

Twitterpated in Patagonia, Part Two

Leaving Los Glacieres for Torres del Paine National Park, and Easter Island



Left to Right: (top) parting shot of Fitzroy, Torres massif in surreal clouds, me and the Torres "high divide" (middle) lupine and Torres massif, spectacular Valle Ascencio en route to... Torres del Paine namesake; (bottom) in-flight amusement en route to Easter, looking back to Hanga Roa, Ahu Tongariki

Introduction

As most people familiar with this page know, I first visited Patagonia in 1997 in response to some major life upheavals. At the time, I could not imagine visiting southern Patagonia again - not only because Sara and my trip had been so amazingly significant but also because, even at the time, we could sense that Patagonia was being developed too fast... to the point that I felt returning there and seeing less wilderness would be heartbreaking. And so it was perhaps surprising that I grew determined to return to southern Patagonia, a decision made late last year - specifically to go with Mountain Travel Sobek (MTS). Although I often questioned many things about doing this trip (i.e. whether I should even try to go back and recapture Patagonia in any way, whether I should spend THAT much money given the HIGHLY unpredictable and often foul weather there), I have to say: totally worth it, easily one of the top five trips I've ever taken - completely equal to Sara and my trip, but in many surprisingly different ways. In the first part of this report, I described our group, our brief visit to Santiago and Punta Arenas, our superb and relaxing cruise around Tierra del Fuego (including landing at Cape Horn), our two days in Calafate (including FINALLY visiting the Perito Moreno glacier), and our three days in the Fitzroy region of Los Glacieres National Park.



Left to Right: gorgeous sky leaving El Chalten, Andes and Lago Viedma, over the Argentine pampas

December 1, 2008 - Long Drive to Lago Grey, Torres del Paine National Park

According to my journals, I slept well but not enough given our early wakeup. As we were on the road most of the day, though, our activity level was minimal, requiring little energy: staring out the windows, daydreaming, writing, reading, or napping. Consequently, I took over the entire back seat of the bus for pretty much the remainder of the trip (a lot of which involved LONG drives). Indeed, much of our 1000 miles of driving took place over these final five days. Having said that, I

was seldom bored (like I felt during comparable drives in 1997); I don't know if I came more prepared this time - or have become more patient... rather, I really enjoyed these times because it gave me a chance to read and write, to recharge my energy state between the hiking. That morning, we stopped a few times: for pictures at some near-lake viewpoint, at La Leona (again), on the side of the road near the highway junction to Calafate so I could pee behind the bus, on the side of this rise of land so we could see Fitzroy for the last time, and at the tiny town of Esperanza for gas. From near Esperanza and beyond, the Torres massif was almost constantly visible - given that the weather, yet again, was clear and sunny. From Esperanza, we turned off the main paved highway - heading west on a gravel road. Indeed, gravel roads would continue pretty much until we were out of Torres - which, despite being slower, was a relief to me. In 1997, Sara and my interpretation was that Chile was paving all roads to and throughout Torres. In fact, Chile was just paving the highway between Punta Arenas and Puerto Natales... but not into the actual park or its surroundings. In this respect, Argentina has probably sold more of its soul to tourism and wilderness exploitation than Chile since 1997 (I would have predicted the opposite at the time). Anyway, we arrived at the border around two. As before, Argentina seemed lackadaisical and Chile seemed officiously bureaucratic. Once officially in Cerro Castillo (on the Chilean side), our local/Torres guide (Pedro) was waiting at this overdone tourist facility where we would finally have lunch. After piling up on more postcards, I was unable to finish yet another gigantic grilled meat-avocado sandwich. And then we were back on the road for another three hours - albeit interrupted by one short walk. Looking at the park maps now, I have no clue by which road we entered Torres; within an hour, I know we stopped at a park administration building so we could deal with entrance stuff and use the bathrooms. I know we then started seeing tons of guanacos against the backdrop of the namesake Torres, suggesting we were up by Lago Sarmiento. Here, our need to get out of the bus and photograph close-range guanacos overruled whatever schedule Andre was hoping to keep. Although we would see plenty more guanacos, I don't regret losing some time from the afternoon hike - which was basically the same little walk Sara and I took the morning after getting stranded at Lago Pehoe (i.e. our ferry was late, causing us to miss our bus and have to emergency camp near the ferry landing).



Left to Right: Cerro Castillo, park entrance, guanaco Serengeti and Torres massif

And thus we headed into the heart of the park, stopping near Pudeto, the base for the Lago Pehoe ferry. Here, things looked more orderly than when Sara and I (plus half a dozen stranded others) struggled to find someplace other than a rat-infested barn to set up camp for the night; indeed, said structure had been demolished - although I could still make out the lumpy field where Sara and I set up our tent. When I explained this story to Andre, he seemed genuinely annoyed that we illegally camped anywhere in Torres - even moreso when I further elaborated how Sara and I "illegally camped" on at least two other occasions, after struggling with shitty maps, useless guidebooks, and zero in the way of information from the park service. Alas, I disappointed Andre a few times in Torres... largely because he knew I loved Glaciers more, and he knew I felt Chile had overdeveloped Torres too much (as compared with Argentina/Glacieres). While I still firmly believe this to be the case (based simply on comparing the numbers of man-made structures and tourist facilities INSIDE each park), I would say - like I said earlier - that Argentina has overdeveloped areas surrounding their park more, putting a different but equal pressure on the wilderness. Most others in our group, though, were clearly more taken by Torres. And even I have to admit that the feel of the land was completely different and more vast: the numerous lakes (each a different shade of blue) dotting the landscape gave the park a greater vibrancy, the guanaco herds imparted a Serengeti-like feel that is definitely lacking in more-sterile Glacieres, and even the central Torres massif (a combination of Torres/Towers, Cuernos/Horns, Paine Grande and Almirante Nieto - both large, glacier-covered mountains) is more complicated and varied than the more uni-dimensional profile of the Fitzroy massif. In these respects, Torres did - on this trip and in my mind - rise to equal status as Glacieres. Of course, that the weather was consistently amazing did not dampen our impressions.



Left to Right: Jacques and the Salto Grande, gaudy lady's slippers, climbing to the viewpoint of Paine Grande, Cuernos

Anyway - we parked at this nondescript area just up from the ferry dock. Given that it was about five, we did not hike all the way out to the viewpoint at the end of the trail (which Sara and I had done). I'd say we went up fifteen minutes, including the side-trail to Salto Grande (i.e. the big waterfall and whitewater canyon between Lagos Nordenskjold and Pehoe). Alas, I still

could not look at this area and not think about herpes... but you'll have to read my previous account to determine why, sufficed to say that it does not involve personally acquiring it. We also stopped to examine several flowers, including this HUGE, gaudy, multi-colored lady's slipper variety. Climbing briefly, we were afforded massive views of Paine Grande, the Cuernos, and Lago Nordenskjold before looping back to the parking lot on some road that does not appear on my official park map. Although the views were as clear as the morning Sara and I visited this area, the light was funkier today: too intense, too far west, too low - rendering too many dark shadows on many rock faces. And yet I still blew plenty of shots taking pictures...



Left to Right: Sharksfin (between Paine Grande and the Cuernos in the French Valley), more Cuernos, returning to the bus

We still had about an hour more driving to get to our hotel at Lago Grey. One of the fortunate things about this trip was being able to stay at Lago Grey. Normally, MTS books all three Torres-corresponding nights at this estancia (a working sheep ranch) just outside the park, north of Lago Sarmiento. However (and to MTS' surprise), said estancia was booked solid tonight - hence, our unique stay at Lago Grey. My only regret: I would have wanted to spend another night at Lago Grey, minimally taking a boat trip closer to the ice face. Lago Grey was, after all, one of the more special sites in Torres to Sara and I; after four days backpacking the mediocre northwest backside of the massif, we FINALLY crossed Paso John Gardner, revealing Glacier and Lago Grey, which we hiked along (delighted) for the next three days.



Left to Right: (top) Cuernos and Torres from Rio Paine, sheer north walls of Cuernos above French Valley, Lago and Glacier Grey; (bottom) restaurant view of Cuernos, habituated hotel fox, hotel decks and cabin-y rooms, PJ in our room

The road to Lago Grey also took us farther south in the park than Sara and I ever saw, crossing Rio Paine and several prairies, winding through this short canyon along serpentine Rio Grey before arriving at the southern end of Lago Grey. While the face of said glacier was still a LONG way off, its perspective on the Cuernos was stupendous, offering taunting views of the sheer north walls above the French Valley - a place I still have yet to hike (next time...). Much as I liked the location, though, this hotel was my least favorite - and was the least high-end. That is not to say they weren't trying: obviously renovating older, more rustic, cabin-like buildings. Of course, my opinions were most colored by two specific experiences: first, the doors/locks stuck and didn't open well (with most walls very lightweight, in general). Second, it remains my professional opinion that the salad/dessert buffet (all room temperature) gave a number of people in our group (including me) enteritis and/or diarrhea; sadly, Gail fell so ill she had to pull back from all of tomorrow's activities. Meanwhile, a habituated fox - which looked more like a coyote - roamed the hotel grounds. After leaving dinner early, I was photographing the Cuernos (again) and said animal growled at me from within some shrubbery. Slightly spooked, I returned to my room for a soak before PJ finished her meal. At some point, Jacques also tracked down a pair of Magellanic woodpeckers - something others had been obsessed with seeing. But I was in bed early because the day had been long and strangely exhausting.

December 2, 2008 - Mystery Hike, Lago Sarmiento - Am I On the Set of Brokeback Mountain?

