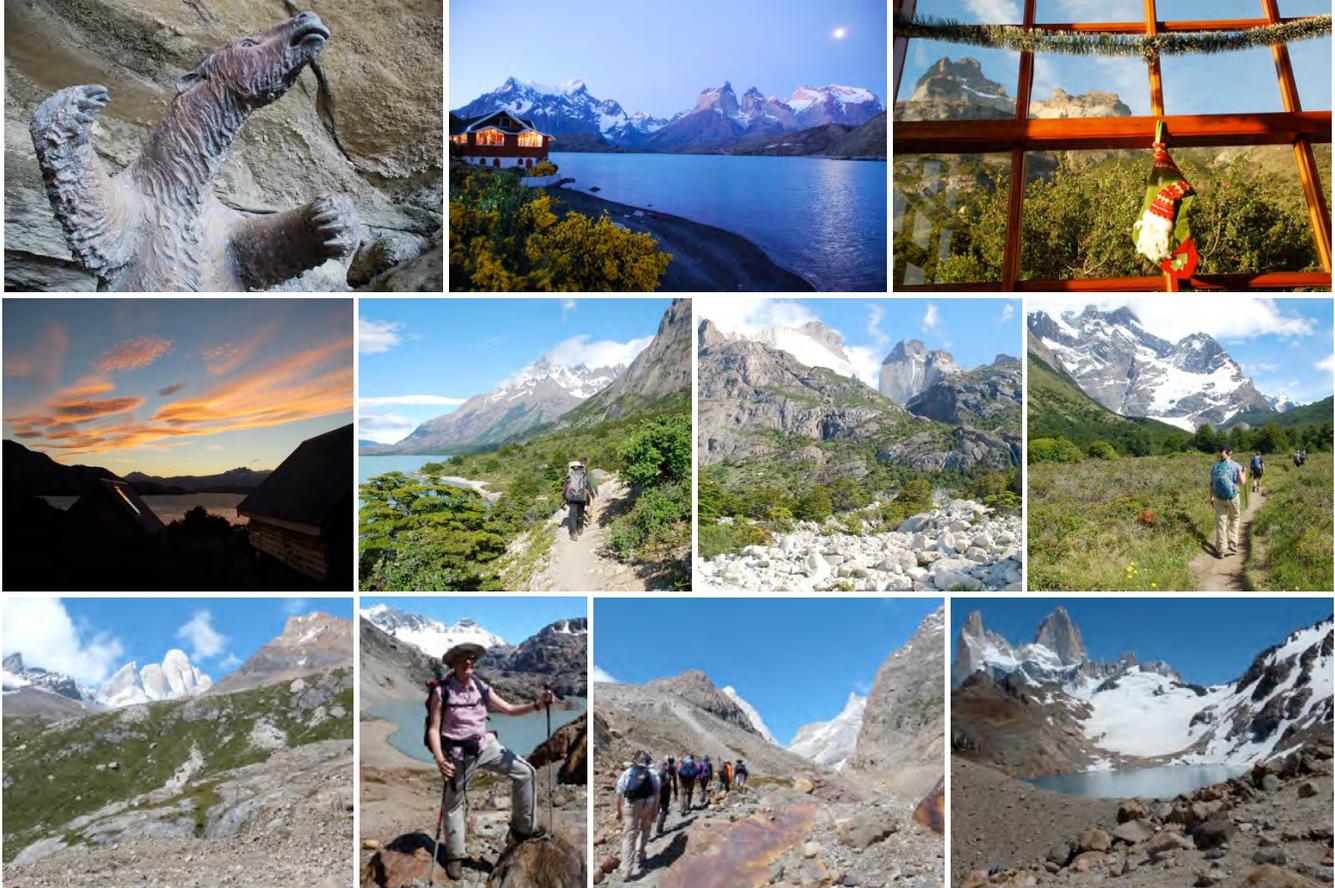




Dayhiking Patagonia, December 2012

Unfinished Business and the Prices of Shockingly Awesome Weather



Left to Right: (top) Cueva Milodon, Xmas Eve at Hosteria Pehoe, Xmas dinner under Cuernos; (middle) Twilight at Lago Nordenskold, under Cuernos I & II, into the French Valley; (bottom) Fitzroy from Electrico Valley, me and Lago Electrico/Marconi massif, Pollone drainage – Fitzroy North Face, Lago de los Tres and Fitzroy – my THIRD clear day here!

Introduction and Overview

As most people familiar with this page know, I first visited Patagonia in 1997 (an adventurous self-guided backpacking trip with Sara) and then I returned in 2008 (doing a luxurious cruise-hike tour with Mountain Travel Sobek, MTS). On the latter, leader Andre gave me some grief about why I was doing the cushy trip - as opposed to their more strenuous hiking-only version. Ironically, I still remember my response: I was gun-shy about more strenuous trips after coming back from Mont Blanc with pneumonia in 2005 (a noteworthy recollection given that I picked up this year's super-bad influenza strain at the end of this trip). However, given my 2011 summer's MANY successful outings (not to mention a healthy tour of SE Asia last winter), I was full of myself come spring – and so I decided to book/repeat BOTH the Southern John Muir/Whitney (for my 45th birthday in August) AND this harder version of Patagonia. Of course, when I went to book with MTS, they didn't have any Patagonia trips that overlapped with my break. But then I noticed the shiny new National Geographic (NG) catalog; not only did they offer a perfectly timed Hikers' Patagonia trip, but it was subcontracted through MTS. And this mattered because my one experience with NG (albeit partnered with Lindblad – see Norway 2008) was not active – consistent with my preconception that NG (in terms of who its magazine and television enterprise seems aimed at) seems more about armchair adventuring. MTS, on the other hand, was a well-known quantity to me – providing active trips and attracting active clientele.

Unfortunately, as with many cycles in my life, last summer's strong season was followed by MANY challenges, including running-induced knee problems during my spring training regimen, a wicked July allergy season that culminated in a major sinus-ear infection (the latter ultimately pulled me out of the Southern John Muir Trail/Whitney trip). Although Allison/Marshall and I enjoyed a couple weekends of Oregon hiking come late September, I plowed straight into a hard fall term – complete with another sinus-ear infection right after Thanksgiving. By December, I cannot say I was filled with great confidence... but I did perk up when the final trip materials arrived – and I saw Andre would be our leader (I had not considered that he might be with us again). Writing this a month after returning (and STILL trying to get rid of my post-flu cough) will be one of my bigger writing challenges because, while I do remember how amazing much of this trip felt, it was as amazingly devastating to get so sick the last couple of days, to fly back alone and out of my head, and to miss a week of work. And, sadly, that was not the only price paid: at least 5 others had similar illnesses by the end, 2 of us (including me) got food poisoning, we lost one couple to a freak fall/broken wrist, my big camera took a tumble and is now broken, etc. Best friend Diane remarked in an email at the end of week one (at the time, I was running a 102.5 fever, in bed between serious bouts of diarrhea): What the hell did you people do... walk under EVERY ladder, cross the path of EVERY black cat, break EVERY mirror? Indeed, most of my friends and family seem to think this had to be the WORST vacation ever... but it is, in my mind, completely neutral once all is added

and subtracted. Why? Well – I finally can say I hiked the ENTIRE Paine Circuit... which, technically, Sara and I didn't completely finish (and MAN the parts we skipped were BIG); I finally got to hike into the French Valley. I finally got to do the full hike up the Rio Electrico to the original Fitzroy North Face viewpoint (my favorite hike on this trip). Although most hikes kicked my ass, I hiked a shitload (almost 100 miles over 8 days) and my knees were GREAT – AND most of that hiking was in GORGEOUS, unprecedented levels of sunshine. And, finally, our party was one of the best groups I've traveled with.

