a closer camp at a different lake (Lago Dickson). The way was annoying, with a lengthy and steep drop to a huge flat field. At the FAR end of said field was a substantial hostel. The skies were rainy and misty, offering only limited views of the lake. Uninterested in camping at a pay facility in the middle of a no-doubt-windy field, we decided to continue. The trail started looking like it was going up and so we explored some social trails that lead to a scrubby, flat bench above a beautiful silty river (Rio de los Perros). It was clear that people had camped here. We settled on a bluff overlooking the river - with a small view toward the lower backsides of the Torres. Up to this point, we had talked little in light of Tim's opinions of our situation. Given that I knew Sara's birthday was coming up (I thought the next day), I told her that I didn't want to forfeit the trip and have to spend her birthday backtracking through the cow fields. As it turned out, her birthday was TODAY. I felt really bad because I had lost track of time... and then I felt like everything bad on this leg of the trip so far was my fault. So I did the only thing I felt I could do for Sara: quietly pick all the woody raisins out of her oatmeal mix. I can't say she was overly thrilled or anything (at least not like she was the morning of the first Fitz sighting) but it was a decent gift given that particular moment in time. For a couple years after our trip, I sent Sara oatmeal and California raisins on her birthday, earning great laughs and recollections of that frustrating day in Chile. I don't recall much about our dinner except that we were VERY concerned about our water filter given the glacial run-off. After unsuccessfully trying to settle the silt in our collecting bucket, we resigned to just taking water from the river. Fortunately, we had to do this only twice on the trip. Although the filter worked for the duration of this trip, it did not perform well and was replaced upon returning home. After dinner, we were in the tent reading/napping when I felt my only tinge of fear on this trip. In the distance, about three guys were approaching through the brush. We remained quiet as they came through our camp. One stopped and touched one of the packs but then they just continued. We never heard from them again. Needless to say, I felt great worry throughout the night. In terms of my poor toes, I removed the tape and re-lanced the re-swollen blisters. Fortunately, my feet had sweated enough that the tape fell away effortlessly (I had visions of ripping down to bone when I contemplated removing the duct tape). Honestly, though, it wasn't nearly as painful as I anticipated. I then applied iodine to avoid infection. This operation was repeated every night and proved effective.



Left to Right: Lago Perro and glacier, rustic bridge, view down over Lago Perro from climb to pass (taken next day)

### **To Lago Perro Camp, February 23, 1997**

In terms of weather, the next morning was that usual Rocky Road blend of Patagonia everything. We packed and moved on, our goal Lago Perro. The way climbed first, and then leveled out along interesting prairie-like clearings (with modest views of distant peaks and glaciers). From here, the way cut almost due south, traveling in forest high above the river. There was one nice backcountry camp near a creek that flowed into the main Perro River. But mostly the way was rough - no trail maintenance, fallen logs everywhere. When you weren't climbing over them, you were zig-zagging to end-run tree after tree after tree. It was completely exhausting for being so flat. At some point, we remarked about how there was no way in hell we could have made this section yesterday (as had been our original plan). After several hours, we came to a rocky meadow, crossed an interesting suspension bridge (actually, 3 poorly connected bridge sections - see below), and then started climbing a giant moraine. At the top, we marveled at the lake (Perro) into which a mighty glacier calved blue and white ice (right shot above). I'm not too embarrassed, however, to say that we did only a Chevy-Chase-Vacation look-see, uh-huh, uh-huh, and moved on. Neither the lake nor the glacier did anything for us after seeing the gold standard (Piedras Blancas). We then descended to a flat area with prominent "no camping" signs. So much for finding an unofficial campsite just outside what we now anticipated would be a fee area. Perro camp proper extended far beyond, all in a beech forest. The dank camp felt like

an island because it seemed bound by water on many sides - the river on one and a stagnant bog of skanky water on the other. The moraine sloped up from this bog and, part-way up, the unofficial bathroom area had been WELL-established. In the middle of the camp, there appeared to be a shoddy cabin - there were actual trees growing from the gutted, door-less shower facilities affixed to the outside of one wall. Based on these observations, we concluded that there was no one stationed here to collect fees for this ramshackle cesspool. Frustrated and unimpressed, we set up our tent.

After a poor dinner of pasta (too much water and not enough cheese), we were greeted by an apparent concessionaire. First, we feigned (sort of) that we understood NO Spanish. Then we removed meager coins from our pockets, indicating we lacked substantial money. Chilean dude was NOT impressed. Later, he found a camper who could translate between Spanish and English, and we verbally reiterated the fact that we had no money. We further explained that we did not know we had to pay if we brought our own tent. The camp-master scoffed off, his translator suggesting that he was going to radio ahead to warn everyone we were coming - penniless. I felt a little guilty for not paying (because we did have some emergency American money) but Sara refused to pay for such a shit-hole (and, indeed, it was a shit-hole). Although her avoidance tactics appeared to work, I always wondered if some of our bad karma came from fudging on the fees. Making matters worse, the weather turned out to be respectable. At one point, the route to the pass became fully visible - troubling because, had we pushed yesterday, we could have enjoyed a perhaps-nicer ascent. Even so, the route looked totally lame-ass simple (and it was, except for mud down low). I don't know who wrote all these horrible guidebook descriptions but - even under snow (which, as evidenced by this page, I do NOT like) - the route up the pass from Lago Perro was tame. As an interesting aside: right before Tim left us, we ran into this American guy who had just descended the pass. He sported all red North Face gear, muddy gaiters, and the dazed look of having wrestled something big and narrowly won. I asked how the pass was and he went on about how awful it was - snowy, difficult, hairy. Sorry, DUDE - I don't know what you were smoking or what all that shiny new gear suggests but that pass was SOOOOOO easy! Even so, we didn't know what tomorrow would bring.