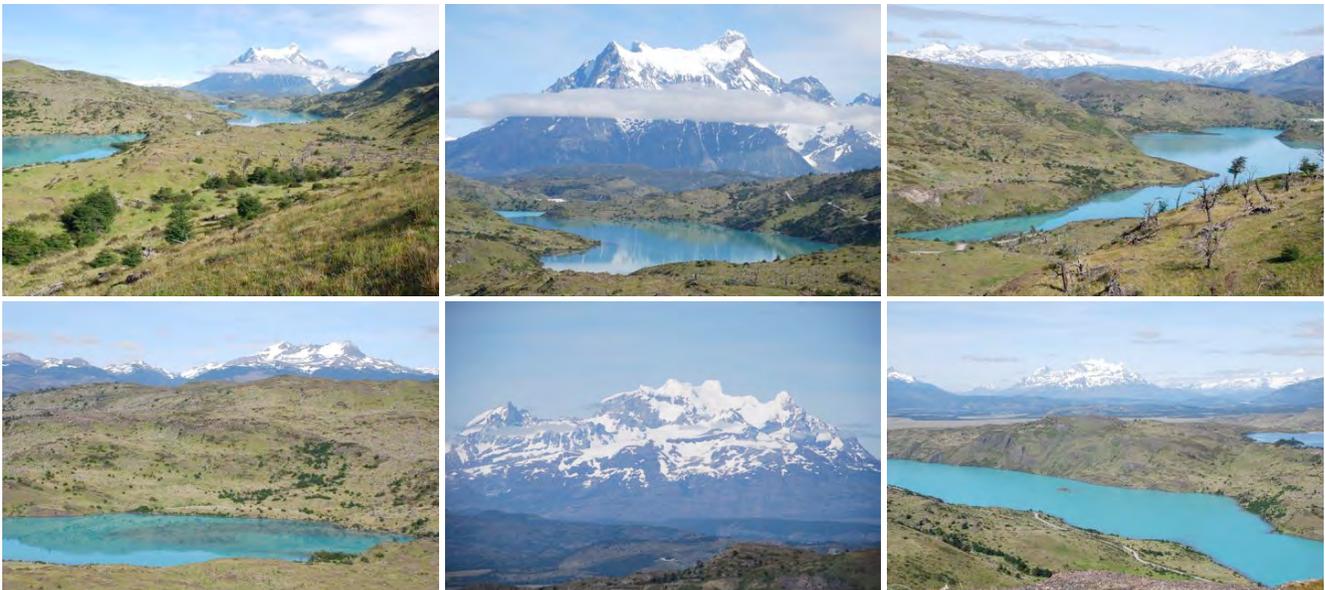
Today's morning hike - in a matter of four hours - offered up more stunning scenery than Sara and I saw during most of our eight days on the circuit. Indeed, SOOOO much of the circuit is not worth the effort - and when I think about the alternative

hikes Sara and I gave up to say we did the circuit... man, I just want to kick myself again, having hiked the few things we did today and tomorrow. Anyway, we packed up (because we were moving to the aforementioned estancia) and left Lago Grey - essentially backtracking our route from last night. Our first stop was at the main administration and visitor center. There, I skipped Pedro's presentation, completely obsessed with this colorful field of lupines outside that beautifully framed the Torres massif. Yes, I may be turning into a crazy photographer (albeit not good at and uninterested in learning proper technique).



Left to Right: (top) morning clouds over Lago Grey, distant mountains/icefield, and Cuernos/Torres massif from main visitor center; (bottom) center exterior, lupine and Paine Grande, Torres massif reflection in pond

Although Andre didn't request we not talk about the location of today's morning hike (an unofficial route that doesn't appear on any map), I've decided to call it the mystery hike and leave it at that. Having said that, people who can interpret maps and know Torres features will be able to figure it out. From the visitor center area, we drove for some time before taking off on foot. Even though this was a short-sounding hike, I would not call it easy - especially the descent. Given that, I was surprised to see PJ tackling it. Later, I learned that Andre had tried to talk her out of it - ultimately saying she could go but she had to focus on keeping moving (not taking pictures). Consequently, he took her giant camera (which was a fair burden for PJ to carry, in general) on all up or down sections. In retrospect, that was a very ballsy move on his part; indeed, I haven't worked with any leaders who would have been so bold given this venue. At the same time, I don't think Andre would have gotten away with it if he wasn't so cute (and, thankfully, he knew exactly how to use it for this kind of situation). Of course, PJ also got Andre to carry that huge-ass camera... and so there was some fascinating people stuff in both directions.



Left to Right: (top) first views while climbing grassy draw; (bottom) higher views while climbing grassy draw, including the main massif of nearby O'Higgins National Park

After briefly hiking with David, I pretty much headed out on my own for most of the ascent. Unlike David, who felt he'd done enough striking out on his own (i.e. he didn't want to get in trouble - implicitly: again), I hadn't pushed this envelop too much - not that I actively wanted to challenge Andre. Rather and by now, I felt that Andre (in addition to predicting my sign) probably

did get who I was, respected that I needed some alone-time, knew my hiking ability, had a sense that I would not purposely get too far ahead, and understood that I would stop if I didn't know the way. As Andre indicated when we stepped from the bus, the first section was totally obvious; indeed, there seemed to be a boot- or horse-beaten track leading most of the way up the main grassy draw. At the top, Andre had indicated we would proceed left along this wild ridgeline. Given that whatever boot/horse-path we'd been following continued over the gap (not onto the rocky ridge), I sat down and waited for everyone else to arrive - which happened over the span of five and fifteen minutes. After briefly ascending more steeply on what seemed like volcanic rock, we reached the actual ridgeline - views opening again towards Paine Grande and the Cuernos. I would liken this hike to a more open, more compact version of the High Divide in the Olympics... the "Torres Divide" being this comparably magnificent walkway along Patagonian meadows and Zen-like rock gardens. Initially, the route seemed to be grassier - passing numerous silver snags, the result of a fairly recent (i.e. in the last decade) fire. We then got back on more rock, following an undulating walkway with more firebush and what reminded me of heather. Although it looked like we were heading toward this prominent highpoint, Andre kept us lower down (although David could be seen up there scrambling, having abandoned notions that he was going to be more obedient). Hiking along the ridgeline, I was twice struck by acute GI cramps and distress - although, both times, things settled down (at least temporarily). After some meandering (including some steep ascents through thick brush), we came out on this big open hogback terminus: views of the entire Torres massif, including the actual Torres peaking in between the Cuernos. Sitting variously on this cap of lava-like rock, we waited for everyone else to arrive. PJ, now entrusted to Pedro and carrying her own camera, was in good spirits. Indeed, I figured if she'd made it this far, down should be a breeze.



Left to Right: (top) first half of ridgeline; (bottom) second half and biggest overlook, PJ and Andre at final overlook

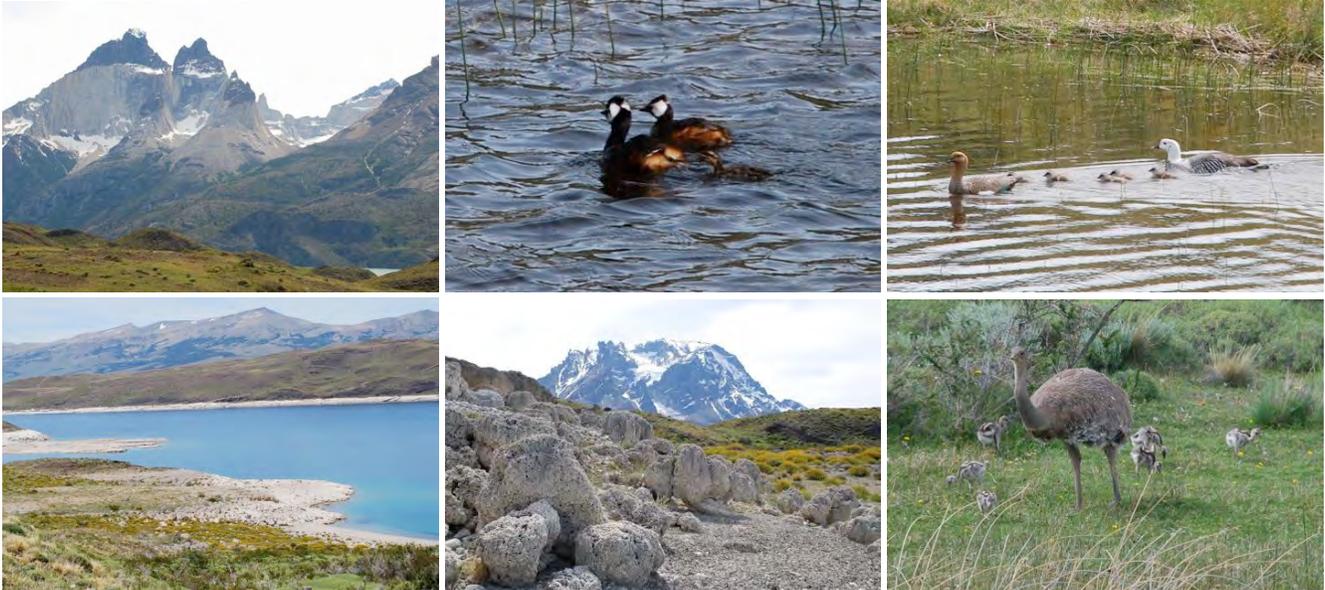
Man was I wrong. Continuing down from the final overlook, the circuitous route quickly grew both steep and rocky... and not in terms of big, stable rocks - but, rather, tiny rocks that slid against a more solid base (like ball-bearings relative to your feet). I nearly slipped three times during what looked like a simple gully, representing a couple hundred vertical feet. Reaching a small spot of flat meadow, it was just Andre, Jacques, Ann, and I. After waiting for some time, Andre decided to let us continue - the route obvious - because he was concerned the others were confused (i.e. he needed to go back and round them up). Even though our subsequent route down was more direct, it was just as slippery and involved the added bonuses of trickling water and mud. Indeed, I recall sitting down and four-pointing at least once. Soon, though, we were in a low-angle high-grass meadow - which, after fifteen minutes of walking, brought us to where the bus was waiting.



Left to Right: upper and then lower descent sections (my camera was away on the hard stuff), austral parrots

Nearby, half a dozen austral parrots squawked and preened in a half-dead tree. After carrying my sack lunch to this lakeside beach, I had barely swallowed one bite of my grilled chicken-avocado-cheese sandwich when, you guessed it, my GI track responded with unrelenting urgency. Thus, I jogged back to some restrooms where whatever pathogen I'd ingested made an earnest last stand. Fortunately, I felt completely better after this episode. Meanwhile, PJ and Pedro took an hour longer to come down, arriving well after two... but she was in better spirits than expected. After giving everyone the chance to fully eat

lunch, hydrate, and relax, we continued to some nondescript pullout where you could hike ten minutes to these funky calcium carbonate formations along Lago Sarmiento. Mind you, I would have had ZERO idea anything we saw today existed based on maps; I suppose it should be no wonder Sara and I were so focused on the circuit. I enjoyed this little walk even though it wasn't, like, difficult or terrifically scenic... although the perspective on the Cuernos was interesting and different. After walking by some ponds with coots and geese, we descended to the lakeshore - which reminded me of being at this very specific place along Lake Yellowstone: where there are these impressive stromatolite formations (stromatolites being fossilized bacterial communities, like what I study). Thus, I remain convinced there either were or are interesting bacterial communities driving this process and microbiologists should be studying this stuff. Of course - now that my NSF-funded research is over...?