December 19-22, 2012 – To Chile: Santiago, Punta Arenas

As with the 2008 trip, we approached Patagonia from Chile; in contrast, we each had to make our way all the way to Punta Arenas, the group meeting point (vs. Santiago in 2008). Given lessons learned in SE Asia last year, I decided to break up what is a pretty long set of flights to Punta Arenas with a 2-night layover in Santiago – a city I am very comfortable with from previous travels. ALL flights on this trip were TERRIBLE in some way – and American Airlines, in particular, should be ashamed of themselves. To avoid a hellish wake-up/shuttle, I went up to my usual PDX airport hotel the night before heading to Chile. The next morning, I made my way to the airport around 9:30 for my early afternoon flight to Dallas, TX. Of course, said flight was an hour delayed (a complete déjã vu of the 2008 flight), making me nervous about my dwindling 3-hour connection. But we landed only 30 minutes late, allowing me to repeat my 2008 Popeye's dinner and mommy-chat. Although our flight boarded on time and all seemed to be proceeding smoothly, the pilot came over the intercom around 10 minutes after we were supposed to take off – reporting that a dozen people were late and, because this was the only flight to Santiago, we were going to wait for them. Needless to say, that turned into 45 minutes and then some storm cells moved in – so that turned into ANOTHER 45 minutes. Given how shitty Dallas is in terms of long runway lineup's, we then had to wait on the tarmac in line ANOTHER 45 minutes. Needless to say, I got to know my seatmate well: a 20-something Chilean studying engineering in Colorado. Although I was initially worried he was going to be annoying and/or aloof (i.e. texting and video-chatting with his girlfriend at EVERY moment during the early part of the wait), he had a lot of smart things to say about politics – North and South American. It was around 11 when we finally took off – dinner delayed another hour thanks to turbulence, which seemed to excessively rattle our old/beater plane. Indeed, there were no individual movie screens on the chair backs and everything seemed extra coated with the grime of too many years of service/passengers. I cannot say I slept much during the flight – but that is typical. Given that Santiago is 3 hours ahead of Dallas, it was light outside within 4 hours (not that many window shades were up... but I peeked out regularly – trying to catch a glimpse of the Andes/Aconcagua through what were a lot of clouds hugging the continent as we came in over the Pacific). At around 10 a.m. Santiago time, breakfast was served. An hour before landing, the pilot came over the intercom again, explaining that some emergency light related to fuel had come on – but we should not be alarmed... just be prepared for the fact that emergency vehicles might be lined up on the runway. Needless to say, this did not sit well with the passengers; the best information we could glean from the attendants was that we'd probably used up just enough fuel during the whole tarmac wait to register a "low" situation. After all the discussion, though, there was no big show on the ground and we landed fine – albeit 90 minutes late.

As well-stated in many previous reports, Santiago is my favorite international airport because it is small, new, and clean. Because I've been to Chile before, I got to use my ongoing reciprocity fee receipt – bypassing the big line of first-time Americans paying their now-\$140 entrance fee. As I stood in the general customs line, though, I learned that said fee is levied because the US is such a pain in the ass for South American visitors; we not only charge a comparable visitation fee but also require a lengthy Visa procurement process. Of course, I also had to listen to this unbelievably loud and ignorant woman from California arguing with an Australian scientist (here to use the big telescopes up in the Andes) about her insistence that climate change was a selfish creation of scientists. After picking up my luggage, I made my way to the hotel shuttle area – and was directed out onto the busy street. My initial urge about where to stay during my 2-night layover had been: right across the street at the super-new Holiday Inn (I'd stayed here 1 night before heading out to Easter Island in 2008 – and it was a very nice hotel... not to mention super-easy). Unfortunately, the going rate at the Holiday Inn was \$200 a night – which I thought was too steep. Because the goal of my 2-night layover was recovery (not sight-seeing), I found a brand new – but cheaper – Hilton 2 miles away. Of course, it took almost 30 minutes of waiting before the Hilton-bound shuttle actually left – during which time lots of cigarette smoke came my way... and, watching all the Holiday Inn folks simply rolling bags across the street, I wondered if I'd chosen wisely. In the end, it was probably a toss-up: the Hilton had a better fitness center (and an actual pool) but the food was more expensive (though not consistently great). Both places had free internet. The Hilton had a good view of the Santiago skyline and the snow-covered Andes, albeit over some immediate industrial crap. There isn't much to say about my uneventful 2 nights there, though: I slept a lot, I worked out 2-3 times a day, I watched TV, I pocketed sufficient fruit and rolls from the breakfast buffet that I effectively skipped lunch, I lazed around reading on the sunny patio (as it was between 75-85°F), and I played with internet/email.

At 6:30 a.m. on December 22, I was back in the shuttle van – heading for the airport and my flight to Punta Arenas. Despite all that relaxing, I hadn't slept well the night before and I willfully chose not to pay for another hotel breakfast... both of which likely contributed to what was about to happen. And making matters worse, the airport was a complete zoo. The line I waited in snaked at least 6 times back and forth – each snake length 100-125 feet... and yet there were sufficient LAN agents to process this mess in 35 highly efficient minutes. Tired and dumbfounded, I headed to my gate – daypack on my back, big camera case and ticket/passport in hand. After passing through the gauntlet of duty-free shops, I waited in a relatively short security line. Dumping all my carry-on's into bins (but not being required to take off my boots), I was surprised when the screener motioned me back to take off my fleece pullover. It was here where I likely lost control of my ticket/passport – but who knows? All I know is that I did what I was told quickly, passed through the scanner, and then hurriedly grabbed all my things on the other side - entirely discombobulated. Heading into the main gate area, I immediately found an electronic board listing current departures – which was important because there was no gate information on my ticket (which I remember pulling out of my fleece side pocket). Exacerbating my state, my flight was not listed and I remember pacing for some time – trying to decide whether to find an airport official to ask, to brave the long Starbucks line for nourishment, or to go the restroom. Initially, I did try to ask an agent at this empty gate – but she would not help, pointing out somewhat rudely that she was NOT with LAN. I then stumbled into this older male airport official and dragged him to the electronic board; by this point,

my flight/gate had JUST appeared... and so I felt sort of stupid. By now, the Starbucks line was even more insane and my patience/bladder needed a moment of silence. Sitting on the can, I discovered my passport was GONE. Perhaps shockingly, I was not completely freaked out by this. That is not to say that my heart did not sink a bit. I retraced EVERY step, including actively interrupting the security operation (which I feared would get me arrested)... but NOTHING. By this point, I had only 30 minutes... so I went to my LAN gate and the agents here were BEYOND helpful: they immediately put a call over the intercom with a request to look for the passport; meanwhile, they said I could at least get on the plane with just my passport photocopy – which relieved me greatly (even though it shouldn't have, I would learn later...). Unable to sit still, I retraced my steps AGAIN, returning to the gate just as people were lining up to board. As I came in view of the counter, the agents waved me over because – PRAISE JEBUS – someone had turned my passport in. All was right with the universe... except that I was now sort of crazy with hunger, exhaustion, and the adrenaline of worry. Fortunately, I had my window seat, the Andes were GLORIOUS (although Patagonia – surprise, surprise – was clouded over!), and LAN was very generous with snacks.

We landed in drizzly Punta Arenas at 11:30 a.m. After picking up my luggage, I watched 40% of the arriving passengers get picked up by sign-wielding agents representing hotels, adventure travel companies, etc. - but NO one was there for me... and the vulture-like taxi drivers could smell my blood. Forging over \$20 bucks, I picked a sweet little old man – who whisked me straight to my hotel (20 minutes away). Although I didn't do any sightseeing in Punta Arenas this time, I did note – based on the cab-ride in – a LOT of new development by the waterfront along the Straits of Magellan. The roadside lupine were also magnificent. Our hotel was the same one from 2008, which was good and familiar. And fortunately, the staff let me check in early. Of course, I did enjoy a delicious salad and vegetable soup at the nearly empty hotel restaurant... before retiring for a shower and nap. At around 3, I was awoken by a phone call – Andre had arrived to pick up the main bolus of the group (who would be arriving on the 4:30 flight); NG's main office never communicated that I was coming early, so finding me at the hotel was a surprise. Of course, I will embarrass Andre a little because he totally forgot I'd been on the 2008 MTS trip with him. But Andre is easy to forgive – albeit mostly because he didn't do most of the long hike options on that trip, having been taken out of commission by a really bad cold. It was interesting how much older, wilder, and bigger Andre looked... thinking back and looking at my 2008 shots, he was only 33 back then - a cute, skinny, boyish-faced thing with a conservative haircut. This time, he was far more striking – albeit in a sort of “if James-Franco had a love-child with Frida Kahlo plus a hint of Pirates of the Caribbean” way: crazy longish curly hair, a near uni-brow, those big brown eyes, and the always goofily wild (or wildly goofy) laugh. Consequently, I was more mesmerized with Andre on this trip. Of course, normally calm and upbeat Andre was slightly taken aback when I confessed to briefly losing my passport in Santiago – firmly explaining that I would not be allowed into Argentina without it, and negating any notion of solving that kind of problem with a photocopy and quick embassy visit... bottom line: no passport, trip over man. Accompanying Andre was Mikki, our second guide on the Chile leg of this trip (we'd have a different second guide on the Argentina leg). Mikki, also a native Chilean, spent half his time in Chamonix – guiding, training, etc. After yacking with them for about 20 minutes, they headed off to the airport and I sent a long confessional email to the family/friends via the dismally slow internet... and then decided I needed to watch some TV and organize my gear (with a strong emphasis on unpacking the big camera from its hard-shell case and getting it ready for hiking with the pack).