Left to Right: climbing the pass - low, brief snow, topping out

### Over the Pass - February 24, 1997

After a night of freezing conditions blustering with frozen rain, we awoke to an indeed-frightful sight: the pass covered in fresh snow... not to mention thick clouds, howling wind, rain, sleet, and hail. Our planned 6 a.m. departure was scrapped and we went back to bed. By 8, there was little change and we frustrated each other with mutual indecision. I argued that the circuit was fucked and we should turn around because it was only going to get harder, worse, and more annoying. Sara insisted things would be fine once we got over the pass - the trail would mellow out. Eventually, I decided to give Sara's opinion the benefit of the doubt. The next question: wait another day (for better weather) or suffer over the pass today? I argued for waiting because I thought we'd be NUTS to proceed over THAT pass in howling wind and on fresh snow. Sara argued that maybe this was the beginning of the end and we better get over it now (or never). Her point was endlessly confounded by this spot of blue that levitated around the pass (the stoeker-hole, inside joke). My response - "well, we may go over today but we won't see a damn thing" - which truly truly frustrated Sara because we agreed 100% that there would be no views today (that's what we wanted more than anything). We watched or talked with three parties who decided to go for it: a couple of Americans from Olympia, WA who worked as communications specialists in Antarctica (like Sara and I, one had great gear and the other one had an old canvas external pack and ripped pants). Second, a bunch of Chileans, complete with a roving video camera. And, finally, this lone Japanese man. Sara argued that ALL these people couldn't be crazy. But they WERE all macho guys and the whole thing just felt like another silly Tim thing to do. But at 9:30 a.m., I went with Sara's plan; we packed up and started to hike at around 9:30. All problems with the pass lay well below alpine sections. On the north side: a mile-long stretch of mud. Within five minutes of camp, we crossed a creek and headed into forest. There, we were confronted with widening ruts of boot-gutted forest floor, slick roots, and pools of standing water. At first, it seemed manageable but then we started contouring low-angle meadow that turned into twenty-foot plus wide swaths of pure mud. As expected, Sara and I had different approaches to navigating these messes. Sara preferred to move slowly, prodding each planned step thoroughly with a ski pole. In contrast, I preferred to dash quickly across the wet spots (like bugs on water). My approach, while pretty good and fast most of the time, landed me knee deep in mud a few times (and I am NOT exaggerating!). How others handled the mud fascinated us to no end: the Chileans and two new groups of young guys (one Israeli and one Australian) slogged straight through the mud (neither was even wearing gaiters... the crazy Australians were wearing shorts). The few times I went in, I struggled hard to pull myself out. I couldn't fathom slogging through this shit with a big pack. FINALLY, we reached the end of the mud and the beginning of the talus. Now noon, the pass appeared to be walk-up. All new snow seemed, from this perspective, to have melted. Only one small snowfield blanketed a shallow pocket up high. We easily stayed on course by following a combination of orange-painted rocks and guy-lines (i.e. lines of guys) meandering through the convoluted patterns in the stone. During the cakewalk portion of the ascent, we took a few rest stops to snack given that mud-inspired frustration had depleted our energy. Sitting there quietly (after groaning, swearing, and complaining the hour before), we both noted the lack of wind. One of the most interesting moments on the climb was coming into full view of this peak/glacier to the west. One of the guidebooks says something like: "take time to stare at the small peak and glacier." I remember going: SHIT - that is

HUGE. The equivalent landscape, for me, would be standing on Third Burroughs and referring to Rainier and the Emmons as such. SMALL glacier - shit. EVERYTHING in Patagonia was huge. Shortly after seeing the small peak/glacier, we arrived at the aforementioned snowfield. A complete joke at maybe 100 feet across, this thing never assumed more than a 10° angle. After the snowfield, the broad pass consisted of hand-sized pieces of shale. The views back to the north were impressive even through broken clouds: mystical towers paraded up in a massive line of increasing height. Upon finding the Chilean guys videotaping themselves near the pass summit, I shook my head: how could you haul that out here?



Left to Right: Sara and Glacier Grey, my muddy boots/gaiters just below the pass, semi-successfully using the camera timer

As I slogged the final steps to the actual pass, I could hear that Sara was hysterically euphoric. Once I saw THAT VIEW, I could only sit among the rocks and silently stare. Having made the earlier remark about the "small" glacier, I have to renege said adjective. In comparison with Glacier Grey (the behemoth south of the pass), the "little" glacier really is nothing. Shit, Grey isn't what I would even call a glacier. It is a fucking icefield the size of Seattle. None of my photographs do this thing justice. There is nothing I can say that would communicate what it is like to see something that large. In response to slides from the pass, unfamiliar people think that we are level with the glacier (or maybe 100 feet above). They also think the mountains on the other side are maybe a quarter mile away. In fact, we are almost 4500 feet ABOVE the ice and those mountains are around 5 miles away. Even at the time, all of it was so amazingly new to my eyes: that kind of ice, that kind of size, that kind of distance and height... and riding the wave of having just come up the pass after all that indecision and foul weather. There's no way to communicate the kinds of things that were going through my head. Sometimes it's just better to sit and stare. Despite elevated spirits, I remained skeptical of the way down. I had read the guidebooks enough to NOT believe things were going to mellow out. Thus, I started down before Sara, stopping several times to sit on the stair-like series of heather benches and drink in the view. We knew we would be walking above Glacier Grey today and tomorrow - all the way to its terminus at Lago Grey. We could actually see the lake from the pass - this amazing blue tip of calving ice against a clay-like surface of gray silty water. Again - the sizes of the bergs were deceptive. From a distance, you might think they were as big as cars. Try city blocks or small towns. Amazing. After 20 minutes, the heather benches ended and gave way to new problem. Sara put it well when she said this section comprised "two miles of vegetable belays through mud on a 40-50° slope." Defining the path, a track of mud formed this thin, slick surface layer down a steep and convoluted chute that spiraled through rocks and trees. What made the whole situation really annoying was that there COULD have been a decent footpath but it was skidded out by all the guys who found it much simpler to slide on their boots and asses. There were NO footholds anymore. Everything was like ice and, in the distance, you could still hear boys screaming down the muddy slope. Neither Sara nor I found this acceptable. It was not an issue of getting killed - but the potential to break an arm, twist an ankle, or smack your face was damn high and we took our time so as to avoid serious injury. I hugged a hell of a lot of trees in Patagonia - most were skinny alder-beech things with 5-6 inch diameter trunks. A typical scenario: sudden slip, grab the nearest tree, pack continues to pull, hold on for dear life - and there you'd be face into the tree wondering if you'd really stopped yourself. A few times, too, there were extremely steep rocky areas (all covered with mud) with no trees - and so I resorted to sitting down and five-pointing myself over what were class 2 scrambles. Within this multi-dimensional maze, there were a couple level spots for breathers. At one point, that Sara insisted we stop and eat a significant lunch. In reality, we just gorged on these exceptionally zingy Chilean faux raspberry candies. Here, Sara expressed big frustration with the trail - how it seemed unending (the story of Chile!!!). I laughed: "you know, Sara, today is one of those days where I just feel I could probably recover from anything. It's like - oh yeah, give me another mile of mud and I'll still be laughing." Indeed, I was cheerful despite everything; I lovingly hugged and laughed at the trees (might have kissed a few).