Left to Right: (top) interesting perspective on Cuernos, coot family, geese; (bottom) Lago Sarmiento, calcium carbonate formations and Almirante Nieto (which eclipsed the Torres from this perspective), rhea family

Within the hour, we were back on the bus - although we soon had to make a few photo stops for charismatic megafauna. I wasn't as excited about the guanacos as everyone else - but I did enjoy the rhea family (one male with a dozen chicks). After leaving the park, we drove thirty minutes north to this sprawling estancia where, as was obvious, the ranch animals were sheep: some 40,000. In looking at my map, I am actually shocked how physically close we were to the Perito Moreno (probably thirty miles as the crow flies - separated by this low set of hills). I also have to emphasize that, despite a lot of sheep, we were in the middle of nowhere - the terrain reminiscent of very rural Wyoming. Even the road we were driving effectively dead-ended at the estancia.



Left to Right: estancia - (top) on-site school, gardens, boardwalks and creek; (bottom) dining room, fire pit, our room

Unfortunately, I was too over-stimulated and hungry to recall how many people typically worked on this estancia. I do recall being impressed by the housing for the workers (which included both single and family quarters) and by the on-site school. Higher up the hill from these buildings were the guest facilities, including a gorgeous dining room with seats for at least fifty (even though I don't recall there ever being more than two dozen people when we ate). This estancia was my second favorite

lodging on this trip. Although I'm sure it was just as expensive as the place we stayed in El Chalten (i.e. which, by comparison, looked like a Pottery Barn explosion), the estancia seemed more authentic in terms of antique-y furniture, working farm facilities, and vegetable gardens. Our rooms didn't offer as spectacular views - but the dining room featured DRAMATIC views of the Torres. After showering and unpacking, I made the scenic walk across the extensive grounds (via many boardwalks) to the dining room. There, we first talked about tomorrow's options. I can't recall how many days Andre had been suffering with a nasty cold (hmmm - group mate perhaps???) but things took a bad turn today - to the point that he would not be leading the crown jewel hike on this trip: to the base of the namesake torres, a hike Sara and I had to forego (despite good weather) because we ran out of time futzing around the damn circuit. Andre did do an excellent job describing the hike, scaring all but the truly crazy (and/or committed) people: ten miles, 3000 up/down (albeit, all kinds of crazy up/down/up stuff). Andre's only mistake: misjudging how fast we'd be. Apparently, he was used to folks taking ten hours; sufficed to say, we took less time and, even though it was tiring and involved some interesting scrambling, I would disagree with him about this being (by a long shot) the hardest hike of the trip. I think it ranked equal with the Glacieres traverse - but for different reasons. But I digress. Dinners at the estancia were very good; although the food was heavy and meat-oriented, the portions were reasonable and the beef (especially) was exceptionally tender. Having said that, I ordered lamb the first night - and spent most of my meal drooling over other peoples' beef tenderloin (Shona gave me a bite and it was spectacular). And then it was off to bed.



Left to Right: Almirante Nieto and the sprawling new lodgings at Hosteria Las Torres, bridge one, first highpoint

December 3, 2008 - To the Base of the Torres del Paine... a Truly Magnificent Hike, Well Worth the Wait

For some reason, today's start felt a little late - probably because I was chomping at the bit... and also because the skies (cloudless when I woke up) seemed to be socking in by the time we were finally driving into the park (around nine) - white eclipsing most of the Torres and starting to consume foreground Almirante Nieto. Consequently, I assumed today would finally represent payback for all the previous sun on this trip. The men (Pedro, David, Jacques, and John) and I were let out first - specifically, at the Armaga administration building (where Sara and I were first dumped during our visit here). All others (including Larry, who developed a blister-related toe infection) continued on to several lower-key activities in the park - none of which I can accurately comment on. From Armaga (like Sara and I, even though we didn't understand it), the men and I boarded a half-full mini-bus; Pedro seemed to think we'd be getting a private van but no one minded sharing with a dozen strangers. Within a couple minutes, we were crossing the same insanely narrow bridge I recall so vividly from 1997 (less than two inches of clearance on either side of the vehicle). And then it was another fifteen minutes of rolling open-plain driving to the final hosteria. Much of this area had burned in the last several years - apparently by some European hiker while cooking soup for lunch. When I heard this story, I was, like: who the hell COOKS lunch in the middle of the day? Definitely fishy. I had long been bracing for what I knew I was going to see at the end of the road: where in 1997, a SINGLE, one-story structure had stood, there was now a sprawling mini-metropolis of bright red units that rose at least two stories, providing a hundred new rooms. I honestly shudder to think of how developed the REST of Torres had become; we were not, after all, visiting places Sara and I had seen before: like the campsites at Lago Grey or Pehoe - both of which were already feeling overdeveloped in 1997. Again - all this stuff is INSIDE the national park... and the situation at Hosteria Las Torres was definitely en par with the horrendous situation in El Calafate.

Fortunately, we did not linger: we hit the trail, which took us - in contrast with Sara and my right/north counterclockwise circuit route - left/south. Dropping briefly and slightly, we crossed a couple river braids via a sturdy and then a swinging bridge - before beginning the first big climb (about fifteen hundred feet). I would describe the scenery and the trail here as the least inspiring and poorest of the day. As with a lot of trammled wilderness areas in the US, there were too many social trails, too many people-widened sections where the landscape was clearly suffering from overuse and lack of management. There were also a lot of serious ruts, most associated with the ongoing use of horses (where Argentina has banned horses and mules in Los Glacieres, replacing them completely with llamas... which also means people cannot ride in that national park). Indeed, within fifteen minutes, we were passed by a long chain of park-ordained horses with tourist riders (all led by a non-smiling gaucho) on their way to a riverside refugio three miles up the valley (beyond here, horses are not allowed); here, people can pay to sleep for the night and then dayhike variously. While this option may appeal to some people, I definitely wouldn't enjoy it - not only because parts of the trail were scary but also because hiking to the refugio was fairly easy... and I didn't find the refugio attractive. After about an hour, we reached the first big highpoint, where a stunning view up the Valle Ascencio was thoroughly enjoyed: massive barren, talus slopes to the left/south (along which our narrow, edgy trail was carved), amazing greenery to the right/north, and these CLASSIC, snow-covered Cascade-like mountains at the head - beckoning me to want to go farther (i.e. past the refugio and the Torres side-trail... up the rugged Valle del Silencio, now on my to-do list). And the most shocking thing? Normally, one would see some of the Torres from this point but, at the moment, clouds were still eclipsing them... and so, even without the main attraction, the views were still astonishingly beautiful. At the same time, I was a little shocked at how far we had to descend - despite Andre's accurate description. Indeed, we dropped 400-500 hundred feet to the refugio (essentially, the valley floor)... actually dropping, climbing briefly, and then dropping again. This was also the trail section I would NOT want to do on a horse because it was narrow, edgy, squishy talus and/or mobile rocky over hard

ground (i.e. prone to slipping, a la yesterday's descent). But we arrived at the refugio within thirty minutes. Here, several of us (including me) used a somewhat filthy public toilet, ate some snacks, and drank water or boxed juice (which the estancia had amusingly packed for us). But thankfully, Pedro was not into dallying - and so we were off again within fifteen minutes.



Left to Right: (top) horses passing us during climb, descending to refugio, close-up of Torres from highpoint; (bottom) gaucho by refugio, between refugio and moraine-scramble - crazy bridge, sidewalk, moraine edge

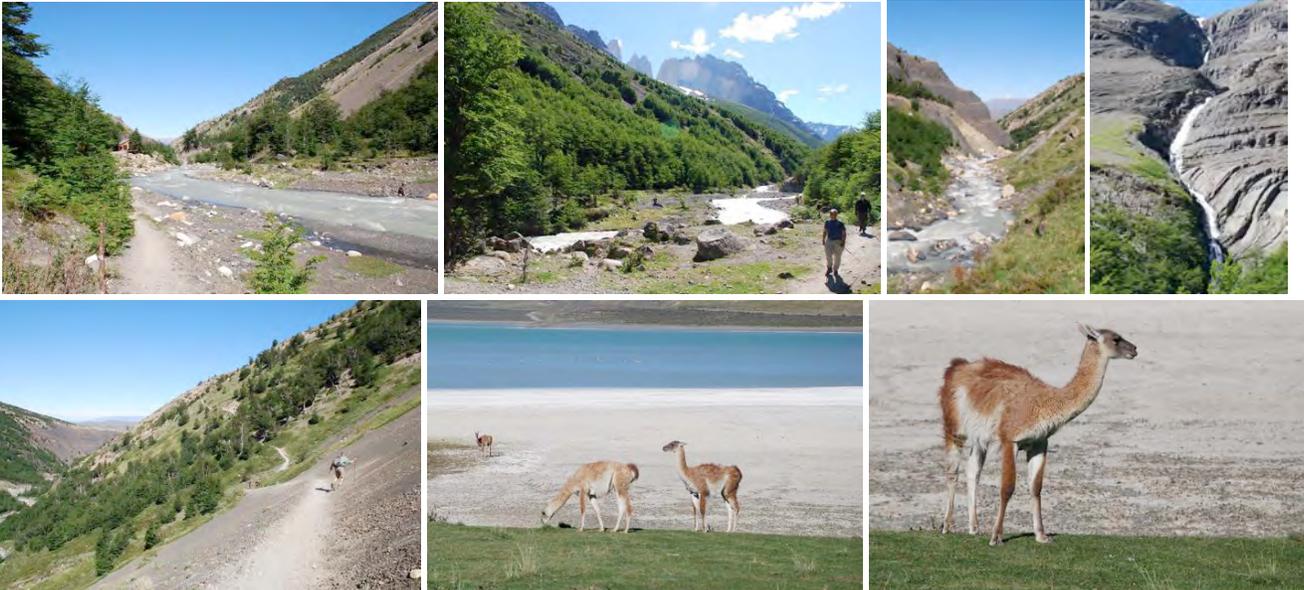
The section between the refugio and moraine was chaotic, thanks to avalanche and/or mudslide activity. Mostly in forest and along the Rio Ascencio, we did a lot of short up, followed by short down - first on the north side of the river, and then crossing (via a not-so-sturdy-looking bridge) to the south. Within an hour, though, the route was climbing more than it was dropping. At some point, Pedro said this would be our last good water until the top - and so I filtered a liter (while others filled straight out of the creek). Soon, we arrived at what I call the sidewalk: this scenic opening where the trail was super-wide and we enjoyed big views up the valley again, including the moraine. From here, the route entered this funky area where, on the way up, Pedro had us rock-hopping more in the open (vs. on the way down, where I followed a creek-side trail that was just in the trees). At the point where the last picture above was taken, the trail vanished - people scrambling up their own route, following a set of widely-spaced orange poles. Although there were a few areas where people had almost stamped out a boot-beaten track, these were REALLY dicey: super-loose small rocks over hard ground. Pedro rightfully took us far away from most people, walking us up bigger rocks that provided better footing.