At 6 p.m., nearly all our group (13 present) assembled downstairs by the bar, complementary pisco sours in hand (or spilled all over my lap, courtesy of a very embarrassed bar hostess); we were still missing a couple from Massachusetts who would arrive via the last flight of the day (and would not make dinner). Relative to other groups I've traveled with, we had A LOT more young members. And I would like to think I am not just saying that because I am getting older; honestly, most comparable hiking trips I've done have averaged 55-60 years old... where this group's calculated average was 40. Our youngest members (and roommates) were two males near 20; Denny was traveling solo (he was a Korean student attending college in the US) and Nathan (also in college) was traveling with his parents – university professors Ken and Kathleen from Utah. A second larger family of six was also on board: parents (early 60's) Bob and Yvonne, and late 20's/early 30's offspring Sara (with husband Matt) and Michael (with wife Ashley) – each married unit now living in different parts of the country. Two final late 40's/early 50's couples rounded out the party: Andy and Susan (from Washington), and Mark and Kim (arriving late). It is worth mentioning that we had a medical doctor (Mike) and a nurse (Kim) in the group; their repeated services were greatly appreciated and, honestly, NG (IMO) owes them some kind of trip discount for services rendered. Following a short presentation about the region from Andre (who has, in his old age, notably increased the sophistication level of his talks), we headed to the restaurant on foot... about 3 blocks away. In contrast with our 2008 meal in Punta Arenas (at this fishy place that felt lifted from the 1960's), we went to this newer multi-colored granola-y looking place with lots of interesting dishes (including guanaco meat) and several vegetarian options... which was good given that several people in our group had fish/seafood allergies and one was a vegetarian (who, for the record, liked very few vegetables). Given fish commentary from 2008, I thought it was hilarious to learn that Chile recently changed the name of its famous “Conger Eel” (actually an ocean whitefish) to Congria, because – not surprising to me – they finally figured out that typical travelers are scared to eat anything called “eel.” Thankfully, too, Andre did not tease me about my non-fish habits or try to get me to eat congria stew, which several folks in our party did order and enjoy. Knowing there would be much meat in my future, I enjoyed a light garlic soup, some carrot/ginger-filled pasta, and a GREAT chai ice cream with carrot cake. Although I generally ascertained from dinner that we would be an excellent group socially, it was hard to know where folks were on the hiking (and putting up with bad weather) scale – particularly because everyone else in the party was an adventure/group travel virgin. Only time – and weather – would tell. And so with a full belly, I waddled home and was in bed by 11... a 9 a.m. departure time on the docket for tomorrow.

December 23, 2012 – Punta Arenas to Torres del Paine/Glacier Grey, Hiking the Milodon Cave

For this and most breakfasts, we had a wide 1-2 hour window, as defined by when each hotel put out their continental spread. I showed up around 8, thinking I would be one of the later folks; in fact, it was just the big family at a full table – followed shortly by Andre, who sat himself down at my little table in the corner (have I mentioned that I am typically anti-social in the mornings?). Over breakfast, I learned that Andre is now the “permanent” NG Patagonia guide (not that anything is permanent) – which means he's not doing any of the MTS Patagonia trips (although he is still doing some non-Patagonia

guiding for MTS). And these relationships are contractual entities. I sensed that these had been big decisions for him, and ultimately positive in terms of more leadership/professional opportunities and a better/more live-able guiding schedule. Being that I'm always fairly upfront, I said I was glad his schedule had improved because he seemed very overworked and tired in 2008. I also said I was also glad he felt he had more opportunities within NG because it seemed to me that he was sort of a low-totem-pole-man with MTS in 2008. However, I did comment that NG had yet to prove themselves to me... and then I explained my history with/impressions of the conservative Lindblad-NG trip, my preconceptions about that clientele and leadership, and my concerns that NG is (and will always be) a little too business-driven. Of course, I didn't expect (or get) any specific thoughts on that from Andre but I wanted him to hear it from me because I think it's important to listen to clients who – unlike the rest of the group – are not company virgins. Of course, I wanted to joke that it WAS a good sign that NG was letting him keep that crazy big hair of his... but I was a good girl this morning.



Left to Right: leaving Punta Arenas, lupine at bathroom stop, Puerto Natales – bus company lane, church, Milodon statue

If you believe Accuweather (which I prefer), the forecast for our time in Patagonia was shockingly promising, although today was a little up in the air. Of course, Andre is not a fan of forecasts and wrinkled his nose if they were mentioned, always insisting (correctly) that one pack their “four seasons.” By 9 a.m., we were on the bus - expertly managed by “DJ” Rodrigo (with us until we boarded the plane to Buenos Aires), and heading for Torres del Paine via Puerto Natales (our lunch stop) and the Cueva del Milodon, a “Natural Monument” of Chile. The skies above were broken clouds and sun; it felt really warm, particularly as compared with yesterday’s midday cold drizzle. The drive to Puerto Natales (about 3 hours) runs through marshy moors and rolling steppe – lots of sheep farms, an occasional rhea. The landscape seems unending and remote at times, and I was struck – in the same way as in 2008 – with this simultaneous sense of: it is such a privilege to be here... and it's good to be back in my second home. Having said that, we were stopped at 3 police-guarded checkpoints (something I'd never experienced here before); all wanted to see Rodrigo's paperwork, including some data-collection wheel that recorded his driving stat's in situ. After about 90 minutes, we made a short bathroom-coffee stop at a roadside café-hostel, the old house surrounded by lupine... and, within the hour, we arrived in Puerto Natales. Unfortunately, the Seattle couple's luggage had been lost en route (and would not appear during the guided portion of this trip – although they did get things back later) and so Mikki took them on a short shopping trip in town. Given that Andre and Mikki were able to loan them several big-ticket items (e.g. rain layers, fleece), their needs were limited to extra socks, light shoes/sandals for wear after hiking, and extra base layers... nonetheless, they still dropped a few hundred bucks. Meanwhile, the rest of us were given 45 minutes to walk the town and/or shop. I headed straight for the touristy gift shop because Andre said they sold local flora guidebooks – something I'd never been able to find for Bryan in 2008. Although it was sunny and lovely, Puerto Natales seemed – in parts – more run down than last time: the park/square seemed to have more dead trees and graffiti, and the usually pristine church had some big cracks and exterior façade sections missing – not to mention a totally new coat of paint. Having said that, the street with all the bus companies was more spruced up, and the place we had lunch was definitely new: a multi-colored vegetarian café/bakery right across from the park/square. My lunch consisted of a homemade walnut veggie burger, this DELICIOUS honeycomb ice cream – the BEST thing I ate on this entire trip – and a mint tea infusion. If Patagonia Sara reads that, she will laugh her ass off because you could NEVER get anything like that in Puerto Natales back in 1997... it was all HUGE fried meat and fish back then. Of course, I also learned from Andre that Sara and my favorite hotel in town – the higher end, girly, B&B-style “Milodon” – has de-evolved into a cheaper and dorm-y hostel.



Left to Right: shots from the lesser caves preceding the big one at Cueva del Milodon

Speaking of Milodon, we hit the road again around 2 - initially along the scenic Seno Ultima Esperanza (Last Hope Channel)... glaciers pouring down from Monte Balmaceda (in still-undeveloped Parque Nacional Bernardo O'Higgins, just south of Torres). For all my times in this area, I figured I'd driven all the main roads... but on this trip we left the big usual highway that most operators take into Torres – veering more west. About 30 minutes after leaving Puerto Natales, we stopped for a 3-mile one-way hike across the benches where the Cueva del Milodon system is located – the original resting place of the namesake giant sloth (who died between 10,000-13,000 years ago) found here in 1895-6. The cave system was originally discovered by

Eberhard and Nordenskiöld, who has his own namesake lake in Torres that we would hike by later. Although Darwin did famously find/collect many fossils in South America, he did not come here; nonetheless, the giant sloth was eventually given the scientific name *Myiodon darwini*. When this area was developed and/or designated as a natural monument remains a mystery to me – particularly given that not even my 2003 Lonely/Lying Planet guide mentions anything about this place. Anyway, the Cueva del Milodon consists of one main BIG cave plus trails to 3 lesser caves spread out under what looks like a rocky rotting hillside. Accessed via a VERY rough road, Rodrigo dropped us at the far end of the complex – allowing us to hike across the benches, visiting each lesser cave, and meet him back at the big, main cave. Although this was a worthwhile little excursion, I think – from the guides' perspective – it was more about checking out whether folks knew how to pack and hike in a no/low-risk format. As should be evident from the shots above, it was sunny and outright hot (easily in the 70's). From the drop-off point, the first cave was a short, steep climb right out of the gate – followed by a slight slide into the cave proper. Although there were no obvious remains left in any of the caves, we were told that many other animals (including the sloth, the saber-tooth tiger, etc.) and even small human settlements (the oldest dating back 6000 BC) had been excavated – and, in the case of the second cave, were still under study (as evident by an area that had been staked into several study quadrates). Although most of the caves, from a distance, resembled nothing more than shallow undercut slits in the rocky hillside, they all had large chambers (some with clearly impacted stalactites/mites) followed by eerie and large tunnels continuing for what seemed to be quite some time (miles, I want to say we were told – in some cases). Between the caves, we hiked through scenic meadows bursting with birds (including austral parrots), flowers, and berries (which Mikki named, ate, and passed around) – distant vistas of glaciated peaks under quickly-burning-off clouds in the glimmering in the sun.