After another hour and mud, trees, and rocks, we arrived at the dumpiest camp I have ever seen/used. Its ONLY redeeming features: no fee, no concessionaire, no hotel, and no shower. The problems: trash everywhere, no level sites, no significant view, and no acceptable water. There was a creek but it had lots of other people's dinner floating in it (we had to use it anyway). Amusingly, the most prominent trash was liquor-associated paraphernalia. Every fire ring had at least five liquor bottles or boxes. Every campsite had a big plastic bag of trash. We celebrated our arrival by taking a photo of me with an empty bottle of vodka. How appropriate. Too bad it was empty. Anyway - we set up camp on the most level spot we could find - feet downhill (yes, there really was an incline everywhere). Sara was pretty beat but I, for some reason, felt more awake. And so I took to cooking dinner: pasta, our camping food bane (second only to woody-pitted raisin oatmeal). Despite the lack of a view, I found myself staring through the tall open trees onto the silent field of blue ice beyond. During life beside Glacier Grey, Sara and I remarked many times about how much it felt like being next to a silent sea. You could feel it out there as some larger-than-life body of water. Definitely was presence out there. Of course, there were lots of other presences even closer. A trio of Chileans (two males and one female) showed up, wearing beat-up tennis shoes and plastic trash bags or drop cloths for raingear. Later, they spent an ungodly amount of time trying to build a fire (futile given the damp wood). As twilight fell, another group of Israeli boys showed up. We were, frankly, at a loss to explain the presence of all the young Israeli guys

(we would pass MANY more similar parties). Sara, who distantly shares this heritage, joked about how her mom (who, like mine, did not support this trip) WOULD have approved of all these handsome, swarthy Israelis (and tried to marry Sara off). But to us, they were so young and so ill-prepared (especially this group). One of them asked us for fuel. After we obliged, they asked what we wanted in return and we said cookies. However, they were running low on food too. Nonetheless, they had no shortage of cigarettes - which they tried give us (we declined). Later, en route to Lago Pehoe, we found them pawning themselves off on more interested (and interesting) women. We can only imagine who eventually got what from whom. By the end, they were all smoking (seriously). Despite their filthy habits, we did enjoy all the very cute brown-eyed guys. As Sara and I lay down for the night, we discussed how pathetic the day had been. Our mileage, we estimated, had been ONLY 5-6 (TOTALLY embarrassing). The elevation was 2500-3000 up and at least 3500 down. The route south of the pass - the lack of anything resembling a walk-able path - made this section unbearable. Given guidebook descriptions, though, it was impossible for us to imagine why people report snow as the problem. It was the mud, trees, and complete mess of the "way."



Left to Right: Descending to Lago Grey - note icebergs, more mud, blue, blue, blue...

### To Lago Grey Camp - February 25, 1997

The next day - again - looked easy: 6-8 miles. Map contour and trail lines were parallel, implying little elevation change. HELLO - make certain you understand the contour interval of your map (feet vs. km). Ours, fully realized mid-afternoon, was 500-600 feet. Take my word for it: a trail can make MANY waves and troughs in that range. All day we ascended 15-30 minutes, walked flat 15-30 minutes, and descended 15-30 minutes - repeat, repeat. The terrain was completely mixed: walking leisurely through meadows in knee-high grasses, veggie-belaying through thickets of deciduous trees, climbing over rocky promontories studded with thorny plants, scrambling ruts of earth where people had put in unusual railings and ropes because the footholds crumbled and sloughed with every step - ALL adjacent to the amazing ice, and under stunningly clear skies. The most interesting traverse involved this avalanche chute of snow, ice, and rock. We descended into the ravine, pieced our way across a mess of dirty white, and ascended a talus slope on the other side. The views up and down the chute - to the towers above and the blue ice below - represented one of the most striking color contrasts witnessed on the whole trip. As with yesterday, we were on the trail ALL day and wiped out completely by the end. Although the trail was strenuous, Sara and I mostly attributed our extremely LONG day more to the inebriating views. Every flat area mandated a long stop to stare agape. The nuances of the changing icefield were simply amazing: some areas were like frozen waves. Some places had superficial pools of melt water that were turquoise against more subtle shade of whitish blue ice beneath. More than anything else that day, I grew to appreciate all the shades of the color blue. That glacier and its inconceivable number of azure shades will be something that mesmerizes my memory for years to come. Trying to put colors like that into words is impossible because the visions and the memories of those visions produce more in the way of feelings than words.



Left to Right: trail near camp to Glacier Grey overlook, Lago Grey camp, evil thorny plants (everywhere)

Our hope for the night was - once again - to avoid camping at a fee-based area and use what, according to our interpretation of our map, should be a flat meadow just before the official Lago Grey camp - with its map-indicated lodging and store. HA - re-read the section about the contour lines. There were no nice flat spots. There were no meadows - at least not anything bearing non-thorny brush. We firmly concluded that the Chilean park service and/or government (in collaboration with the concessionaires) purposely seeded all land EXCEPT that in fee-based camping areas with genetically enhanced flora bearing the maximum capacity of thorny stems and bristly seeds. After trudging back and forth in search of an unofficial campsite, we surrendered to the branch trail that lead down to Lago Grey camp. The reappearance of horse-droppings provided testimony to the fact that stock is allowed up to this point from the other direction (i.e. Lago Pehoe). Lago Grey camp occupied a huge space of forest on the lee side of a peninsula - positioned there because bitterly cold winds were typically generated from passage over the icefield that calved into the water on the far side. A new-looking, posh two-story wooden lodge with every