Left to Right: (top) scrambling; (middle) top of moraine, lunch spot at excurrent stream, the men, close-up of waterfalls

All in all, I think everyone was surprised how short and sweet (in the sense of straightforward and satisfying) the moraine scramble felt - even though it was big (and, in my opinion, felt much bigger going down). At the top of the moraine, the views of the Torres were as impressive as I was expecting, having looked at pictures of this view MANY times over the years. Astoundingly, there were no major clouds in the way... just some transient wisps coming over from still-obscured Almirante Nieto. Given a large mob spread across the top of the moraine, Pedro insisted we scramble down to the lakeshore,

specifically to its excurrent stream. I can't say this was as easy as I was expecting - but it wasn't bad... and no one else had discovered this spot. There, I rock-hopped a line of boulders protruding from the lake and had Jacques take my picture, after which other people (both in our group and new people from above) did the same. Even though Andre insisted we each carry two sandwiches, I only ate one. Although it was tempting to want to sit in the sun and stare forever, I think we surprised Pedro by suggesting, after forty-five minutes, that we wanted to get back - mostly because of Andre's prediction that we would not return until WELL after seven; instead, we wanted to enjoy our last night at the estancia, to clean up and pack, to eat with everyone else. And so we headed down. Jacques and David bounded down the moraine - visibly out of sight in a matter of minutes... until we regrouped at the refugio. Initially, I started on my own but kept getting sucked into the slide-y tracks - and so I followed Pedro and his more stable route off to the side. As the slope moderated, Pedro grew worried because John was way behind. Thus, he sent me ahead - at which point I discovered the aforementioned creek-side trail through the trees. At the sidewalk, I waited about ten minutes for Pedro and John. Although I stayed with them a fair bit in the woods, I started jogging and got ahead of them again. At the refugio, I was surprised to find Jacques and David... that is, until their motive became clear: ogling young women backpackers, all of whom looked like white college girls. Indeed, the numbers of women we saw in Torres (everything from independent college students, to a full-on group of teenagers from some private American school, to Hispanic mothers and daughters out hiking for the day) was STAGGERING compared to what Sara and I experienced: i.e. ZERO female groups in 1997... not that David or Jacques fundamentally appreciated this difference.



Left to Right: (top) Rio Ascencio before refugio, looking back from refugio to Torres, down river from refuge, four-tiered waterfall en route; (bottom) Jacques running down trail, guanacos by Laguna Armaga

From the refugio, the climb back to the first highpoint was annoying but I felt strong - chugging up the whole way. At the top, Jacques and I jogged and/or ran down the big descent... the grade was perfect for speed. Although I wondered whether this was good for my knees, I figured that if seventy-something knees could do it - well, mine would be fine. Given that actual nature called Jacques midway down, I was the first back to the trailhead. There, Pedro not only had a private van for us within five minutes BUT Juan-Carlos was at the Armaga building when we arrived. Shortly thereafter, we briefly stopped for some nice views (and pictures) of guanacos along vivid, blue Lago Armaga; there were also a dozen distant flamingos in the water - but you wouldn't know that from my pictures. We were back at the estancia by a little after six - PLENTY of time to enjoy a great soak and shower, to pack, and to relax before dinner. Although I picked the beef option, it wasn't as luscious as last night's cut; but the spinach quiche was superb. Unfortunately, I didn't sleep well - a combination of being too-hyped up and dehydrated (i.e. I was up in the middle night pounding down water... and then peeing).



Left to Right: parting views of estancia and Torres massif - Paine Grande, Cuernos, Almirante Nieto, Torres proper

December 4-5, 2008 - Return to Punta Arenas and Santiago

After breakfast, we left the estancia for good - the views of the Torres massif gorgeous, made more impressive by all these funky lenticular clouds in the sky, floating strangely above the mountains. Our first stop, unplanned, was made when we came upon a major sheep-drive along what was still a dirt road between Torres and Puerto Natales. Here, this classic-looking

gaucho on horseback was the only human in sight - albeit accompanied by half a dozen shepherding dogs (and several hundred - thousand? - sheep). Needless to say, we got out of the bus to take pictures, the gaucho seeming perplexed by our interest in photographing him. We then continued to Puerto Natales, splitting the herd as we drove down the middle of them.



Left to Right: gaucho, gaucho and Andre, sheep in the road, sheep from the bus

Within ninety minutes, we were driving along a familiar and beautiful, mountain-flanked waterway (Seno Ultima Esperanza) that had - even in pouring rain - impressed my mind in 1997. Indeed, today we actually saw the main O'Higgins massif AND Paine Grande against mostly clear skies - all very near Puerto Natales proper. Andre, who resides in Puerto Natales, pointed out his home as we neared the town center. I can't say Puerto Natales looked different... other than a little more hotel sprawl, particularly to the north. Here, we would be dropping off Pedro - and spending just over an hour on our own. My goals included taking out more cash (unfortunately, not enough!), doing a little shopping (i.e. post cards of Torres and a beautiful llama sweater), and enjoying a cup of hot chocolate at our regrouping spot, a brightly-colored coffee shop by the main square. Hmm - now that I am thinking about it: the main square seemed more run-down, the gardens less maintained and more graffiti. There were also more souvenir shops and obvious hotels near the square. But the pretty church, the tourist service area (i.e. where Sara and I caught all our buses), and the young military men wearing fatigues, walking the streets, and carrying large guns seemed highly identical.



Left to Right: O'Higgins and Paine Grande from near Puerto Natales - main square, church, bus station Sara and I used

Back in 1997, Sara and I had planned to make what was (at the time) the seven-hour bus-ride between Puerto Natales and Punta Arenas and, from there, arrange a flight to Rio Gallegos, Argentina (at the time, the only easy way back to Buenos Aires). In the end, we skipped Punta Arenas - taking buses back to Calafate and then Rio Gallegos (cheaper but required two days). On this trip, I was VERY surprised to learn that the ride between Puerto Natales and Punta Arenas is much faster thanks to the paving of the road. Even so, to break up the four-hour drive to Punta Arenas, we would be stopping at a different estancia for an asado (barbeque) lunch, followed by a trip to a penguin rookery/reserve. Of course, my bladder (given the hot chocolate) demanded an impromptu stop within the first hour (at Villa Tehuelches). Even though only Andre and I left the bus, entering a friendly-looking roadside diner, the female owner chewed Andre out while I sat on the can - signs everywhere stating that using the toilet/toilet paper cost \$400 Chilean pesos (about \$0.75). I have no doubt he paid - and yet she still berated him. Thankfully, we were promptly on our way.



Left to Right: lunch stop estancia - asado facilities, gardens around home, crazy penguin prison (NOT the reserve)

Sadly, I have not been able to precisely decipher where the estancia and penguin rookery/reserve were based on the maps I own. All I know: we left the main paved highway at some point, turning onto a dirt road. After twenty minutes, we arrived at this funny little farm that reminded me of, like, someplace you'd see hosting a small-town rodeo barbecue and pancake feed in VERY rural Wyoming. In contrast with said impression, however, a big bus of Taiwanese tourists were, like, already here

chowing down. The immediate grounds consisted of pretty gardens (many flowers in bloom), the touristy asado facilities and dining room which were plain and basic: picnic tables covered partly in colorful vinyl. Thankfully, the grilling/meat area was not as rustic as I was expecting (i.e. no headless lambs on a stick, off which you selected meat); rather, there was a quiet gaucho-esque guy with a fork, handing over piece(s) of meat sections that you pointed to - all pre-cut and laid on a platter. Although the un-refrigerated side dishes featured cream-based things that typically make me (as a microbiologist) think, "classic foodborne Staph," I partook in and enjoyed most and never fell ill. However, I did not strongly agree with Andre's assertion that this lamb (being raised near the saltwater fjords) was fundamentally more savory... but it was juicier and fatter. After a cup of tea (as the Taiwanese tourists sang, took pictures, and left), I headed out to see this crazy display that the estancia owner seemed very proud of (but which several people, including Andre, were NOT interested in encouraging). Indeed, as with comparable, rural American "home wildlife exhibits" featuring things like exotic cats or captive bears, this estancia owner had set up his perception of what tourists wanted (for this area, at least): penguins, penguins, penguins... including, disturbingly, actual Emperor penguins (i.e. the ones in "March of the..."). All had been captured in (presumably) Chilean Antarctic territory and were now being housed in this odd concrete and plastic-liner pool surrounded by a wooden fence. In the words of soft-spoken, mild-mannered Larry (who I NEVER imagined would say such fierce words): "man, this is fucked up." Yes - it was. I was almost ashamed for going back there.

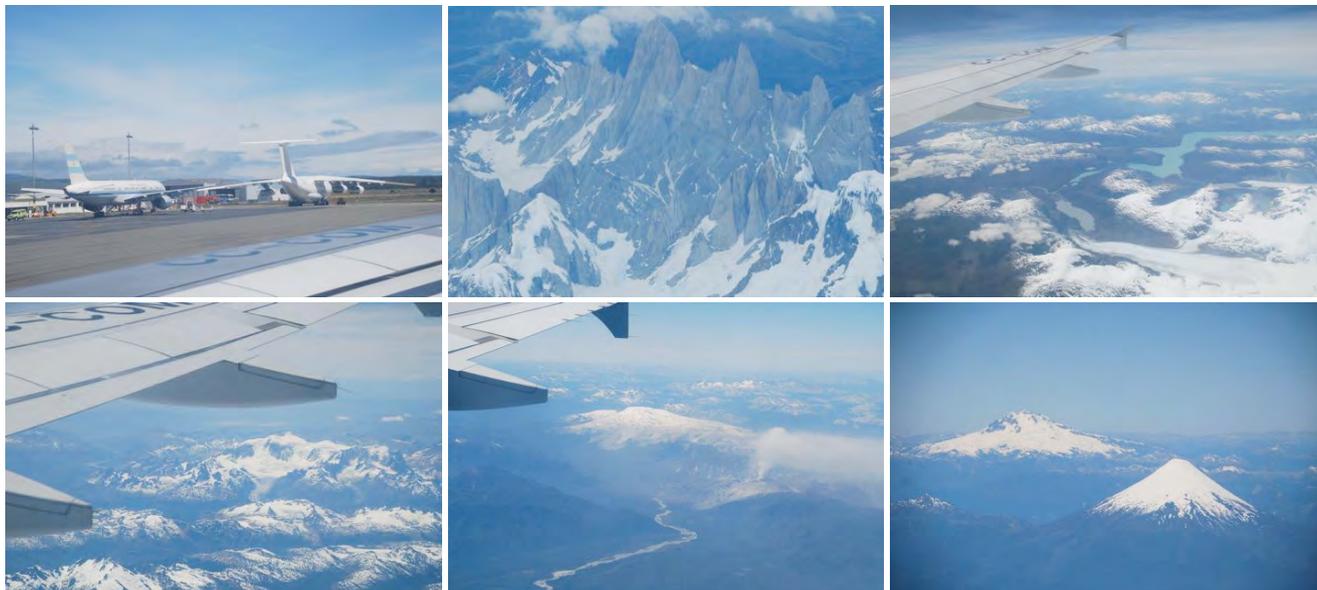


Left to Right: all from natural penguin reserve - boardwalk, public viewing area, penguins, male meadowlark