Left to Right: (top) hiking across the benches, perizia (Fuegian edelweiss), Magellan orchid, information kiosk with cave animals; (bottom) main cave sign, into the main cave

Eventually, we arrived at the well-developed main cave area – complete with a visitor center, café, and parking lot. From here, we proceeded 10 minutes (with stops to read signs about cave animals) up boardwalks through beech forest until we arrived at THE Cueva del Milodon – an football field-sized main cavern that itself entailed a 10 minute walk through. Near the end, a life-sized statue of the ~10-foot tall Milodon attracted many photographs (it is shown at the beginning of this report). We then returned to the parking area, partook in the restrooms, and were on our way to Torres around 4. The road we took into Torres was definitely remote, rough, less traveled, and curvy – one I've never been on before. But it was also really scenic, entering by way of Lago Porteno and Lago del Toro. Along the way, we made 2 brief stops: (1) a designated roadside viewpoint above Lago del Toro where, to my complete awe (yet again), virtually the Paine massif and Cuernos were visible – including the impressive Tiburon/Sharksin rock feature within the French Valley; and (2) an administrative entrance gate.



Left to Right: roadside viewpoint of Torres over Lago del Toro, near administrative building, Lago Grey

Shortly thereafter, we crossed the Rio Grey (which flows from Lago Grey) and were soon at our lodging for the night. In 2008, our one night at this place – while beautiful – was a little sketchy (IMO); the rooms were old and noisy, the doors stuck, and the buffet dinner left at least 3 of us with mild foodborne illness symptoms the next day. This time, we stayed in the swank

and brand new annex and there was no questionable buffet. As with many places, the forested lodge was all decked out for Christmas – a mix of very Catholic manger scenes and cartoony Santa Clauses. Handrails along the many boardwalk paths between the sections of the lodge buildings were all garlanded. We had 45 minutes to unpack and clean up before a pre-dinner meeting. I managed a quick shower and a good contemplative sit and stare – given the full-length windows, which offered teasing views of the mountains through a thin canopy of beech forest. After retrieving our free welcome drink from the hotel (huckleberry-like calafate pisco sour), we all met on the big view-filled deck for an overview of the next few days a la Andre and his maps.



Left to Right: Cuernos from lodge deck, swank new room, Andre laying out our next few days, Lago & Glacier Grey

On this Chile/Torres portion, we would be doing what is commonly known as the popular “W” trip – albeit a little out of order (owing to a shortened holiday ferry schedule across Lago Pehoe): starting at the Lago Grey camping area (which we’d access by ferry tomorrow) and hiking to Pehoe tomorrow, then going from Hosteria Las Torres to Cuernos, then Cuernos back to Pehoe plus the French Valley, and then wrapping up with a hike from Hosteria Las Torres to the base of the towers and back. Andre, however, explained that a HUGE section of this route had been burnt down last season (almost to the day) by illegal campers trying to avoid the fee area at Lago Grey. They were burning toilet paper during a sustained period of 100 mph winds, which caused the fire to spread rapidly and jump whole lakes in a few hours. The massive fire ultimately shut down half the “W” trail all of last year’s season (wreaking havoc on all efforts to complete longer treks in this park) – to the point that Andre had not even hiked here since the fire. Indeed, Andre seemed shaken by the fire and more solemn than usual about the prospect of seeing the devastation tomorrow. Given that the rest of us were beyond used to favorite trails burning to the ground on a semi-regular basis throughout the west, we seemed surprised that this was such an unusual experience for him. But, Andre explained, Patagonia has no lightening like we have in the states, the beech forests have no fire cycles or tolerance (and would take decades to grow back), and there is no fire infrastructure (i.e. no helicopters, no fire-fighting force of people) in these parks – to the point that most efforts (not that anyone could do much) to fight last year’s blaze fell unsuccessfully to guides. Looking out across the lake, you could see the brown path left by the fire across the land, sweeping up from the peninsula where the Lago Grey camp lies, jumping across lobes of the lake. But for now – it was time for dinner. As with most evenings, dinner began and ended later than I am used to in my normal life: starting around 8 and ending (if I was lucky) by 10. The meal – some kind of cheesy potato appetizer, a steak with rice, and a custard-y dessert – was fine and, most importantly (in light of the 2008 experience) did not cause me to ask any microbiological questions (or ultimately challenge my GI tract). Of course, I was always the first to excuse myself for bed... which I did around 10 – but not before returning to the deck to shoot the more golden light across the lake and mountains.



Left to Right: Huemul – Patagonia deer, manger decorations, leaving the lodge, thorny calafate (very sour and woody!)

December 24, 2012 – Ice and Fire: Glacier Grey to Lago Pehoe

Up again at 8, I enjoyed a light breakfast all to myself. The weather at this hour was not as promising as I thought it would be – and it certainly did not portend how warm it would get (easily upper 70’s) and how clear the day would become. None of the Cuernos were visible, and most of the upper reaches of Paine Grande were hidden; the gray skies looked and initially felt cool. Also the first to the bus, I was just about to unload my pack and sit down when Andre (hauling luggage) excitedly decided I needed to see the pair of endangered Patagonian deer (one with an obvious puma slashing) he’d seen moments ago along the brushy perimeter of the parking area. The deer move fast – and so what I thought was going to be a 1-minute walk to a slight clearing turned into an off-trail ramble through the woods and brush, over logs – at times directly in front of half a dozen rooms and their full-length windows (where patrons could be doing lord-knows-what, under the assumption crazy people chasing deer weren’t going to be in their view) - and then down to the sandy beach well below the big assembly deck where most of the rest of our group was milling around. Meanwhile, I am wearing my full daypack (with 3 liters of water!) and Andre has nothing... so he is also moving fast. Of course, I did get some close shots but I cannot say I attained Andre’s level of enthusiasm over the deer.

We all then proceeded to the bus for a 5-minute drive to the road-end ferry dock access trailhead. Amusingly, the parking lot featured a memorable old Westfalia van – its camper popped up - complete with multiple surfboards, HUGE tires, and various towing devices. From here, we hiked a short section of forest, crossed a substantial suspension bridge over the large Rio Grey (in general, there were many such bridges in Chile... more than I ever remember before), and then crossed another island of gorgeous beech forest – before dropping to the massive sandy beach in front of the lake, icebergs in the distance and later strewn across the water-sand interface. Unbeknownst to me for reasons I cannot explain, our goal was to hike across this whole sandy section to another rise of rocky land in the distance (I knew that part) – BUT then we were climbing said viewpoint AND returning to right here, because that's where the ferry dock was. And that was just the morning hike... we had 8 more undulating afternoon miles after the ferry ride (I also knew that part, having hiked said section last in 1997).



Left to Right: Susan and Kim on the Rio Grey bridge, gorgeous beech and beach, Ken and icebergs (did I mention Ken got a wicked GI bug during this trip?)

The sandy looking beach was more variably rocky than anything... and was sometimes annoying to walk on. By the end of the morning hike, I had emptied rocks and grit from my boots twice. Near the opposite end of the beach, where several icebergs or ice pieces had washed to within reach, a moderate amount of time was spent playing with the ice (see Ken shot above, note GI comment) and/or throwing/skipping rocks at the ice (a repeating lakeside theme given 5-6 man-children under 40). From here, we climbed up to a viewpoint of the whole area – the trail rocky, edgy, and dotted with a surprising variety of flora. While the viewpoint was decent – including a kayaking group too-closely navigating a mess of icebergs - and there were a few sunbursts, I didn't include any shots because the mountains were still pretty socked in. The hike back to the dock was uneventful, save my awkward bathroom run in this tiny cluster of beech at the foot of the viewpoint rock. Arriving 20 minutes early, we lined up in what was now outright sun. Being that it was noon, I decided to eat most of my hotel-provided lunch: a ham and avocado sandwich and an apple. And then we had to don ghetto-cheap life vests, transiting between the dock and the ship via a Galapagos-like panga boat. The main ship seated about 60, and so we were just a small cohort within the larger mass. Although it looked inviting and scenic to stand on the upper deck, available space in the front was extremely limited (and it was cold/windy) and available space in the back was choked with foul engine fumes. Thus, I spent most of my time in the front indoor seating area – views blocked by a variety of butts (as noted by Ken) braving the front/outside deck. At least most were decent-looking, as noted by me. The ferry ride to the Glacier Grey camping peninsula was good – but we never, like, got ANYWHERE near icebergs or the main glacial face... so if folks think that that is what that ride is about, they will be disappointed. Of course, Andre hoped the views of Paine Grande would be better – as the ferry provides one of the only ways to see its true summit; indeed, I learned on this trip that said peak (the tallest in Torres) has, like, 4 different summits... and it is likely I've only seen 3. Another reason I'll have to come back.