amenity I could think of was positioned right before the designated tent area. Manning the front desk was - to our surprise - an American girl. We explained our money situation and, with no hassle whatsoever, she let us stay for free. Later, I would talk with her about what brought her here: an undergraduate research project studying puma through Ohio State University (she never saw one - only their scat). She ended up loving Chile so much that she couldn't leave and got the lodge job. I chanced to ask her how the winters were and she said there had been hardly a foot of snow and, amazingly, NO WIND. We set up our tent in the middle of MANY other tents. The aforementioned Israeli boys were camping open-faced and side-by-side on the beach. They looked WAY too cute all lined up in the wind, curly hair blowing everywhere. Unfortunately, we also noticed the dreaded CCC Americans camped two sites away (not surprisingly, CC's annoying chatter gave them away). Aside from the people, facilities, and pollution, Lago Grey camp was splendid and lovely. A bona fide sandy beach, in combination with the smell of open fires and relatively warm afternoon, made the whole place feel like California - in winter. We strolled to the overlook of the Glacier Grey's calving face, hoping to see something large peel off into the lake. While, indeed, we heard an occasional creak, nothing substantial happened over the course of the next hour. I don't recall what we had for dinner that night; it was not, however, substantial or filling. Once again, we were down to little food, actively contemplating the purchase of more goods at the camp store. Unfortunately, we mistakenly failed to commit to this desire (actually, necessity).

### **To Lago Pehoe Camp - February 26, 1997**

The next day, we were filled with great anticipation because we would finally (hopefully) see the Cuernos, the horn-like mountains that typify most people's notions of what Patagonia looks like. After waking to CC getting chewed out by German woman, we packed up and headed out. The numbers of people on the trail were stunning in comparison to what we'd seen ANYWHERE else so far. Later, we discovered that dayhiking to Lago Grey was extremely popular (one could take a boat across Lago Pehoe, our destination for the night, and easily hike to/back from Lago Grey). The first part of our day involved hiking through nondescript rolling brush. However, the views back to Glacier Grey as it grew small against the huge landscape were highly awe-inspiring. Then we climbed to this alpine zone that had a number of small lakes, set amidst massive boulders. A soaring condor and several other interesting birds made this area even more memorable. From here, we climbed through substantial rocks over what felt like a little pass. The whole time, we kept thinking: the minute we get to the top of this thing, there are going to be huge-ass views of the Cuernos. Needless to say, when we hit the top: no Cuernos. Just typical brushy rolling hill terrain, a few tall peaks WAY off to the distant southeast.



Left to Right: leaving Glacier Grey, unnamed lake halfway between Glacier Grey, first view of the Cuernos and Lago Pehoe

The trail dropped into a shallow ravine and, after a long and winding while, we arrived at a huge grassy field. There, to our surprise, were the Cuernos - towering over gold hills that rose above the immediate field in the foreground (home to a lodge and the official camp area). To the north, Lago Pehoe appeared the color of lazulite. To the east, brushy hills rolled, defining the curving shores of the lake. Our original plan was - again - to camp in a theoretically flat, grassy meadow just past the official camp. However, as before, our errors interpreting the maps were obvious. Still unable to admit this, we climbed up the trail from the prairie-like camping area. The views of the Cuernos were utterly magnificent - more so against the striking sky of forbidding weather. The trail then dropped into a miniature valley of thorny brush. No suitable campsites were located, despite an extensive search. We began climbing the next rise but, growing frustrated and concerned about the weather, stopped to discuss our options. Once again, we retreated to the designated sites. Within the official camp, a few clumps of trees and bushes were located variously in the otherwise broad meadow. Where there were no bushes, concessionaires had erected man-made wind blocks that looked like loading palettes turned on their sides and staked loosely into the ground. We located a decent site in a small patch of trees. Given that we were down to three ramen noodle packets and a few dried tomato slices, dinner was downright pathetic. We did splurge on dried cheese at the camp store. While there, we noticed a sign for boat tickets - at which point we re-evaluated our plans for the final hike out. The trail along the lakeshore - plan A - would lead to the main park headquarters, arriving there after about eight miles. Originally having assume it was flat, we now knew those miles would be frustratingly up and down. Alternatively, we could each pay \$8 for a thirty-minute boat ride across Lago Pehoe. At the other side, we were told, tour bus companies picked up people around 3 p.m. daily. We also consulted the map and located a refuge there with food for lunch (i.e. it had the same legend icon as all other lodge sites we'd seen so far). Hopeful, we bought tickets for the 2 p.m. trip the next day. We then ate ourselves silly. BIG mistake on both counts.

### **Bad to Worse - February 27, 1997**

The next morning, we rose early, hoping to hike partway up the French Valley, said to offer MASSIVE and unusual views of the Cuernos. Unfortunately, big bad weather also arrived, engulfing the towers in clouds and sleet. We did manage to hike to a little alpine lake but, with no views in sight, decided to hunker down amidst the foliage as the spitting rain began to fall. Here, we ate virtually all our remaining lunch food and then dashed back to pack up. By 2 p.m., the winds were extreme. While the sky above the lake was relatively clear and sunny, the surface of the lake was swept with huge wave crests of white, rainbows of spray, and - I swear - small water funnels. We would sit on the pier for over two hours waiting for the late boat - a crowd of about 20 others at our side. It was more than clear that we were going to miss our bus. But, we reasoned, there was a refuge

on the other side. I, for one, was ready to fork out my credit card for both dinner and beds if need be. FINALLY, the boat arrived and the crewmen loaded us onto the upper deck, supplying us each with a life vest. For some reason, though, we didn't take off. No one on the boat would answer any of our questions. I, for one, felt completely dissed. And then, for no reason, a crewman told us all to move into the belly of the boat where, once again, we waited and waited. The downstairs was this dank, dark space that smelled like fuel. Only a narrow band of windows lined the upper part of the compartment. We all began to speculate audibly and with one another about what the deal was. And then it became clear: a tour group running late from their hike to Lago Grey was being ushered onto the scenic upper deck, their guides clearly in with the boat crew. We were LIVID. At that moment, my disgust with tour groups was sky-high, having witnessed the carcass-eating in Argentina and now been fully fucked over here. With the elites now on board, the boat instantly pulled away from shore. As we departed, the Cuernos - against a clear sky of azure - were visible through the narrow panes of glass. Five new Israeli boys, all wearing alpaca Peruvian hats, were asleep, each leaning on the shoulder of the other down the line. It was darling - Sara and I wished we'd had the gall to take a photograph. We doubt they would have minded. And then, as we hit the middle of the lake, the undulations began. Outside, we could see the 6-8 foot swells. I seriously questioned our safety a few times - mostly because we were in the bowels of the boat. The trip lasted perhaps an hour - but seemed to take a lifetime. The images of blue skies and white surf and occasional rock through the rising and falling glass remain one of the memories I retain most from this trip, if only because the totality of the experience most disrupted my equilibrium.