As for the nearby penguin rookery/reserve we drove to next, this area was a "natural" beach that was privately owned and managed. Remarkably, there were at least four big buses here (including the Taiwanese tourists, again). Adjacent to the parking lot were several structures, including a souvenir kiosk, restrooms, and a cafeteria. Beyond, the grounds were fairly natural: flat grassland interspersed with a few tiny creeks, lots of low penguin burrows, and a couple miles of hand-railed boardwalks. In contrast with nearly all other weather on this trip, our subsequently cut-short boardwalk hike saw TRUE Patagonian winds and cold temperatures - which pleased Andre to no end. Ultimately, we only made it out to the beachfront viewing shelter, where several dozen people were basically huddling from the wind. After seeing ZERO penguins while trudging against the wind across the grassland to said shelter, I was surprised to see several dozen Magellanic penguins on the beach and/or in the surf. Some even started making their way to their inland burrows, exciting several people from their huddling positions. Along with Andre (still fighting his cold), though, I returned to the bus long before everyone else. After regrouping, we were back in Punta Arenas within an hour; I recall arriving there about an hour earlier than expected. I can't say that the weather in Punta Arenas was any better or different than when we first arrived here... but there seemed to be WAY more local people on the streets (despite the fact that it was only around four on a Thursday). Our hotel was, like, the most posh thing in the city; case in point, the presidents of both Argentina and Chile were staying there for some inter-country summit. Consequently, we couldn't pull right up in front of the place; after being dropped off half a block away, we walked through this security zone where police and press were stationed variously. Nevertheless, no one remotely attempted to stop us and - in all honesty - things seemed awfully loose for protecting heads of state. Although the hotel's front desk and lounge areas were swank, I can't say the rooms were any better than those in a typical Marriott. Andre gave us about ninety minutes of free time before our farewell group dinner. My main task was to withdraw more cash for tipping Andre and Juan-Carlos; even though I took out the daily maximum allowed, I screwed up the Chilean peso conversion (i.e. at first, I assumed I didn't have enough... even though it was, in fact, WAY more than I needed). I then enjoyed a shower and short nap prior to regrouping in the hotel lounge so people more skilled than me could make sentimental toasts about the trip. Jacques, who had teased me almost daily about when I was going to cry (because I was so sentimental about my last trip), made some nonspecific remark about tonight finally being the night I was going to do it for him. Given that my mind is usually in the gutter, I misconstrued the context, turning beet-red because I thought he was (as usual) flirting with me again... only, tonight, the ante had apparently gone up. Oh well. People found my response amusing (having not seen me that red), even though most didn't fully comprehend how bad my interpretation had been. This - and the high levels of twitterpation achieved - should further explain why I never cried at any point. Anyway, we walked three blocks to this sort of odd, overly-bright restaurant that Andre said had the best seafood in Punta Arenas. Needless to say, I wasn't excited about it. Mostly, I just remember this long conversation about vaccines and tuberculosis that I had going with MD Gail. Walking back to our hotel, we apparently passed

the presidents (and their entourages) of Chile and Argentina... although I can't say I actually recognized (or even saw) each. After writing my first email home (as in: during this trip), I was in bed by eleven... tomorrow's wake-up and itinerary fairly easy.

After waking at eight, I enjoyed a small breakfast before packing up again. In retrospect, our ten a.m. meeting time seemed awfully close to our eleven-thirty flight back to Santiago... particularly because the airport was twenty minutes away. But we made it - and, once there, our goodbyes were fast. After getting through security, I made my way to the restrooms, which involved one common opening: men one side, women the other. For some reason, I noticed changing tables to the right and proceeded. While sitting on the can, I heard Larry humming while using the urinals. Indeed, BOTH gender restrooms had changing tables - which made Chile (mainland, at least) seem more progressive and cleaner than much of the US. Of course, I had no qualms leaving the stall and saying hello to Larry as I left; and then the others made fun of my apparently sexist decision-making process. My recollection is that our flight was twenty minutes late - but all was good once we boarded: I had a window seat and Jacques was my neighbor. Outside, we could see both presidential jets on the tarmac; unfortunately, the skies did not look promising for pretty mountain views. Glued to the window, though, I did glimpse several Torres lakes and cuernos between the clouds... and then, AMAZINGLY, the whole Fitzroy massif appeared from this ethereal whiteness - totally clear for a full ten seconds.



Left to Right: (top) presidential jets at Punta Arenas, yes - Fitzroy from the air(!), Andes; (bottom) more Andes, Futaleufu river valley with still-erupting Volcan Corcovado(?), Fuji-like Volcan Osorno

Although the skies briefly socked in again, we had GORGEOUS views of the Andes all the way to Puerto Montt, where we stopped to exchange and/or pick up passengers: massive icefields and glaciers, stunning mountains, lakes in every shade of blue, and - during the last thirty minutes - volcanoes, including the one (Corcovado?) that exploded in 2007 near Chaiten (where Allison and I went for 2006's infamous Futaleufu trip). Said volcano was still smoking! After a very efficient stop at Puerto Montt, we were back in the air - flying by Fuji-like Volcan Osorno. Landing in Santiago around two, we all dispersed without a lot of fanfare. In contrast with everyone (all going home) but John (heading to Aconcagua), I simply walked my luggage across the street to the new Holiday Inn. Yes it was tacky and overpriced - but the convenience was SOOOOO awesome. After all, I had a nine a.m. flight to Easter Island the next morning and this hotel cost the equivalent of what I would have had to pay for cabs to/from the city center plus a comparable hotel downtown. Unfortunately, I didn't take pictures of my sleek, modern room - which was nicer than the high-end place at Punta Arenas. After leaving messages with my family and getting Bryan in his office, I enjoyed a good, familiar-tasting dinner: club sandwich, French fries, and this astonishingly thick, rich, raspberry juice that rivaled the comparable drink I so enjoyed in Norway. In fact, I loved it so much that I had two - and was freakishly regular (perhaps TOO regular) for the next several days. Oh well - it was time to go vegetarian and completely purge all the red meat that was rotting in and jamming my pipes. After dinner, I lazed around switching channels between CNN, BBC, and South American MTV, including the always-entertaining "Pimp my Ride." At some point, I did get a hold of my mother - who seemed shocked she could hear me so well... but then it was bedtime.

December 6, 2008 - Easter Island Part One

So I'm not going to lie: after the amazing ease, luxury, and weather experienced in Patagonia (some courtesy of MTS/Andre, some by sheer luck), Easter Island was far less pretty. And this is sad to admit because Easter was a place I had wanted to see since I was very little: specifically, because of that old Leonard Nimoy-hosted show "In Search Of." MTS, however, did arrange my tour and hotel - but, to both our chagrin (in retrospect), I insisted on the absolute bottom-of-the-barrel budget option. Easter Island, though, is NOT a cheap destination - especially during high season (which this was). Just flying there (over four thousand miles, roundtrip) cost me about \$800, and that was reserved seven months in advance. In contrast with the Galapagos access (several competing airlines, shorter flights), only LAN flies to Easter - which probably explains, in part, why the cost is disproportionately higher. Of course, the flights are only the beginning... and I don't want to get ahead of myself. At seven a.m., I made my way back across the street to the airport - which was already chaotic. Although I attempted to use the self-serve check-in computers, neither the LAN representative nor I could get the system to recognize me. Thus, I was sent down to stand in one of the many LONG lines (and, no, that American Gold Card does not translate to affiliates). In

contrast with most American airports, Santiago's ticket counter is organized by both carrier and destination. The LAN area alone consists of probably thirty different counters - each labeled with a different name that changes with flights. Of course, not a single counter said Easter Island. Instead, I was directed to a GIGANTIC line for San Paolo - and assured by two others in line that this was also serving Easter Island. Although things did not move hardly at all for thirty minutes, LAN officials finally separated our groups and the Easter people began to move quickly. Amusingly, the guy in front of me was Steve from New Jersey; Steve was on his way to Easter for the eighth time. He was a representative for Colgate-Palmolive (yes, the toothpaste and detergent company) and one of his sales regions was Chile. Not surprisingly, Steve and I would run into each other a few times on the island - given that its total area is, like, ten by fifteen miles... and there is only one town (Hanga Roa). Anyway, I had my ticket and was through security by around eight thirty. We were boarding within thirty minutes - specifically, a GORGEOUS 767 that offered individual video monitors (with extensive viewing selections) for each person. Although my impression of the ticket line had been that this was a pretty white bread American-looking crowd (including a big retiree group wearing Lindblad regalia), my impression on the plane was different: a LOT of families with kids, most of whom looked and spoke Spanish. If these were, in fact, local Chileans on vacations, it was in stark contrast with the Galapagos-Ecuador experience (i.e. hardly any Ecuadorians are said to vacation in the Galapagos, largely because they are too expensive).



Left to Right: (top) restored moai, in-flight amusement, view for five hours, Easter Island; (bottom) Hanga Roa (below runway) and Volcan Rano Kau/Orongo (above runway), runway from land, airport

Although five and a half hours of sitting on a plane (ONE-way) sounds like a hell of a sacrifice to visit such a small island, I can't say it was painfully long or frustrating... although, if they didn't have the individual video monitors, I might have been less amused. Initially, I was assigned the aisle of the center seating area - a family with three young kids adjacent. Dad, seated next to me, was mostly in charge of the youngest, a toddler who often flopped into my space because he was fussy. Thankfully, I had my earphones and was as deeply engrossed in "Momma Mia" as I could be. After a decent lunch, one of the flight attendants asked me to move to an open center aisle seat a few rows back (this time next to a bunch of brooding college guys) so the family could have more space. There - after finishing "Momma Mia," I watched one of my all-time-favorites: the first "Matrix," cut a minute short because it was time to land. Given that I didn't get to see the island during our landing, all above shots were taken when I left Easter, having obviously been given a window seat. As I learned later during this trip, Easter Island's single jet-worthy runway (which spans the length of a part of the island) was upgraded by the United States when the space shuttle program was being developed (specifically for emergency landings - none of which have happened). After landing, we turned around and taxied back to the airport area - where they opened both ends of the plane and we emptied onto the tarmac. As expected (for all my time on Easter), the skies were blue, the sun was strong, and the air was hot and humid. The baggage claim area was a madhouse; being that my bag was close to the front of the pack, I fought my way through the crowd to grab it - and thankfully escaped. Just outside, someone from my hotel (actually a hostel, according to the island tourism agency) greeted me with a bougainvillea lei and took me to their van. Joining me shortly were two very blond Dutch women (both government employees) who had just spent the last month backpacking through Peru and northern Chile; amusingly, they quickly pegged me for a university biologist - on nothing more than my appearance and habits.