Left to Right: panga-boarding, inside seating main boat, disembarking on Glacier Grey camping area, boat from peninsula

After 90 minutes, we arrived at the familiar Glacier Grey camping peninsula – where Sara and I memorably camped in 1997 after 2 beautiful but harrowing days descending the rocks and mud from Paso John Garner. Sadly, the exact beach where we camped is no longer open to pitching tents... and, needless to say, there are now MANY more permanent structures. Some of us were under the impression that we were, like, the only group disembarking (as most folks do the 3-hour to/back tour); for that reason, half of us (including me) missed the rush to line-up for the first panga-ride to the shore. On the less crowded second panga, I disembarked but managed to undo and then lose my chest-strap pack-clip – having mistaken it for one of the life-vest clips (fortunately, this was an easy replacement once I got home). Between that and then having to unstrap my walking poles, AND lose/pack a bunch of clothes (now that it was sunny AND hot), I was the last one to make it up to where everyone else was sitting in the forest waiting. Oh well. As stated earlier, our goal for the day was an 8-mile thru-hike to Lago Pehoe - the slight challenge being that we HAD to get there by 6 p.m. or we'd miss the last ferry across that lake. The elevation gain and loss on this section is ~1500 total up and ~1000 down... ALL via undulating trails. Indeed, my recollection of this section of trail when Sara and I did it was that it was negligibly easy. Ha ha. Not that today was hard in the comparative scheme of things – but I must be getting older, that's all I can say. The up and down nature of the route was, at

times, tiring – particularly in what was sweltering heat; and the trail was WAY rockier than I remember. There were even a couple mini-scrambles over steep rocky outcrops. Most ironically, though, I had elected NOT to wear shorts today; even Andre, who twice mocked my shorts-wearing habits in 2008, had the sense to wear shorts today. Sounds like global warming.



Left to Right: (top) last close view of Glacier Grey, new construction at Glacier Grey, first view of fire; (bottom) new growth amidst fire, looking down on fire damage along Lago Grey, near Puente Olguin, marsh beyond point (note water arrow)

After climbing through intact beech forest up to the main circuit, things looked green for 10 minutes... and then we hit the fire damage (60% of the remainder of the hike): blackened beech trees, dead brown leaves, places so scorched you could still smell the fire in the ash. But there was a lot of new growth in the form of green grass, which (of course) agitated my sinuses. Between here and the biggest viewpoint (Puente Olguin), we hiked a LOT of up and down. Any time we crossed creeks, the guides encouraged folks to directly (i.e. dip) replenish water bottles (so as to avoid carrying boatloads of water all day). Although this issue rarely comes up on guided trips, I have made my feelings well known on this topic (e.g. see Arctic/Hulahula report) given that Giardia is ubiquitous and symptoms take 2+ weeks to develop. Indeed, we ALWAYS had access to group water filters in 2008 – so I was shocked to see no water purification whatsoever on this trip. In contrast with half the group, I carried 3-6 L of water in my Platypus EVERY day – some days running out, and ALWAYS burdened with the extra weight. Sadly, my small first aid/emergency kit did have some old iodine tablets (which I used a couple times) but no neutralizer.



Left to Right: Lago los Patos, Azucena/maiden flower, anemones for Bryan, Quebrada de los Vientos final descent to Pehoe

At Puente Olguin, we stopped for ~40 minutes and I finished the rest of my snacks. For folks coming the other way, this spot offers the first view of Glacier Grey – and so, once we continued, we had no more views of said ice anymore. Although much of our uphill work was done, there was still a LOT of little up and down remaining in the day... plus our biggest sustained elevation loss. Within an hour, we arrived at scenic Lago los Patos – which seemed bigger and surrounded by thicker forest (most still intact) than I remember from 1997. Beyond, we crossed many rolling rocky meadows – which offered plenty of flowers to photograph. About 45 minutes from the end, we arrived at the very familiar canyon descent to Lago Pehoe – officially called the Quebrada de los Vientos (Corridor of the Winds). Here, EVERYTHING was scorched by fire – as the winds channeled the fire especially hard in this curving valley. At the bottom, the way opened to the familiar open field where Sara and I spent a frustrating and hungry night camping in a city of tents interspersed with staked-up cheap wood palettes, someone's ineffective idea of a wind-shield. But today, said field is "wild" again. Way off to the side, a smaller camping area is located behind the HUGE inn/cafe/terrace complex (also new since 1997). Given the fine weather (and the fact that I was trying to avoid spending extra money on snacks), I sat down outside and enjoyed the clearing views of Paine Grande and the Cuernos. After 45 minutes (i.e. around 5:45), there seemed to be a large exodus of folks (not among our group) heading down to the dock. Soon thereafter, Mikki and Andre started gathering and moving us in that direction as well – although we were quite dispersed throughout the long CF line. At 6:30, the private Explora Lodge (\$1000 per night) boat arrived and picked up half a dozen exclusive clients – our "public" ferry visibly approaching in the distance. In 1997, Sara and I – tired, weathered, and nearly out of food – made the decision to end our circuit hike here and take the Pehoe ferry to the landing at Pudeto. Our

escape remains one of the most memorably frustrating moments of the whole 1997 trip – riding across the huge waves in the bowels of what looked like a retired fishing boat, crazy on diesel fumes after being kicked off the upper deck by a high-price adventure travel company group. Today’s hydroplane-like ferry seats 50 times what that old boat did, and there are no restrictions on the upper deck (unless the weather is bad). And so, despite a seemingly endless line, we all boarded fine... although it was standing room only up top for the 30-minute ride to Pudeto.



Left to Right: (top) ferry line and Paine Grande, views from ferry – Paine Grande, Cuernos and French Valley, Nieto detail, Pudeto dock; (bottom) GLORIOUSLY magical Hosterio Pehoe – bridge, dining room and view, my room

The other half of Sara and my 1997 nadir tale involved the fact that, after surviving the ferry, we disembarked to find NOTHING... NO refugio and NO food. In our confusion and shock, we also missed the last bus out. In the end, we camped in a lumpy field, ate our emergency ramen, and tried to hold it together. Although we had distantly passed this area in 2008, I had failed to find exactly where Sara and I camped. This time, there was NO mistaking it... walking from the dock, I saw the field and every frustrating emotion of Sara and my crazy night rushed across my mind. Of course, one of the ironic things about Sara and my expectations of Pudeto (based on our reading of the map) was that we had confused it with the famous Hosteria Pehoe (the first real lodge in Torres); indeed, we thought we would get off the ferry and credit-card our way into that thing. Ha ha. Well, tonight – Christmas Eve and totally clear, no less – we were going to that dreamy place... no question. Less than 15 minutes away by car, Hosteria Pehoe is – HANDS DOWN – the BEST place I have ever stayed. Located on its own island, the lodge is accessed by a footbridge over the unreal blue water – making it even more magical. Greeting us on the bridge was Andre’s wife (Maria), a physical therapist who – given the holiday - was joining the group for a couple days. Needless to say, she was gorgeous and sweet. Tiny Pehoe accommodates very few guests (when we were there, there were 30 tops), reflecting the unreal low expectations people had about visitation before Patagonia exploded with tourism. The facilities were rustic, homey, and perfect. Views from the dining room and front lawn area encompassed everything from Paine Grande, the Cuernos, Nieto... and even a couple Torres/towers between/behind the massif. It was absolutely stunning. Arriving at 7:30, we had an hour to clean up before a pre-dinner meeting and then the extra-special Christmas meal. Notably sunburned, I did laundry, did my repacking for tomorrow (more about that shortly), enjoyed a shower a short catnap, and some photography time on the grounds. The pre-dinner meeting was held in the beautiful room above the dining room; our big family was all decked out in matching Christmas shirts. The main point of this meeting, aside from holiday cheer, was to make sure everyone was prepared for tomorrow’s light-load packing situation (i.e. we were staying at the rustic trailside Cuernos cabins, meaning porters would only carry one small stuff-sack of bare essentials).



Left to Right: big family in Christmas shirts, dining room and view, turkey and potatoes, moon over Pehoe

Around 9, we went downstairs for the big dinner – which featured 2-3 choices for each course, salad, and a big dessert cart. Being that it WAS Christmas, I had to have the delicious turkey in walnut gravy and cheesy potato slab. The salad vegetables were exceptional, as was the ice cream cake. During dinner, however, I had to escape twice because the moon reflection situation outside was UNREAL. I thought just I was crazy enough to leave dinner and make my way half-way across the

footbridge for THE shot... but then this delightful redhead Polish girl from another party joined me and we stood there with our big cameras, dumbfounded. By 11 p.m., it was time for bed. Given that my room was outright hot, I threw open the windows, popped in the earplugs (as I correctly guessed some folks would be out partying – although I had not predicted said partying would involve a gardening wheelbarrow... as was witnessed by others in our group around 2 a.m.), and went to bed.



Left to Right: Christmas day - pre-breakfast reflection, breakfast cookies and fruitcake, parting shot of Hosteria Pehoe

December 25, 2012 – Under Nieto and Cuernos: Unfinished Circuit Business

Once again, I thought I was up late (8 a.m.) but apparently not... given a 9:30 departure target. Even after another photo run on the footbridge (BREATHTAKING reflections that were gone in 30 minutes), I was only the third one sitting down to eat. As shown above, there was an excellent spread of Christmas cookies (homemade, as delicious as they looked) and light fruitcake – plus toast and eggs to order. It seemed most others packed first and then ate, where I was sort of opposite (half packing the night before, then completing the task after breakfast). Today, though, there was more pressure on mini-pack situation... plus, as I indicated earlier, some late-night revelry had apparently kept a few folks awake. On the usual itinerary for this trip, today would involve re-taking the Pehoe ferry back – and continuing on the “W,” hiking into the French Valley and then continuing the Cuernos cabins. As previously stated, though, the holiday ferry schedule was limited – and so we were, instead, driving to the Hosteria Las Torres end of the “W” and working backwards to the Cuernos cabins today.