Left to Right: morning hike becomes soaked in, afternoon skies clear but winds tremendous, ferry across lake

It was around 4 p.m. when we finally arrived at the dock. The tour group was whisked immediately away in a private vehicle. Several others vanished likewise, having arranged private pick-ups. Sara and I walked around dazed, looking for the lodge. Hmm. Only this rotting barn-like building stood - no signs... no door. Three parties (including the Israeli boys) began setting up their camps inside this nasty structure. Sara looked inside disgustedly, mumbling something about rats. It became slowly apparent that this was a "refugio" (not to be confused with an actual lodge). And - ironically - this one was actually free. There was no store. There were no beds. There was nothing and we were stuck. At this point, we began wondering if ANY buses would be coming. Maybe you had to walk, like, 5 miles up the road to something more substantial. But the boat crew (now packing things up), assured us that the buses would be here tomorrow afternoon. It is safe to say that we went a little wacko that night (more wacko than on any other leg of this trip). Notably, this was the only night Sara was less together than me. Problem one: finding a suitable campsite. We would have camped in the middle of the flat, open road but the winds (problem two) were building up to raging levels. Behind the refugio, we found a clear spot in some bumpy grass that was partially protected from the wind by the lower branches of an old tree. Unfortunately, said flora almost shredded the tent during the set up, producing unusually foul language from Sara. I took to assembling what few food items we had left: one packet of ramen, a few dried tomatoes, the last dregs of cheese, some candy and fruit (the latter would be saved for breakfast). I cooked the ramen carefully in the vestibule because of the wind (in retrospect, I'm shocked Sara let me do this in her tent). Sara complained throughout dinner preparation, repeatedly muttering that we were totally fucked. The final problem came as we began to settle for bed. I never knew Sara was a serious arachnophobe until that evening - although she had joked with me on previous hikes about not liking to walk first because of spider webs. I had just returned from my trip to piss in the grass when Sara began screaming and shaking (seemingly uncontrollably), flinging gear in all directions because she said there was a spider in the tent. Rule number one: don't laugh at this. Laughing only makes Sara more angry and upset. When I realized that she wasn't kidding (in fact, she was hyperventilating), I calmly said something like - Sara, I want you to sit here and I am going to clear out the far end of the tent so you see there are no spiders and then you are going to go over there when you believe me and you can check yourself. And then I'm going to pass spider-free items to you one by one until everything at this end of the tent is over there and you can go to sleep... alright? She liked this idea and so we spent half an hour going through the gear as such. After we lay down for bed, though, I could not keep from laughing about the spider incident. Sara, now calm, even laughed a little herself. I then recounted the following story: John had a milder physical aversion to spiders. One day I was down in the communal laundry area where we lived when I found this HUGE dead wolf spider (a whole inch across - and that was dried/curled up). As a joke, I carried it upstairs and held it out in front of him - four feet away. He went ape-shit. And then I tossed it towards him only to have it land in the front pocket of his shirt. High frequency screams were heard as John bounced around the house, bending over upside down to get the thing out of his pocket without actually touching it. Sara was ill listening to that story and said I was pure evil. Surprisingly, she didn't joke about that being the reason John and my relationship was over. Of course, I'd just spent a half an hour going through the tent to assuage her genuine fears... something I would not have done with John. And then we realized we were so exhausted that we finally just let the wind put us to sleep.

### **Leaving Torres With Mixed Emotions - February 28, 1997**

The next morning was calm, warm, and clear. What else is new in Patagonia... especially after all that shit the day before? Downing our handful of candy and dried fruit, we decided to hike this decent-looking trail from the boat launch. We did, after all, have several hours to kill before the putative bus was to arrive. This walk turned out to be one of the BEST in this paradoxical park. As we set out, it seemed clear that good views of the Cuernos would be had - but we had no idea how

excellent they would become. We hiked three miles total, passing this spectacular shallow lake that offered stunning reflections of the Cuernos. We also hiked by this surprising whitewater area (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT 2003 - the same location where an over-priced "I have genital herpes but look at me doing sexy things" antiviral drug commercial was filmed). Anyway - above all this grandeur (waiting to be exploited by American drug companies targeting yuppie STD victims) - was gigantic Paine Grande (two pyramidal summits and HUGE glaciers spilling everywhere). High as a kite on WAY too much sugar, we pranced through the brush out onto this rock outcrop, magnificence all around. And then we just sat and stared. We eventually made our way back and packed up. I don't remember how long we waited. I recall the bus being only a little late. It was nearly full and we were thankful to get seats. The ride to the main entrance was very scenic. We finally saw llama-like guanacos grazing along the road. Unfortunately, we also saw the distant Torres del Paine, the ONE feature we had not been able to hike/see up-close given decisions day one. Against a clear sky, the giant towers of granite rose above a ridge in the foreground (left shot below). Sara and I had to turn away because we knew we could not hike up to them at this point; it broke our hearts to have them blazing before us. We were exhausted, malnourished, stressed out, and we knew it was the end. Chile, we freely admitted, had not exactly been with us. From the standpoint of beauty and effort, Sara and I both found the Torres del Paine Circuit to be VASTLY over-rated. To call this thing one of the top walks in the world is, I'm sorry, crap. Don't waste your time, energy, or brain cells on the circuit. If you are determined to visit Torres, do the so-called "W" trip instead (Pehoe to Grey to French Valley to Torres). Even though I'm happy I did the circuit - and there were parts that were great (like the pass and walk along the upper Glacier Grey) - my criteria for recommending a trip represents the product of weighing good with bad. The circuit came out 40:60 good:bad. For these and other reasons, Sara and I found the Chile experience annoying to the point we could not honestly decide whether we'd return - and, significantly, no tears were shed during any portion of the ride out. We yearned for Argentina. Tonight, though, it was back to Puerto Natales. We had reserved the posh purple Milodon with the excellent beds (those actually called to us more than did anything in Torres, honestly). When we arrived in Puerto Natales, it was just after 6 p.m. Prior to eating or relaxing, we had to make decisions and buy tickets for the next day's travels. As determined by our airline tickets, we had to be back in Rio Gallegos in two days. As mentioned before, our original plan was to take a bus to Punta Arenas (a larger city to the south) - but all of these were booked solid. Given our yearning for Argentina, our next option was the seven-hour trip back to Calafate via Rio Turbio. Most annoyingly, it required a 7 a.m. departure time. There went all lingering hopes of FINALLY enjoying the beautiful beds and pillows. Only returning to Calafate made this sacrifice easier. I felt a certain calling for the familiar men at La Tablita. If I didn't know it before, I certainly knew it now: Calafate was home to me in the southern hemisphere. After another bad dinner at the otherwise fabulous Milodon, we did our best to retire early for a deep sleep.