Accommodations on Easter Island are in Hanga Roa. The aforementioned Steve had told me that he used to be able to get a no-frills room for fifty bucks a night; in the last year, though, pretty much all lodging facilities have seriously increased their prices - largely, in his opinion, because some recent American poll placed Easter Island on a revised "wonders of the world" list. Given my experiences, I think it is safe to say that rates have grown at FAST pace - and certainly MUCH faster than has accommodation quality. The place I stayed was extremely basic and inland - in what I would call a residential neighborhood (Easter Island being home to around 3000 residents). Even so, the tropical hotel grounds were more spacious and lush than the adjacent dwellings. I would guess that there were twenty rooms, all located in a couple one-story buildings. Each had a nice but public deck/walkway (with bench) that looked over the grounds in some way; over time, I grew to enjoy sitting outside and enjoying the views of the skies, palms, and banana trees. But the room itself definitely left something to be desired - and it was (in no way) comparable to any similarly-priced (i.e. hundred-dollar a night) hotels in the US; indeed, I would have paid no more than fifty bucks for a room like this... and even that would have been generous. Why? Well - the bed was fine but it

was detectably old and too soft (to the point I suspected some springs were broken), housecleaning didn't do anything on a daily basis (and given the insane humidity, I wanted things changed out), the bathroom worked but it was highly unfinished, the continental breakfasts were miniscule, and - most importantly - there was a massive ant infestation... not to mention several HUGE roach sightings. Definitely not in first world mainland Chile anymore. And, again, I should stress that during my five days on Easter, I had the opportunity to compare hotel impressions and costs with fellow travelers from six other places (most real hotels, including several beachfront ones with pretty views of the ocean) but everyone had similar thoughts as me: rooms and services were REALLY basic, they did not align with the high prices being charged, and they did not match expectations based on experiences in the US (or even mainland Chile). Although no one else had insect problems, a woman I met from one of the beachfront hotels had her purse stolen from her room while she slept (having cracked open the door to their deck for some air). Mind you, I didn't get feedback about the deluxe Explora Lodge (what MTS felt matched my Patagonia trip)... and, sure, if I had a couple thousand extra dollars burning a hole in my pocket, I might have gone that route. Instead, I sucked it up and did my best to ignore the ants and roaches... among other things. After unpacking and showering, it was time for an afternoon nap; unfortunately, the daytime noise in residential Hanga Roa is INSANE: constant barking dogs and crowing roosters... both of which (along with horses) freely roamed the streets. Fortunately, earplugs cut most of the sound. Nonetheless, this and many other things have convinced me that Easter Island is a total cash cow for Chile, even though they really have not invested back into the place. Although I don't want to see the place overdeveloped, it is second world out there compared to the mainland: only a few main roads are paved, the rest of the roads (even some that are paved) are horrible, there were sanitation issues, the livestock situation was almost third world (and contributing to sanitation issues), and - in my opinion - the archeological sites are not being protected. Perhaps the saddest statement is that the Heyerdahl Museum in Oslo, Norway (which I visited last May) seemed like it spent more money and presented better information about Easter Island history and archeology than anywhere on Easter Island (and, yes, Easter Island does have a tiny museum which I did visit - for about half the entrance fee as the Oslo museum). In sum, someone needs to start investing more of Easter Island's skyrocketing profits back into the island or it will lose its value as a tourist destination.



Left to Right: (top) airport, bougainvillea, hotel grounds; (bottom) various shots of hotel

I woke up from my nap around three and decided it was time to go walking. Given that finding maps of tiny Hanga Roa had been challenging, I set out following hand-painted road signs for the museum. I assumed it would impossible to get lost but somehow I did - at least temporarily... or maybe I was just drawn to the town's colorful seaside graveyard, pulling me down the wrong road and toward the gorgeous blue ocean. I would be lying if I said that Hanga Roa felt completely safe; even though my rationale mind believes that Easter is one of the safest places, something often tugged at my female intuition MANY times walking by myself: Be Careful. And, alas, I felt that way because there were a fair number of sketchy men (both lone and in groups) and there was this combination of ramshackle houses and overgrown jungle-like space that I didn't like the feel of. From the graveyard, I saw my first moai (the word for human figure statues) in the distance - easily accessible by obvious trail or wide, bumpy dirt road. All land near the sea, it seemed, was open, bare, dry, brown (in terms of grass), and rough lava (with only a couple very small sandy beaches - all crazy-crowded). As I walked the coastline, a couple other camera-wielding tourists were in front of me, as were some locals barbecuing freshly-caught seafood on some flat lava benches. But, so far, I was impressed with the lack of crowds... something I could not say tomorrow. Actually seeing a moai up-close is very impressive. The moais at this site (Ahu Kote Riku) were all restored - in the sense that someone (often a private benefactor - as I learned) paid a lot of money to un-topple the figures - and cement back on the broken heads. Leonard Nimoy aside, my most recent information about Easter Island comes from a combination of Jared Diamond's Collapse (which I nearly completed while on Easter Island) and things I learned on the island. Honestly, I found Diamond's book the most informative - probably because he didn't whitewash anything... where I felt the locals (as Diamond said would be the case) didn't emphasize how badly the indigenous people destroyed the island; they also never discussed the darker history (e.g. how bad things got during the wars, including the practice of cannibalism). Indeed, as resources dwindled, warring clans (there were 11-13 on the island) purposely toppled each other's moais (each representing a clan leader) - the explicit goal being to force them to the ground, breaking their necks. Although I didn't notice it today, I quickly became aware of the fact that pretty much every restored moai has a necklace ring of cement. Moai were generally placed on ahu, the word for the big rocky platform burial

sites. In addition, there were stonework walls and other structures at Ahu Kote Riku (and other sites), the most common being chicken coops - as raising chickens became a common practice on the island as natural resources were exploited. Hmmm - could all these loud and freely roaming poultry be historical descendents? Probably. There were some official placards at Ahu Kote Riku - mostly explaining the rules: no walking on any ahu or touching any ruins, and you should be with an official guide at all times. But the placards were minimal and there seemed to be zero enforcement (or enforcement infrastructure). I assumed there would be at least some kind of entrance or permit process involved in visiting the ruins - a way to not only generate revenue for protecting the ruins, but also to make sure that someone official explain the rules (or provide a brochure about the rules) to every visitor. As far as I can tell, though, you can just show up and go wherever you want. The aforementioned Steve, for example, said his favorite thing to do was rent an ATV and venture out. Given the lack of an organized park, it shouldn't be a surprise that - just last year - a European tourist used an axe to chip off one of the moai earlobes at one of the most popular and accessible areas on the island.



Left to Right: (top) graveyard, graveyard view, Ahu Kote Riku moais; (bottom) more Ahu Kote Riku - lava beach, wild horses

At some point while strolling among the moai at Ahu Kote Riku, I stumbled across another sign for the museum - and followed a dirt road through slightly more upscale houses. Although I did find the museum, it was closed - today, tomorrow, and the next day. Well, I guess that meant I would be going there on day four - my last full day on the island. Ambling back to Hanga Roa's main street (Ave. Atamu Tekena), I bought the first of many trinkets (including an irresistibly tacky moai-covered Hawaiian shirt) and then hit a so-called supermercado, which was actually more like a gas station mini-mart. Although there was a more legitimate-looking grocery store nearby, it was closed (not only today, but every time I tried to go there). Thus, hopes to enjoy budget grocery lunches and dinners was foiled, my choices limited to boxes of peach or apricot juice, yogurt, and chips. After returning to my hotel, showering again (as I was totally sweaty from the humidity and heat) and consuming my supermercado items, I decided another nap was in order. Not surprisingly, I was starving when I awoke again - to the point that I spent the equivalent of twenty bucks on a tiny salami-cheese grill-pressed sandwich, a tiny salad, and a tiny bowl of semi-freezer-burnt chocolate ice cream. Ahhh... this is why I'd hoped to avoid restaurants: overpriced and under-quality (which, again, sounds like the hotels). When I returned to my hotel, a British couple in full garb had just returned from their wedding; later, I learned that they actually had the ceremony performed out at Ahu Tongariki, which I'd be visiting tomorrow. Meanwhile, the nervous-looking mother of the bride sat on her bench a few doors down, smoking heavily in a magenta satin dress. After an hour reading Diamond, I retired - earplugs firmly in place.



Left to Right: Vaihu toppled moais and topknot, Rano Raraku (quarry) overview, Ahu Nau Nau at Anakena beach

December 7, 2008 - Easter Island Part Two

Like the Dutch women, I awoke too early, having not realized Easter is TWO hours behind Santiago (not just one). Unlike them (who somehow talked their way into an early breakfast), I went back to bed. Today represented the full-day tour that MTS had arranged through the largest-looking tour/bus operator on the island (in contrast with my assumption that I would be working with a private guide). Although it took me a day to warm up to this large group, I did enjoy them... but I wouldn't do

this kind of tour again. After a paltry breakfast (I swear the staff, like, counted and weighed every morsel of food), I enviously watched my Dutch neighbors get whisked off in a jeep by their private female guide. Meanwhile, my twenty-seat bus showed up - and, yes, ALL would be filled today. My greatest complaint about the tour was that we wasted a lot of time driving Hanga Roa's crazy roads to pick up and then drop off people from six different hotels (I was second on the list). Why they didn't mandate a common pick-up time and place in the center of town - and make everyone find their way there - was a complete mystery. The first day was the most frustrating because half the people were not on time and then, for some reason, they took us to an actual gas station mini-mart for water, snacks, ATM, and a restroom. While this was a ridiculous stop, I will say that the gas station had better food than the mini-supermercado - and thus I stocked up on granola cookies, crackers, and chocolate. Our group consisted of about a third English-speakers (half American, half Australian), a third Germans, and a third Spanish-speaking. Our tour guide, a middle-aged woman from Chile, spoke in both English and Spanish - being that the Germans spoke sufficient English to get by. Fellow Americans included a family from California and a pair of women from Colorado (involved in the aforementioned hotel theft).