Mostly on time, we boarded the bus and made what is a pretty long drive to Hosteria Las Torres (where would stay our last 2 nights in Chile). Today’s reverse itinerary actually afforded a more relaxed drive, allowing us to stop more than usual to partake in additional photo stops and animal viewing (i.e. guanacos, which everyone but me was all gaga over seeing). My only beef with the reverse itinerary is that the weather was CLEARLY awesome today... and I worried (accurately) that tomorrow (which included the French Valley) would not be as magnificent. But such is the weather. Our first stop was at this big overlook (Mirador de Nordenskold) where Andre spent some time talking about the regional geology. Having visited this spot in 2008, I didn’t include many pictures – as it was likewise cloudless that year, the Cuernos looking like a cluster of weird mushrooms, this spectacular-looking valley (Valle Bader) separating them and Nieto. Andre explained that he’d been camping up there (in the Valle Bader) the week before this trip – adding that many groups hiked up there when the fires closed the Grey area last year. Having said that, there are no trails up there shown on my maps (and I did not notice any obvious trails near the Cuernos cabins, which is where he said you leave the main trail from)... so it’s probably something just the guides and locals know about. Anyway - from the mirador, we continued into the Serengeti portion of the park where all the guanacos are. While we certainly saw a couple dozen, we didn’t see the numbers we did in 2008 – and there were fewer babies. Some of the males were also seen fighting, Andre explaining that they will actively bite opponents’ ankle tendons or testicles to select them out of the gene pool, as it were. Testicle-biting comments aside, I had to make a “behind the bus” pee break while everyone else gushed over the half-dozen guanacos in view. Dropping my pants roadside, I almost fell over - intoxicated by this insanely fragrant bush of very hardy-looking verbena (locally called Cojincito).



Left to Right: mushroom-looking Cuernos and Valle Bader, Cojincito/verbena, guanacos and Nieto, BEST view of Torres

We continued, Andre cracking us (and himself) up with his guanaco imitations as we rounded a bend only to find a pair of guanacos full-bore mating. Needless to say, someone in the peanut gallery asked Andre what THAT sounded like... but he did not oblige any sound effects – only busting up (as we all did) and then leaving them in peace (as it were). Of course, this sighting wouldn’t have been so funny if – 10 minutes later – we didn’t come upon 2 fluffy Patagonian skunks following each other across a field... and then going at it as well. What did I say in 2008? Twitterpated. Within 15 minutes, we passed the main park entrance at Laguna Amarga – stopping 2 minutes later for the best guanaco shots... mountains in view, fields fragrant with verbena. But we still had another 30 minutes to the trailhead – the worst of the bumpy dirt road still to come. Dropping into the final valley, we were granted our best view of the namesake towers (Torres del Paine). Of course, we didn’t know this would be the best view at the time, but I strongly suspected it – which is why I made sure I caught that bus-view shot above. Fortunately, I had already hiked the Torres under picture-perfect conditions in 2008. According to the time-stamp on

my pictures, we did not begin hiking until almost noon – having blown more time than we needed to at the hosteria while the guides tried to locate the porters. After 20 minutes, Andre herded most of us back the bus/trailhead – ultimately sending us ahead with Mikki while he managed the porter/gear situation. Just as we were about to leave, our youngest member showed up - having being unable to find his passport while trying to buy snacks. I'm sure I shot Andre a knowing look - as he no-doubt tried to avoid his "bad-face" expression. Ah – little did he know what was in store today... this stuff was tip-of-the-iceberg. And poor Maria... it was her first time joining one of these groups – well, she definitely got a very thorough show.



Left to Right: (top) setting out – Nieto in clouds, mother-in-law colonies, lunar landscape, lakes appearing; (bottom) Monte Balmaceda, main Nieto face, stream-crossing shortly before accident

Fortunately, the passport problem was quickly solved with a quick search of the luggage – and then Mikki and the group were off again. The first 20 minutes of this trail overlap with that to Torres; after the second bridge, we continued straight/flat for another mile or so. Today's hike – about 7 miles – was pretty easy; only the last couple miles were challenging in terms of trail quality and modest elevation gains. Initially, our views were limited to massive Nieto, which fully eclipsed the Cuernos and Paine Grande. The plateau-like terrain was covered with light green round blobs that reminded me of bacterial colonies. Although they looked soft and forgiving from a distance, they were actually harsh and prickly – which is why their common name is "mother-in-law" bush. At some point, we ran into our porters – who somehow thought we'd arrived/left much earlier. Mikki radioed back to Andre – and fortunately their backtracking was less than 2 miles. Climbing to a higher and more lunar plateau, we passed a small lake with beautiful views of Monte Balmaceda (the winds picking up, heralding the changes to come) and then dropped to a sunny wind-shielding draw: a good spot for lunch, Mikki declared – just as Andre and Maria caught up. Thereafter, Lago Nordenskold (reminiscent in color of Pehoe) became the dominant scenery for the rest of today, and most of tomorrow. All seemed to be going well as we hiked through a low-beech area, traversed by several shallow rocky draws. Within 10 minutes of the last shot above, though, the hiking line stopped abruptly; Yvonne, matron of the big family, had fallen in one of the rocky beds – the diagnoses: fully broken wrist. The guides, Maria, and the family spent about an hour stabilizing the situation, the rest of us 100 feet up the trail in a meadow. Sadly, by the time Mikki, Sara/Matt, and Ashley/Mike appeared with the outcome, Yvonne/Bob, Andre/Maria were already making their way back to the hosteria (on foot, they decided – although horses were available)... so we didn't get to say our goodbyes. Given that Maria was accompanying them back to Puerto Natales (instead of joining us at the Cuernos and on tomorrow's hike out), we didn't get to say our goodbyes to her either. No one was sure yet whether Andre would make it back tonight or meet us tomorrow. Needless to say, the rest of today's hike was very solemn. It also was, like I said earlier, somewhat more challenging – with a couple moderate climbs (300-400 feet each), even more rocky traverses, and some exciting suspension bridges.

From our last highpoint, the Cuernos cabins (there are only 8, for the record) were visible – indeed, RIGHT under the massive rock-horns. Lower in the trees beyond the cabins was the rest of the complex, including a substantial camping area and a big crowded dining hall/bathroom facility. Arriving at 5:30, we waited outside said structure for 20 minutes before Mikki re-appeared with a go-ahead to proceed to the cabins. Retreating from that CF was embarrassingly appreciated (indeed, I was not looking forward to re-joining the throng for dinner!). Much as I joke that I've become such a snob, the fact is that crazy crowds are NOT why I hike or visit the mountains/wilderness. So if that is the definition of a snob, then I have always been guilty. Although I'd read some sketchy reviews of these cabins on TripAdvisor, I didn't think they were that bad – particularly as compared with the gold standard in bad rustic cabins: the shanty huts along the Futaleufu. Having said that, I'm not sure how often the bedding is cleaned (and this was the ONE night I did not have my hygienic liner bag on me), the cabins were not heated, and there was no in-room bathroom. For the latter, we all shared a cabin-dedicated facility. Unfortunately, the shower water/heat situation was variable and the toilets backed up regularly (coinciding with periods when all water was shut off). For whatever reason, Mikki gave me the cabin with the longest trail and steepest climb – which I knew would be exciting in the middle of the night (fortunately, I was assured I could pee just in the shrubbery by my deck). Hauling my junk up there, I was quick to get an early shower – and do laundry. And then it was time for a nap – given that our assigned dinnertime was a staggering 9 p.m. But the guides – having prepared us in advance for the fact that tonight's food would suck – laid out their own posh selection of wine and appetizers (which they hauled in) around 8... notably by the scenic platform with the murky,

near-boiling cabin-dedicated hot tub, which no one (to my knowledge) used. As discussed, tomorrow's itinerary would take us into the French Valley (but only to the lower/French overlook), and then continue on to Lago Pehoe (same place we hiked to yesterday and took the ferry) – the latter destination/ferry issue meaning we were, again, under a time constraint.