Left to Right: Paine Grande and some great whitewater, Cuernos, Torres del Paine from the bus

### **Calafate, Buenos Aires, Uruguay, and Home - February 29 to March 5, 1997**

I can honestly say that the bus ride via Rio Turbio was from hell. Said town was a blackened, polluted mining town - terrifically depressed and depressing. The roads connecting Turbio to Calafate felt like rocky, dried up creek beds, the bus frequently slowing to 10 mph for significant stretches of time. Had the roads been paved, the 200 miles would/should have taken 3-4 hours. The only redeeming feature of the commute: views of BOTH Los Glaciers AND Torres del Paine at one point, resembling two Grand Teton National Parks side by side against the otherwise flat and desolate pampas. I had NO idea they were situated like that. It was an amazing connection to feel, despite the chaos of the ride and the empty exhaustion I was feeling at the time. Calafate was a welcome sight, despite the fact that both Del Norte and Cerro Crystal were booked. We wound up getting a moderately expensive room in the upper part of town, hoping (after our Puerto Natales experience) to find luxurious bedding. No dice. The rooms were decent but nothing close to the beautiful Milodon. But, of course, there were glorious steaks, potatoes, tomatoes, and onions for dinner. Mmmm. The next morning, we took the bus back to Rio Gallegos and then boarded our non-stop flight back to Buenos Aires. There, we returned to the same pre-Patagonia hotel (which we'd reserved prior to trekking). La Senora seemed genuinely happy to see us again. We stumbled around in search of dinner, finally opting to try this bistro-like Italian place. I need to dispel a strange myth that Argentine-Italian food is good. As suggested in many guidebooks, this place mixed red sauce with the equivalent of white gravy (the equivalent of what goes on "biscuits and...") They even topped pizzas with this weird and heavy combination. It is simply murderous to conceive of eating a marinated artichoke heart dripping in roux. With only four days left, we discussed prioritizing goals over our lackluster meal.

First, we decided to make our way to a nearby region known as the Mar de la Plata because it was home to the national Museum of Natural History, the largest of its kind in South America. The museum also served as some kind of adjunct science facility for the major university in Argentina. Sara had read that it had lots of interesting prehistoric specimens. Getting there involved maneuvering the trains and subways, something we both wanted to do. Riding the trains was not too difficult - the cars original wood with sliding windows. Having read all sorts of glory day tales about Argentine trains (most now defunct), we felt a certain privilege riding in these antique cars. The ride lasted 1-2 hours and dumped us about half a mile from the museum. It was terrifically hot and we walked the rest of the way. This area was frighteningly run down - to the point that Sara said she wouldn't walk there at night. We stopped at a pub-like place for lunch en route. The museum occupied a major part

of this large public park. Despite the locale, the museum still charged a hefty entrance fee. Walking through this place was like stepping back into time: the laboratory of Linneaus or Darwin or Frankenstein or Moreau... nothing but antique taxidermy specimens in row upon neatly ordered row. Genus and species, genus and species. The smell of mothballs and old things in the air. Downstairs were most of the animals, birds, and insects. Upstairs was an anthropology wing that housed art, implements/tools, and a eugenics-inspired display about different races and human history. While I certainly wouldn't go back, I'm glad I did it once. By far the funniest thing: this cordoned off annex that represented university research space. Therein, you could see the professors and students, their offices and lab space. Right before the barricade, though, was this ancient-to-the-point-of-falling-apart cabinet of bound Ph.D. dissertations. Most of them were either loose pages or actively bug-eaten. My poor heart sank when I saw all that work being decayed. I wondered where the authors of each were now.