Left to Right: Vaihu - buses, moai, shopping bonanza with Rano Kau Crater in distance

We FINALLY hit the one main paved highway - off to Vaihu, along the southern coast. In contrast with Ahu Kote Riku, Vaihu was crowded (although you could take decent pictures without people in them) and the ruins were not restored. Vaihu featured one main ahu with several toppled moai - plus impressive red lava topknots in the foreground. Although I thought toppled moai were initially fascinating, I was less into them over time... partly because they all started to look the same and partly because they seemed unkempt against the sober brown landscape. At most of today's sites, everyone dispersed, our guide seeming not to mind. I don't know what other peoples' excuses were; mine was that we typically arrived along with four or five other buses, and I could out-walk most others (given that most sites required a block of walking to access). Returning to the bus, I was surprised to find four semi-insistent vendors selling wares on tables. I did give in and buy a couple mini-moais and shell jewelry. Much as I wanted to buy any number of feathered ornaments, I suspected customs would confiscate them (although they fully allowed shells, which was surprising). We then drove ten minutes along the coast to our next stop at Ahu Akahanga, which also featured toppled moai. Behind the main ahu, there was a lone moai that was much older. My understanding is that old moai were smaller and had more natural facial features where younger moai became larger over time (perhaps reflecting more competitive and/or greedy clan leaders) and more stylized (i.e. more sharp eyes, nose and ears/lobes). Off to the side of the old moai there were more toppled younger moai... in what seemed like a big pile of rubble.



Left to Right: Ahu Akahanga - moai head, topknots and blue water, old moai, toppled moais

Our next big stop was - by a LONG shot - the BEST on the island: the quarry at Rano Raraku, the gray-black rock crater from which the moai bodies were carved. One of the surprising facts I learned reading Diamond is that there are 700-800 moai on the island... and HALF are still at the quarry, in various stages of carving or transport across. In contrast with final site moai, none of the quarry moai were purposely toppled or disfigured during the clan wars - specifically because moais did not "become" synonymous with clan/leaders UNTIL they were formally erected and their eyes, a combination of white coral and red lava, inlaid (only one or two of these fragile entities has survived... most having long disintegrated into sand). Pulling up to this strange little oasis-like cluster of trees (which, oddly, reminded me of Phantom Ranch), we parked and disembarked from the bus. By now, most of us needed to use the bathroom - which cost the equivalent of a dollar; an attendant actively collected money and handed you a generous folding of toilet paper in front of the restroom entrance. Outside, there were several other semi-permanent structures - including a mini-mall of vendor stalls, a large covered shelter with picnic tables, and brick fire-pits/ovens for grilling. Indeed, after our tour (which, again, coincided with four to five other busloads), EVERYONE amassed in this area for lunch. Although it had been easy to photograph previous ruins without people in the shots, it was nearly impossible at the quarry. Leaving the picnic area, I climbed this wide path that gently ascended the grassy flanks of the crater. Although we eventually did climb to the higher base of the actual volcanic stone, we never got - like - close to the crater rim (although there is an old but currently-closed trail that does go up there). Within five minutes, we began walking through these random moais protruding from the ground, a chaotic procession down the hill - halted, literally, in their tracks...

the entire process of carving halted in medias res. There was, more or less, a loop trail through the quarry. I took the high route first - passing by what are probably the most photographed moais in the quarry: the quirky angled moai in the top row below, and this highly stylized narrow moai shown twice in the middle section below.



Left to Right: images from the quarry - most middle shots are carvings in progress, last shot is old moai at end of trail

After a little climbing, I came to the edge of the rock - where one can get the most close to the moais that were abandoned while still being carved. Many of these reminded me of the giant Buddha's that the Taliban blew up during the years just before 911. A small side-trail lead around the main face of the crater - terminating at this very old moai that had, I recall reading, been dug up and restored - notably overlooking the highly restored ruins at Ahu Tongariki, our next destination (after lunch). I then returned to the main trail and followed a lower route back - with some interesting (but people-littered) views of the whole quarry area. Back at the picnic area, I did a little more shopping before lunch, picking up a too-tempting lapis lazuli mini-moai (this combination is a total anachronism - lapis lazuli being mainland Chile's favorite semi-precious stone... but not associated with Easter). And then our guide fished us from the masses, handing out hot, foil-wrapped trays with chicken and rice - along with one can of soda, one roll, and one cup of strawberry Jell-O. Reminiscent of my hotel breakfasts, the tour staff reprimanded one of the German men when he attempted to take a second soda from the ice-chest. Meanwhile, the women from Colorado and I amused ourselves with the quarry cats - although this Spanish-speaking guy in our group, who looked like he was in a motorcycle gang, was the one who sweetly fished chicken from the trash and hand-fed it to the cats.



Left to Right: lunchtime, quarry mommy cat and kitten brood, Rano Raraku crater profile (shot from Ahu Tongariki)

After another dollar-trip to the bathroom, we headed ten minutes down the road to Ahu Tongariki, the largest restored ruin: a GIGANTIC ahu with fifteen different-looking moias. Even though Tongariki is very photogenic and impressive, I - given what were consistently small ahu elsewhere on the island (the most moais/ahu = seven) - could not help but wonder if this was REALLY how this site originally looked. This low, shallow beach had, after all, been completely devastated by a massive tsunami during the last century - dispersing all the ruins. Unfortunately, I neither heard nor found any detailed history to

explain this site or the rationale behind its restoration (indeed, I even bought/read a whole history book about Easter Island archaeology and it said nothing informative about this site). Certainly, there would have been pictures of this area before the restoration (undertaken by the Japanese) - and probably even before the tsumani. Consequently, the scientist in me wants to see the evidence for this chosen restoration - because, in my opinion, it did not match anything else on the island and it simply did not feel correct... it felt anachronistic: as though modern people wanted to believe it had to have been SOOO grand.



Left to Right: nearly all Ahu Tongariki - (top) from Rano Raraku, from parking area, walking trail; (bottom) head-on and from behind; our next brief stop at Ahu Te Pito Kura: the navel of the world

After twenty minutes of driving - first due north across this inland section that was west of the semi-roadless Poike Peninsula and then northwesterly along the northern coast - we briefly stopped at Ahu Te Pito Kura. I don't remember much about this stop except that, as its name roughly means, this is home to the "navel of the world" rocks (what Easter Island represents as well). I recall there being some moais there but, again, the toppled ruins all started to blend together. Although a lot of people lined up to physically touch the navel rock, I didn't have any strong inkling to do so. From here, we proceeded another ten minutes up the coast to Easter Island's largest sandy beach called Anakena, which was also home to Ahu Nau Nau - the first (and most well-preserved) restored moais... specifically discovered buried in the sand and re-erected by Heyerdahl.



Left to Right: Anakena, Ahu Nau Nau, old moai butt carving (for lack of a better description)

Although we had been told to bring a bathing suit and towel for Anakena (as we were given an hour there), I am not a big fan of swimming in the ocean - especially given the big crowd scene (howsoever idyllic it looks in the picture). But about half our group went in, the rest of us exploring Ahu Nau Nau and enjoying some shade under the palm trees - all of which had been planted post-Heyerdahl. At some point, I learned that the aforementioned axe-earlobe-incident happened here... which I found shocking given how crowded this place must often be. After Anakena, we returned to Hanga Roa via the mostly-direct central highway. The interior of Easter, as we discovered more tomorrow, is dotted with many small, eroded craters, lava fields, and a lot of land that is being farmed in some way (e.g. off-the-grid shack-like dwellings with fields of taro, grazing lands for cattle or sheep). There were occasional groups of trees or small patches of jungle-like plants - but only one area I would call an outright forest... and, again, all large trees represent recent replanting efforts given that the entire island was deforested prior to the clan wars (which also meant the loss of most native species). North and northwest of the central highway represents a less accessible part of the island - in the sense that it lacks paved roads. This region encompasses Terevaka, Easter's highest point. My twenty-dollar Easter Island map depicts a "track" with ATV, horse, and hiker symbols heading to the top of Terevaka. Based on my conversations with Steve, many "pseudo-roadless" areas on the island are open to ATV's and horses, which - in my mind - is unfortunate. The northern and northwestern coasts (which feature many ruins), however, does show tracks with only hiker symbols. Although Steve said he had not found a way execute this fifteen-mile route (said to be challenging), he knew people who had arranged for a taxi to drop them off near Ahu Akivi (which we'd visit tomorrow) and then pick them up ten hours later at Anakena. Prior to visiting Easter, I'd found a couple groups (backpacking and equestrian) who did run weeklong trips around the whole island, presumably via these areas. The other semi-roadless

area lies at the east end, the aforementioned Peninsula Poike. Although there are fewer ruins along Poike, there is something called Ana o Neru, which Steve finally visited (albeit with a lot of effort and an expensive guide/transport): the cave of the white virgins, the place where several girls were kept in the dark (so they could lighten up, as this trait was apparently valued); new leaders got their pick upon "winning" the birdman ceremony (which I'll talk about based on things we saw tomorrow). Anyway, I was back at my hotel by around six - probably thirty minutes late. After a short nap, I headed out for some shopping (i.e. my cleansing yogurt and apricot juice dinner plus more trinkets), ate and read on my deck, and was in bed by ten.



Left to Right: birdman petroglyphs at Ana Kai Tangata, Volcan Rano Kau, lava tube caves at Ana Te Pahu

December 8-10, 2008 - Easter Island Part Two, Leaving Easter

Today, I awoke to full-on rain, cool temperatures, and totally gray skies - which would not only persist until noon but also return variously later in the day. Indeed, I can honestly say that - between today and tomorrow - the weather on Easter Island was worse than Patagonia. In contrast with pre-trip information MTS provided me (which said I would be having two half-day excursions - one today and one tomorrow), BOTH half-day tours happened today. My first thought: that means we are going to waste an hour in the morning (with pick-ups/drop-offs)... repeat in the afternoon. But, honestly, today's itinerary wasn't bad; plus, we lost a few people but those remaining were punctual and I actually got to know many of them.