Left to Right: (top) one of a couple more suspension bridges, Nieto and Valle Bader, firebush, climbing; (bottom) more climbing, Cuernos and detail, first view of Paine Grande, crazy dining hall

Around 8:45, we returned to the still-insane dining facility. With the sun very much shining through the windows, it was blinding AND blazing hot (particularly if you overdressed, as had I – given the outdoor chill). Despite my snob status, I have enjoyed many a basic and cheap meal served in a mountain hut/inn. But most experienced huts/inns (e.g. in Europe) know that if they are going to go cheap/easy to do something like saucy pasta or stew. Why Cuernos tries to serve 3 courses (soup, shoe-leather pot-roast and mashed potatoes, and fruit cocktail) is beyond me. Those of us (including me) unlucky enough to receive the burnt ends of whatever kind of roasted animal (angry, ball-less, unfulfilled guanaco?) they had back there could not physically cut the meat, much less consume/stomach it. Fortunately, I had the sense to trade it in – for what was a reasonably edible middle piece. Where most people hated the fruit cocktail, Kim and I LOVED it; between the 2 of us, I think we each ate 5 cups of other peoples' desserts. Fortunately, despite the late hour, service was reasonably efficient (not taking into account their lack of attention to beverages – which our guides basically managed), and I was on my way back to the cabin around 10 – distracted by the gloriously weird clouds and their dramatically changing hues.



Left to Right: (top) approaching cabins, cabins and Cuernos , my cabin, my cabin view, goofy cabin hot tub dinner; (bottom) dinner in crazy hall, yes – fruit cocktail, magnificent and weird clouds of Patagonia (over Lago Nordenskold)

December 26, 2012 – French Valley: More Unfinished Circuit Business AND Delayed Karmic Payback
 Somewhat to Andre's chagrin, our assigned breakfast time was 8:00 a.m. (recall – we had to hike 12 miles and 2500 feet up/down by 6 p.m.). I do want to say that we arrived 15 minutes early - presumably because we hoped earlier groups were also chomping at the bit to hit the trail. Given all this confusing turnover, though, breakfast (cereal, toast, eggs, juice – each

handed out separately) was a total CF: the tables became mixtures of different groups, the servers didn't know who was coming/going – or who had received what. Despite this mess (and the fact that I was grumpy), I thought the food was better than dinner... AND we hit the trail by 9 a.m. I set out hiking a blistering pace with the 20-something guys up front. The first half of the 2-hour route between Cuernos camp and our next big junction (Italian Camp, an undeveloped tent-only site) was reminiscent of our last hour yesterday: up/down meandering, all in view of Lago Nordenskold and Paine Grande, much in beech forest. We rock-hopped at least one simple stream, walked a bona fide beach along the lake, and then I slowed down because we hit a steep but short climb up to this more open bench. At a scenic point along this bench, we all caught up to admire a more intimate view of Paine Grande. And then, it was a VERY gradual descent to the Italian camp.



Left to Right: Cuernos detail, Lago Nordenskold – beach, west across lake, Miki & Andre – Paine Grande

The Italian camp lies at the junction where the dead-end trail into the French Valley heads right, and the circuit continues left (to Pehoe). Although there was a ranger-like shack (selling some basic packaged snacks/food), there was – thank god – no multi-level hosterias, crazy cafeterias, murky hot tubs, etc. Scenery-wise, though, Italian camp was IN the woods – and, not surprisingly, we barely stopped here. So – in my fantasy version of this hike (which, if I haven't stated it emphatically enough, has been a HUGE goal of mine ever since not making it up here in 1997), I did have my heart set on going to the trail end – i.e. ALL the way up in the open moraine. Although pre-trip literature suggested today could include a 14 mile option (which does match my math in terms of going ALL the way up), that really wasn't an option and Andre definitely presented that final mile as rocky and rough-to-the-point-of-annoying, the final view (IHO) as inferior to the lower one we'd be visiting. Whether that is true or not, I cannot say. Much as I love Andre, his preferences sometimes differ from mine; I also know how much he LOVES Paine Grande – which is funny because I barely noticed Paine Grande until my second trip here. For me, Patagonia's unique draw has always been its massive and/or weird granite towers – not its glaciated peaks (perhaps because I've grown up around glaciated peaks my whole life). My reasons for wanting to visit the French Valley were to see, close-up, the highest cirque of granite towers that lie beyond/behind Paine Grande (e.g. the Sharksfin/Tiburón), pictures of which reminded me of a more expansive version of the extremely magical Wind Rivers' Cirque of the Towers. Between that confessional and the fact that, by this point, the clouds were pouring in, it should go without saying that I have yet to experience my fantasy version of this hike... not that this was not spectacular.



Left to Right: (top) lower moraine climb to French overlook, GORGEOUS beech promenade trail; (bottom) French overlook view of Paine Grande, and Cuernos, hiking a little above the French overlook

The hike from the Italian camp to the lower/French overlook was a mini-déjà vu of the OLD trail to the Torres/towers (but, as learned tomorrow, they've thankfully improved that beast since 2008). Gaining over 2000 feet in about 3 miles, though, it wasn't QUITE as crazy as the old moraine scramble to Torres... but it did have its moments. After 20 minutes in the woods, we broke out into open moraine and rock-hopped along a semi-obvious route. After 40 minutes, we re-entered the forest and log-jammed several times (given MANY other parties/people), owing to some interesting sections that were narrow, chute-like, steep, slick, rocky, rooty, and/or all of the above. The way then became this GORGEOUS beech promenade up/along a

hogback mini-ridgeline – the trees thin enough on both sides to see both Paine Grande (left) and the Cuernos (right). So - one of the other reasons this area didn't live up to my fantasy is that I actually wasn't blown away with how the Cuernos looked from this side... they seemed flatter and less impressive. It's sort of why I never liked climbing high on Rainier... losing the huge perspective I am used to from lower down. After 40 minutes, we arrived at the very busy French Mirador, a rocky open clearing that offered unobstructed views of Paine Grande and the Cuernos. From this perspective, Paine Grande is MASSIVE – the peak rising 8000 (+) feet STRAIGHT up. To avoid the crowds, we proceeded 10 minutes higher – to this area along a GORGEOUS whitewater section of river, all of Paine Grande towering before us (the Cuernos eclipsed by forest behind us). This was our one-hour lunch stop, aimed at experiencing the fairly regular icefalls that loudly exploded down various faces of the mountain. A different party arrived as we were sitting down – their leader exchanging friendly jabs with Andre about how we'd stolen their spot. Based on my reading of the map, we were still 1.5 hours from (and 1500 feet lower than) “the top.” Had the weather been perfect, not going higher might have mattered more to me... but things were not friendly at this point. The other thing that wasn't friendly was lunch (presumably prepared by the infamous Cuernos kitchen); many folks (including me) barely touched their sandwiches – which one person accurately described as catfood-like (some kind of canned fish, possibly tuna?). Fortunately, the provided bag of GORP was plentiful and decent - and I was carrying a few snacks of my own, which I combined with some Pringles potato chips and chocolate, courtesy of the guides.



Left to Right: (top) me and lunch spot Paine Grande views, Cerro Fortaleza, Espada-Hoja-Mascara; (bottom) me near French Overlook, heading down, bridge over Rio del Francais, fire damage along Lago Skottsbergs, weather BAD!

We started back down around 2, 7-8 miles of hiking remaining. Getting back down to the Italian camp wasn't bad, although it was pretty much me and Andy pulling up the rear (with Andre). At times, I felt like I must not have been paying attention at all during the hike up – the lowest glacier on Paine Grande seemed entirely foreign to me as we descended (thus, photography slowed me down further). Back at the junction/suspension bridge, part of our party regrouped but, for the next mile or so, I had no idea where most others were; Andy and I had been given the OK to continue - so we plowed on, only to see no one else for 20 minutes. At some point, we discussed whether we should stop and wait – my concern being that everyone else was back there looking for us and unnecessarily waiting. But then we came upon Mikki and a subgroup - waiting for a full regroup. Initially, the trail was not burnt – and we traversed a mixture of forest, rocky hillside (above smaller lakes), and marshland boardwalks. As we neared Lago Skottsbergs, though, we started more sustained but gradual climbing – and the fire damage (still the Lago Grey fire) was apparent. Halfway alongside this lake, we came to this obvious spot where Sara and I had stopped during our aborted attempt to hike the French Valley in 1997 (the weather too ugly!). It's funny because, at the time, we thought we were above Lago Nordenskold – a testimony to our bad states of mind at the time. Of course, the distance between Lago Skottsbergs and Pehoe seemed UNENDING as compared with my impressions in 1997.