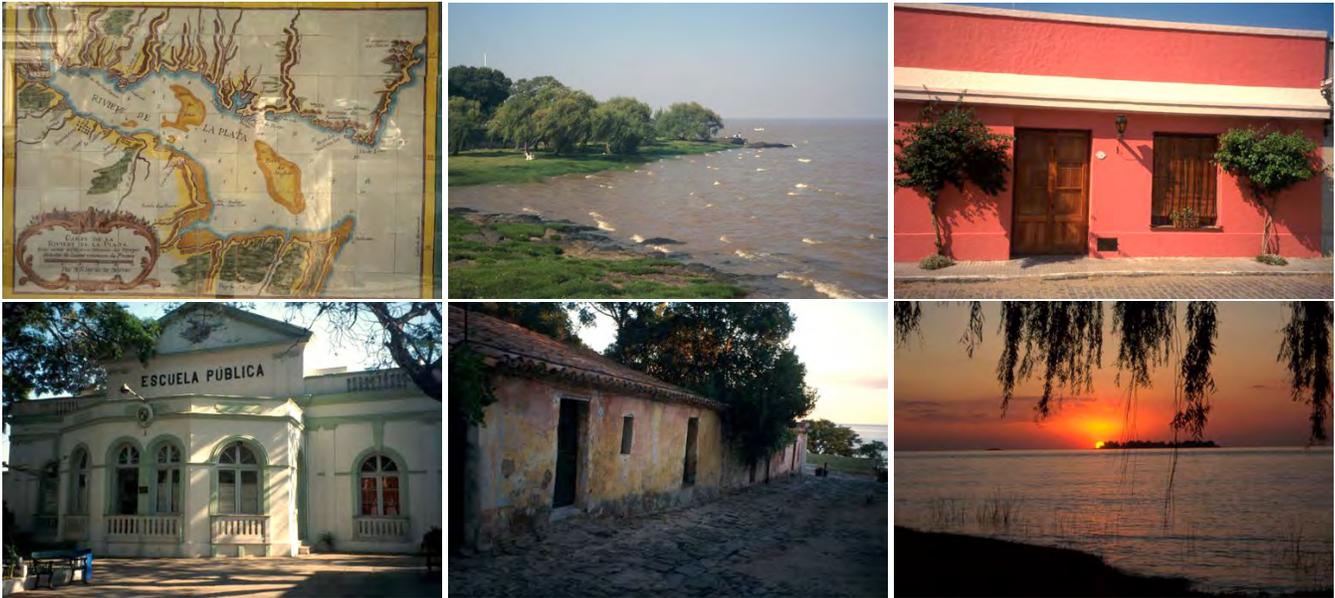


Left to Right: Museum of Natural History in Mar de la Plata, Recoleta scenes

That night, back in Buenos Aires, we discovered Coto's, the supreme gastronomical irony and epiphany of the trip. Severely burnt out on meat and potatoes, we searched fruitlessly (no pun intended) for a truly great non-beef, non-Italian restaurant. Despondent and desperate, we wandered into what sounded - based on one guidebook - like a horrific locale: Coto's, a grocery store with an attached cafeteria. Hello Larry's Market of Argentina! For non-Seattleites, Larry's Market is yuppie central - the produce and selection impeccable, the take-out insane. Coto's delivered big-time on all fronts. I wish someone had been there with a camera to photograph the look of euphoria and shock on our faces when we first stepped into Coto's gymnasium-sized cafeteria above the grocery section where the food-line featured 40 feet of dirt-cheap salad bar alone. Fresh fruits and vegetables glistened like multicolored jewels to our sore eyes... along with half a dozen quiches (many meatless), some meat and potatoes (of course), drinks to knock your socks off, and a dessert bar to drool for (best flan in Argentina... for \$1 - and I tried numerous WAY more expensive varieties). For basically \$5-7 each (you could go cheaper if you wanted), we loaded up on the most amazing delicacies AND dined amidst what felt like the first true cross-section of real Argentines we'd experienced at close range: the old, the young, the ever present romantics conspicuously touching one another, the voluptuous women friends wearing large-striped spandex and sporting bandages across their noses from recent plastic surgeries, the refreshing young men eating nothing but vegetables and fruit. In Coto's, we witnessed it all. We recommend it highly - very highly! I think we went there, like, three more times - and every time, our portions got bigger. Since I am discussing food - and before I forget - I want to discuss the myth of mate (MA-TAY). One of my mild, weird phobias about Argentina (as a microbiologist) was that I would wind up at a table of strangers passing around mate. While this act and its accoutrements could be construed for illicit drug paraphernalia, mate is a legal Argentine herb, analogous to Green Tea. The traditional way to drink it is to stuff the dried leaves into a hollow gourd and then pour boiling water therein. A complex filtering straw is then used to suck the slurry. Given extensive guidebook mention, we were expecting most restaurants to sell this stuff. But, to our amazement, we never saw it in the cities. Only when we got out of Buenos Aires did we see people - mostly lounging on the sidewalks/streets during the siesta - sipping mate (a peculiar green slime coating the upper part of the gourd). To this day, I have yet to try mate. After purchasing a gourd/straw/mate set-up, I've been put off using the thing because I'm concerned the neighbors will see me and think I'm smoking pot. Several friends who've seen the set-up have remarked: geez, Sarah... what ARE you into these days?

The next day, our primary goal was to see the Recoleta, the rich people's cemetery in the posh part of town (home to the grave of Eva Peron). We would walk 20-30 blocks through upscale shopping districts to get to the Recoleta. During our walk, I saw my destiny: two stylish young women with 10-inch cornrows (minus the Bo Derek bead thing). I looked at Sara and said: I'm going to grow out my hair just so I can do that. Sara decided that would look good - although just having it long again would be nice, in her opinion. The cornrows will develop greater significance - so keep that in mind. The Recoleta occupies about five square blocks (although I could be way under). We were told that a single-family mausoleum costs \$50-70 thousand dollars a year. Visiting a graveyard is not something I do often - much less as a tourist venture. There was something frightening and overpowering about this place. Everything is concrete but each individual structure is decorated with surprisingly unique stonework or images. Some are art deco, others are very traditional - one was even meant to look like an alpine rock garden. There are no directions to Peron's (or anyone's) grave so, unless you know what you are doing, you wind up walking up and down row after row of the dead. Some of the mausoleums were looted - with broken doors or windows that allowed you to see the spooky coffin areas. And all around are the skittish Recoleta cats. Finally, we found Peron's grave - the only one adorned with flowers. There were two trashcans next to the grave because someone has to clean the decaying blooms regularly, the only sign of maintenance in this weird little tourist attraction (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT 2003 - compared with seeing the ritualistic burning of the dead in Nepal, the Recoleta is, for the record, nothing). On the way back, we noticed a craft fair where Sara purchased a few trinkets. It was also there that we simultaneously noticed the strangest sight of the day (weirder than the Recoleta): two HUGELY pregnant women with their partners walked past one other, each going in the opposite direction. One was wearing a tube top and stretch pants, the latter cinched down to reveal her former-innie-now-outie navel (not to mention what should have been her natural pubic hair-line). The other was wearing a bikini top and blue jeans, the latter of which was buttoned almost completely down to expose her HUGE belly glistening with sunscreen.

Sara and I were completely agape. I said something like: that's quite a meeting of the minds there. Then Sara and I discussed Argentine women. On one hand, non-pregnant women flaunted it to no end, driving us nuts. But here were these massively pregnant women doing the same thing. We decided these women had major balls to just parade around like that. Oh well - this is not exactly a deep moment in feminist discourse.