Left to Right: Ana Kai Tangata - looking down at cove and trail to cavern, looking out from cavern, looking back at cavern

Our morning tour focused on Easter's southwestern peninsula (i.e. on the other side of the runway relative to Hanga Roa). Our first stop was at Cueva Ana Kai Tangata, an undercut cavern within the seawall of lava. Given that it was spitting rain, several people sat out this stop. Meanwhile, the rest of us braved the elements and walked this muddy, rocky, somewhat slick path down to the cavern. Once inside the cavern (which was about a quarter the size of Redwall, in the Grand Canyon), it was actually pleasant. Our guide pointed out these rock paintings on the ceiling. Amusingly, I tried my damndest to figure out what they were at the time... but it wasn't until I came home and looked at my photographs that I just went: oh, those are the birdmen. Anyway, my impression is that this was the place from which the birdman ceremony commenced. My understanding of Easter Island's history is that there was a major shift in government following the clan wars and population crash - a result of resource exploitation which involved suffering, death, and cannibalism (indeed: Ana Kai Tangata means "cave where men are eaten"). Instead of the previous system (essentially, family-based monarchy within each clan), post-apocalyptic leaders were selected (more or less) based on physical strength (and probably luck): specifically, whichever man was able to swim from this cave out to this island (which we saw at our next stop), retrieve a bird egg (I can't recall if it was a specific kind), and bring it back was the new leader for one year (and also got his pick of the white virgins prepared out on Poike).

Returning to the buses, we then proceeded up Volcan Rano Kau, arriving at the crater rim in fog so dense that you could not see the bottom of the crater - or across the crater. Given that the rain had stopped, though, we did take a short walk along the crater - hoping things would clear. Of course, this is where my out-walking skills separated me from the group to the point that I missed our guide's summon to turn around. Eventually I realized no one was coming behind me and I backtracked to the parking area. There, I saw the group walking in the opposite direction: toward Orongo, a partially restored post-apocalyptic village where people lived part of the year... coinciding with the birdman ceremony and the dry season (i.e. because the crater provided a supply of fresh water). Walking by the low stone structures, we could look out at Bird Island. Eventually, we came to a narrow rim overlook - the immediate skies clear to the point that we saw the colorful rim and the boggy crater. Indeed, many interesting core samples from the crater swamp have provided important data regarding now-extinct plant-life and resource utilization/availability over time. We then headed back down, stopping midway for a not-worth-including picture of Hanga Roa from a couple hundred feet up. Our final morning stop was at Ahu Vinapu. As with many of yesterday's stops, this one featured a large ahu with several toppled moai; however, Vinapu's unique distinction was that there was also a headless female moai that had been stood up. Of course, several of us were at a loss to "see" what about this piece of rock made it female - but we did agree that it was different than the male moai, and we decided that native women must have been flat-chested. Incidentally, so far, only two female moai have been found (the other is at the museum and does include the head),

with all indications being that they represent more ceremonial or spiritual ideas about women - as opposed to specific women with tangible power. After being returned to my hotel for lunch, I chatted with the newlyweds who were playing board-games on their veranda. When I said I was starving, they recommended a pizza place just up the hill. And so I ordered my eight-inch more-cheese-than-anything special. Back at the hotel, I finished three slices and snuck the last one into a refrigerator in the dining area (at the time, I was certain the staff would reprimand me - but no one seemed to notice).



Left to Right: (top) Motu Nui/Birdman Island, Orongo; (bottom) Rano Kau, Vinapu female moai, Puna Pao topknot quarry

Within the hour, I was back on the bus but my companions continued to drop like flies: the entire Australia contingent had totally bailed... which was good because most were verging on pneumonia. The afternoon theme was central Easter Island, with our first stop at Puna Pau, the so-called topknot quarry. Given how impressive the moai body quarry at Rano Raraku was, I was TOTALLY expecting this place to be amazing. In fact, Puna Pau was this tiny, overgrown depression of gold grass with few obvious red lava seams visible, half a dozen eroding topknots strewn about. However, it was interesting to learn that the topknots (wheel-like disks) had to be carved, like, several feet larger in diameter than intended because, in the act of rolling them to their final destination, they eroded THAT much material off. Nevertheless, I wondered if we'd seen the best of Easter yesterday and now things were just going down hill, eroding in a manner that was akin to the topknots themselves. While it is true (in my opinion) that we had seen Easter's best yesterday, our two final stops were more interesting than expected: Ahu Akivi (Seven Founder Moai) and Ana Te Pahu (lava cave farms).



Right to Left: (top) Ahu Akivi moai, Ana Te Pahu lava cave farm-gardens; (bottom) caves, museum, taking off - Hanga Roa

Ahu Akivi is the site where seven moais were erected to honor the men who founded Easter Island, having been sent out to look for new islands by early Polynesians. In contrast with all other moais (all clan leaders, facing inland), the seven founder moais face the sea - presumably because, as explorers, that is what they did. This site was restored, supposedly by a private American donor. While I wouldn't call the site or its surroundings awe-inspiring, hearing and knowing the story of this site - and recognizing its unique status - was interesting. Five minutes down the road - and surrounded by impressive lava fields -

was Ana Te Pahu. While Ana Te Pahu is one of the longer and larger lava tube caves (at one time, you could walk over a mile through it to the ocean), it is fairly representative of a lot of Easter Island's cave-strewn lava fields. Most interesting, though, indigenous people used these caves for farming because they provided cooler, wetter microclimates for growing things like bananas, taro, and figs - the former two of which were growing wild in Ana Te Pahu. At this site, we climbed down a rough path into the cavern and then walked a few hundred feet in the dark cave - where another ceiling failure had happened (i.e. light entered and there was a big pile of rocks blocking further easy walking). After a fairly short drive back to Hanga Roa, I was back to my hotel by six. About this time, the Dutch women were also returning - in their case, from a nearly full day of horseback riding, something I really thought I wanted to do before this trip. Given that I chatted with them after most of their outings (which included more extensive walking/hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding), I think it says a lot that they were exhausted by and in the most pain after today's ride. Howsoever tempting I thought horseback riding on Easter would be, I wasn't drawn to the idea once I saw the place: the typical riding trails advertised for tourist trips were mostly nondescript inland locations and, given all the freely-roaming horses everywhere in the town, I questioned the quality of the tour operators. After an ATM and grocery run, it was another quiet night of the same-old, same-old: eating, reading, going to bed early.

Given that I knew that I was about to endure, like, twenty-six hours of flights and layovers, my last full day on Easter was mostly about banking as much rest as I could. Waking to another wet morning, I enjoyed a later breakfast than usual - before heading out on foot to the museum. There, I paid the equivalent of fifteen bucks for my entrance fee plus a decent museum guidebook. But, honestly, the place was sparse: one room that was a forty foot square - with nearly all displays in the form of laminated posters - some pictures but way too much text. Yes, there were a few nice archaeology specimens (e.g. the other female moai, an original coral-lava moai eye, lots wood carvings)... but, given what I've read about Heyerdah's expeditions, I suspect a lot of things are either not on display or elsewhere in the world. The museum gift shop was well-stocked and had the best interesting trinkets on the island - including beautiful artwork by local painters (which I would have bought but getting them back in one piece would have been a challenge). By noon, I was back at the hotel - where I rested, napped, and relaxed the rest of the day... showers continuing most of the rest of the day. The next day, the Dutch women and I were taken to the airport around eleven. First in line, I was pleased to get a window seat; however, I was not pleased to hear that they couldn't check me all the way back home - even though I was proceeding directly onto my US-bound flight after landing in Santiago. During the flight, I indulged Keanu yet again, this time watching "Something's Gotta Give" - although, if I were Keaton's character, I would have stuck with Keanu. We landed on time (around eight, after losing two hours) and fortunately my American Gold Card worked (i.e. no waiting in lines for my final tickets) because, from here on out, I was flying American. Indeed, every transition during the flight home was on time and remarkably stress-free - including customs in Dallas.

Closing Thoughts

So - I have nothing but spectacular things to say about Patagonia and the fantastic itinerary and leadership MTS executed for this "Explorer" trip. In the realm of my ranked "greatest trips" list, it is worth mentioning that MTS holds two of the top spots: their Alsek (Yukon/Alaska) still holds the top position, and Patagonia - both Sara and my version and this trip ties for second. While I could easily see myself indulging the Explorer on a more regular basis (i.e. once every five years even), I think I have developed more serious backpacking aims in that part of the world for the moment (e.g. the French and Silencio Valleys in Torres del Paine)... and Andre knows I am deeply tempted by the challenging icefield trek around the Fitzroy massif, a topic of a few conversations. We'll see about that idea. Going into this trip, though, I would have never predicted Patagonia would or could be so sweet again; indeed, I had serious concerns I was going to be disappointed by it - because of constantly bad weather (the specific ramifications being no views and/or getting sick as per my Mont Blanc-pneumonia incident), because of over-development, or because it just didn't seem as beautiful or impressive as my first time. In the end, though, only point two annoyed me (and only in Calafate and Perito Moreno). As a relevant aside (in terms of the title), Jenn openly predicted last year I would get smacked by serious temptation during one of my big sabbatical trips; after quietly making it through the Galapagos, Norway, and the Grand Canyon/Colorado, I was actually surprised that Patagonia offered up three very distracting men on that level. Hence, I was twitterpated much of the time in Patagonia (as were several group members, in my opinion). But, honestly, I chock it up to more than just the obvious things (be they Andre's adorable looks, Jacques off-the-charts flirtatiousness and charm, or David's worldly intellect and boyish bouts of shyness): there simply was something in the air on this trip - that quality of springtime bursting, warm sun, flowers, vivid greenery against blue skies (interrupting what has been a dreary, cold, gray fall-winter for most of us)... all reminiscent of the Alsek trip, the only other trip that comes close to this one in any of those terms (including the twitterpation level). Indeed, it should be no surprise that my favorite trips have been the ones where I was in love with almost everything the whole time. And Patagonia is a place that was magical the first time - and, coming back, I only fell in love with the place more... as though it really is a fundamental part of me.

Given all those superlatives, it should also be no surprise that Easter Island didn't have a chance of living up to Patagonia - even though I felt, before this trip, I was slightly more excited about seeing what were new things there... and definitely more confident the weather would be kinder. Although I'm glad I saw it once, I probably wouldn't go back there again. The cost and effort is barely worth it given the quality - whether in terms of accommodations, service, or things related to the ruins. And, honestly, I didn't find most of Easter physically beautiful. At first, this impression seemed a little odd to me because, when I think about - say - the comparably remote, volcanic Galapagos Islands, they were similarly austere in terms of landscape - but the flora and fauna there were so remarkable and Allison and my small-group ship venue was so intimate, satisfying, and relaxing... plus, it was more than clear that Ecuador is more serious about protecting that place. Even though the Galapagos has suffered historical resource exploitation (e.g. turtle plundering), you don't feel it like you do on Easter... at some level, Easter just feels like this terrific scar - and what is sadder: the lack of management there, the lack of enforced access or visitation standards, and the relative level of living standards (as compared with mainland Chile) feels like it is just an ongoing scarring process. But maybe that is what Easter Island - given its remarkable history - is supposed to feel like. Nonetheless, I felt no love on Easter - and not even a second of twitterpation.