Top Left to Right: Ceramic tile map of Argentina-Uruguay border, Rio de la Plata, beautiful Colonia style  
Bottom Left to Right: Colonia public school, old quarter cobblestone street, sunset over the Rio de la Plata

During another dinner at Coto's, we decided we were tired of the city and wanted to see tiny Colonia, Uruguay. Colonia was said to be quiet, peaceful, and pretty, boasting cobbled streets dating back to its founding pirate days. Right on the shore of the Rio de la Plata, it required only a simple ferry ride across said river - with its dramatic sunsets and cool winds. We made our way to the ferry office (a few blocks from the hotel) and signed up. I don't remember much about the ride over - only that the river was thick with silt, and the sky was hazy. Uruguay, though, was sunny and pleasant. We found a decent and quiet hotel after walking around the tiny town for an hour (La Senora had stored most of our belongings back in Argentina, leaving us unencumbered). And then we went for food, Sara AGAIN declaring this place's chicken as THE BEST. Later, she ordered sausages made from blood and walnuts but couldn't stomach them. My grandmother used to make Norwegian blood sausages so I ate Sara's leftovers. Definitely weirder - not that a rating system for blood sausages can/should be made. We then just strolled the delightful streets of the quiet town - the deliciously colorful houses and gardens all wonderful sights. But the best memory was walking down to the river and watching the sun go down. That's where I always end my slides, I'm afraid - and, beyond that, there's not much more to say about our trip. Coming home was long and tiring.

### Epilogue - Cornrows and Other Five-Week Phenomena

While many demons vanished during this trip, an equal number of new and old ones emerged upon my return. But, and I can still say this: I am a stronger person because of this trip, because of the power of that place and who I had to become to experience it. In the end, this trip cost us each about \$3000, nearly as planned. Substantial costs could be reduced by staying in shittier places and not enjoying rest days. Because we were new to the area, women, and not into youth hostels, we stayed fourteen nights in mid-range hotels (\$30-40 a night), many of which came with breakfast. Food was the most painful expense because we struggled endlessly with finding decent eats and racked up bills that were greater than we hoped. A frugal pre-packing of camp food would save money and hunger-related sanity on the trail. As mentioned, I could find nothing strikingly Argentine in the souvenir department except for a beautiful gaucho belt (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT 2005 - I wore this during my WOU interview - where I am now tenured). I did consider buying a crotch-length miniskirt, gaudy striped skin-tight mid-riff top, and platform heels - as these items seem to be what women wore down there - but I chickened out (even though I was told by a far-too-kind Uruguayan leather vender that I had the legs for it). Of course - this trip also entailed some huge emotional costs - and not just the obvious one (John). My parents absolutely did not support me going. While I have needed to establish more independence from them, this trip facilitated a nasty hiatus/separation from them for two years. The last price was, for a long time, the most painful. In an inexplicable month of apocalyptic clarity, I found love for a friend (James) who, I freely confess, I'd had eyes for a few years prior (yes, while with John). James became a recurring entity in 1997, 1998, and 1999. My first attempt to write up this report came after this relationship (round one) ended in spring 1997. By the end of summer, I had completed through Torres/Glacier Grey pass plus a farewell dedication to James (because I thought it was done and I was secure with that). At this point, many things came up to halt the writing: a real job, moving, buying a house, and James again. Throughout 1997 and 1998, I received incredible responses from readers, old and new. Consequently, the incomplete Patagonia story tugged at me in various ways because it was, like pieces of the aforementioned relationship, unfinished and unresolved. The hardest tug came in October 1998 when, out of the blue, I received a letter from James because he'd apparently just stumbled onto the dedication section for the first time. For the first time in a LONG year, I had to go back and read all the devastation of that period of my life while trying to make sense of this man's letter. Fortunately, I was living a state away and was also on my way to Nepal. But I had moments of questioning everything, questioning my ignoring something so strong. I came close to pulling the dedication section and re-writing the whole report in a depersonalized manner

just to escape responding to him. But I don't believe in erasing significant statements from the past. Sometimes the simple answer really is to do nothing. And it would have worked if we didn't stumble into each other in Seattle in early 1999: another five-week thing turns to stone. It would be nice to say I could write an equally tender dedication at this point in time but I cannot begin to put meaning on Patagonia or the palimpsest of writings about Patagonia. Patagonia was what it was - necessary at that moment in time. Fortunately, Sara and I remain close - and I will be forever grateful to her the most. As for the men who have provided little earthquakes in this reality - I don't know. Despite our since-terminated friendship, John deserves thanks for the airline tickets and the big food before I left. As for James, I once made the following analogy to him about leaving Los Glaciers: sitting on the bus, watching the magnificent peaks growing small in the distance, weeping - the complementary realization that I wouldn't be sitting there feeling anything if I hadn't chosen to throw away all my safety nets and partake in the adventure. Would I have chosen not to experience such magnificence? Absolutely not. But, honesty, I have never been quite as certain about comparable choices of the heart with him.

And now I will end this tale with the following story and musical reference: recall my pledge to cornrow my hair after seeing the two beautiful Argentine women in Buenos Aires. As with this report, the hair move took some interesting and symbolic detours, not to mention years time to complete. First, I returned from Patagonia to find James' long blond hair done up in cornrows - a totally random decision, something he'd never done before. I'm one of those people who, because I use symbolism in my writing, read everything into everything. Well, between my hair finally growing out long enough to pull it off and my deciding that it was about time to take back the hair thing (since that's where it started for me - on the streets of Buenos Aires), I finally did the cornrow thing (and I LOVED it... except for the unbraiding part... yikes!). And, after five weeks, it was gone too.

*Sarah lives in a beautiful garden  
Walks a path of Forevergreen  
To the mountains so high, a dance with the sky  
Her footprints all over the Earth  
Always finding the way back home  
She found a rhythm in all of this water  
A two-step with the thundering sea  
Oceans to clouds, mountains to rain,  
Run back to the ocean again  
The water flows through her in silvery waves  
As she paints circles around the sun  
Growing flowers in everyone  
She loves  
He looks for her somewhere in this forest  
And wanders along the valley so green  
He knows a voice on the mountain is calling  
But never once does he begin  
Slips himself into a warm water spring  
Sits there along in the silence reclining  
The brackish water cools, be he can't get out  
So he tries to fill it again  
Oceans to clouds, mountains to rain,  
And back to the ocean again  
The water just washing him away  
Chalk circles around the sun  
Slowly burning holes in everyone  
He loves*

- A.J. Movius