We arrived at Lago Pehoe – many of us feeling tired – a little after 5 p.m. In contrast with a few days ago, it was definitely NOT sunny and inviting – meaning that most of us gathered in the dining area. Despite the weather, however, the apparent move to line up at the dock occurred earlier... probably because folks knew what was about to happen (the afore-title reference to “delayed karmic payback”). Although the guides did their best to move us out, we were – once again – spread out in the CF line. Even though the line was no bigger than that from the other day, the issue became that the ferry captain can close access to the upper/open deck if the weather is questionable – and that severely limits the numbers on board. Well – you can imagine what happened: the ferry pulled up, the people got off, and then you could feel the inertia of that line moving forward because folks could sense that the captain was going to close the upper deck. In the end, 60% of our party made it – but 40% (including me) were ~20 people behind. Andre definitely tried to argue that the rest of us be allowed to cut forward but at least a couple strong-willed folks in front were NOT going to let that happen (they physically and verbally blocked these efforts); in the middle of this exciting show, the captain/crew simply pulled up the gangplank and left without a word, meaning we would be waiting for the second run. In retrospect, I should have gone back and waited indoors (because it was cold and windy on that dock). But for some reason, our party decided to tough it out, securing our place at the front of the line as everyone else slunk back to no-doubt drink more. Fortunately, it never rained. Of course, the most annoying thing: when we finally got on board, the captain TOTALLY opened the upper deck... and passed out candy, hoping to appease us. In the end,

I met a neat family from Colorado who was here visiting their daughter (she was in a study abroad program near Puerto Montt). I also had a nice conversation with one of the individuals who blocked Andre's earlier efforts (but I'm not sure she connected me and his group); she was this striking older woman from Austria and we would cross paths again in Argentina. Even though the whole boat situation was annoying, it was fair – and it was fairer than when Sara and I were bumped by a comparable adventure travel group in 1997 – who, back then, not only had the clout to delay the ferry to wait for them, but also managed to gain exclusive rights to the view-deck. As a result, Sara and I cursed adventure traveling a lot back then – and so I should be happy, 17 years later, that the ferry no longer recognizes a class system, as it were.

When we arrived at Pudeto (just after 7:30 p.m.), I was initially surprised to see everyone else waiting in the bus – but then I did the math and, indeed, the drive to Torres is too long to do twice. As we proceeded to Hosteria las Torres, it was also clear that we weren't going to arrive there until around 9:30. Fantasies about taking a shower and then eating were eliminated when Andre did his own math and announced that the buffet shut down at 10; thus, we'd be driving up and proceeding straight to the dining hall with gear and as is. Needless to say, I deployed half a dozen handi-wipes to get some of the stink and grime off. Arriving on schedule (as it were), we definitely turned some heads as we arrived, piling our impressive backpacks in an unassuming corner and – likely with crazed looks – poring ravenously over the available food. So – I have good things and bad things to say about the Torres buffet, the footnote being: recall what I said about the 2008 buffet at Lago Grey. I did not have major concerns about the conservative food choices made this evening: a delicious and well-cooked lamb-chop, a pile of pasta with a pesto-like sauce, a tomato salad (well-bathed in vinegar), some kind of bean soup, and cake. However, there were MANY suspect items out there, including seafood appetizers and custards that were not on ice/chilled in any way. Tomorrow, I ventured into one of those zones and paid the price the following 2 days. Given an earlier-than-usual wake-up (7 a.m.), I was done with dinner by 10:10 – and, in the next 45 minutes, managed to shower, do my laundry (while the bathtub filled), enjoy a relaxing bath-soak, and brush/floss my teeth. Lights out 11 p.m.

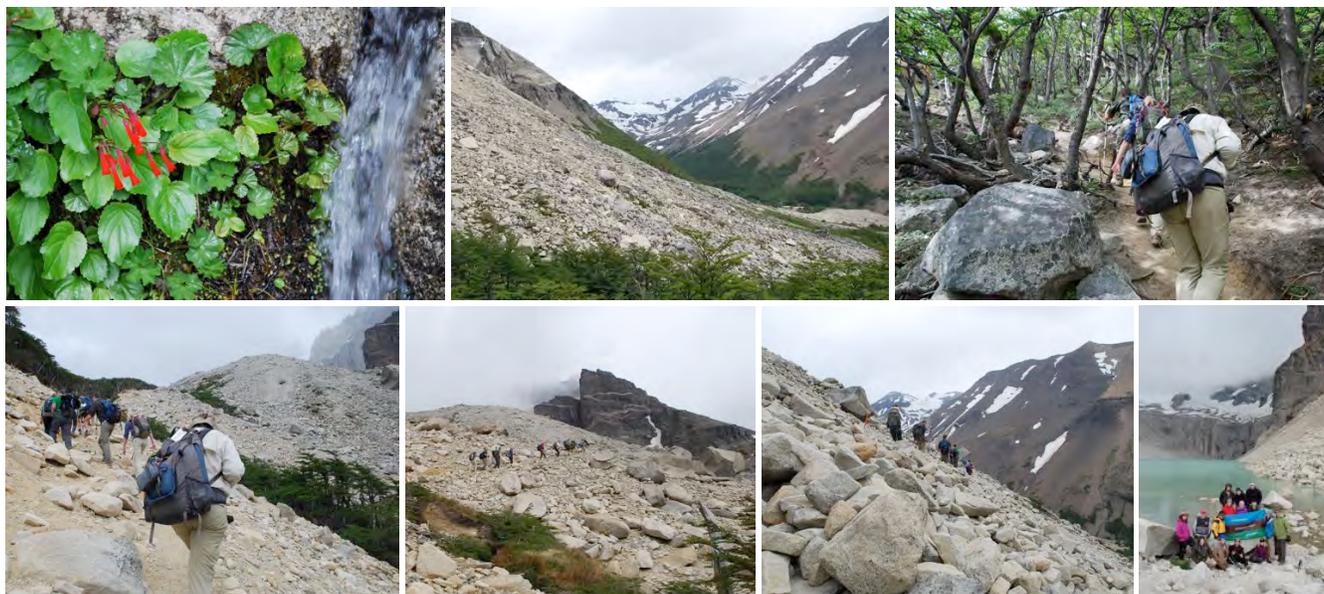


Left to Right: (top) Torres room, heading out, Nieto in the mist; (bottom) at first highpoint, crossing Rio Ascencio, capachito lady's slipper, daunting view of climb, lower climb in beech along creek

December 27, 2012 – Torres: Prodromal, Death of the Big Camera

Despite my efforts to get a full night of sleep, my slumber was interrupted by the intense smell of smoke in the middle of the night. Given all the talk of fire, the huge damage we'd seen, and the fact that the weather was changing, I was actually worried there was some new fire out there... and so I tossed and turned quite a bit. Ultimately, we were never sure what it was – but a few folks (also awakened) seemed to think it was some gauchos (who ran the nearby horse corral and riding services) burning stuff. Running late and dragging myself to breakfast at the last second, I learned Andre was delaying the start by about 30 minutes – given that the majority of us were lagging. At some point (probably in the middle of the night), I had made a pact with myself about whether I was even going to do this hike (having already seen it under picture-perfect conditions in 2008): if I woke up and could see the Torres, I would go; if not, I was taking a rest day. Although I didn't have my camera with me as I strolled to breakfast, the Torres were – in fact – visible through thin fog up there. And so, with great reluctance, I proceeded. In hindsight, I was prodromal with something – and should not have done this hike, one of the hardest (based on my experience in 2008). Hitting the trail at 9, I remained in the back of the pack ALL day. For the first half-mile, we walked the same trail as we had to the Cuernos, thus stitching together the complete W route. After the second suspension bridge, we headed right and started up – climbing 1000 feet up a path that largely ignores the concept of switchbacks. After just over an hour, I reached the first highpoint – TOTALLY sucking wind. In 2008, the view from this point was one of my favorites – the curving valley and distant peaks up the Silencio Valley reminding me of Cascade Pass. Promisingly, the vista today included much of the valley and peaks – albeit shrouded in fog that hovered around the 3000-4000 foot level. From this point, the trail drops a hundred feet, does a little more up and down, and eventually commits to a 200-foot drop to the Torres Camp (similar to Cuernos, except no private cabins). Regrouping, we continued on to the next phase of the hike: an hour of VERY up and down hiking along (or high above) the Rio Ascencio. Indeed, today's whole hike looks like it only gains/loses 2300 feet – but the combined effect of the MANY smaller up/down sections bring the total closer

to 3000 feet. After mostly keeping up with the fast-folk along this section, we arrived at the big, daunting view of the final ascent: 1000 up – mostly along but then across the huge moraine spilling down from the Torres cirque. For whatever reason, this didn't seem as difficult as the straight-up ascent earlier in the day - although I was still sucking wind. As mentioned previously, this trail has been TOTALLY improved since 2008: where, back then, it was a loose-rock free-for-all up open talus for at least 50% of the climb, they have now moved 80% of said route back in the trees adjacent to the talus. The grade is civil and there is no scrambling. The last 20% of said route contours to and across the talus – but they have actually put effort into constructing a civil walkway between the beech ridgeline and the talus, some sections cleared down to smooth gravel, others stone-worked to the point that few rocks move like they used to. Even though we never saw the towers, I appreciated the new trail and don't regret doing this hike - even when factored against what was about to happen...



Left to Right: (top) waterfall plant interlude, view of talus, totally new trail up beech hogback; (bottom) getting closer to the moraine heap, well-constructed talus final walkways, group shot & our best view

Although the official walkway to the moraine summit was impressive, the social routes heading down to the lake were not improved – with precarious, mobile rocks and a couple hands-on scrambling moves required. At the lake edge, we took another hour-long break – even though the weather never improved much (despite several teasing bursts of sun from behind). As a result of some sudden GI distress, I made an emergency run behind some rocks that ultimately produced only gas (hmmm – maybe that buffet wasn't safe after all?). Still feeling funny, I had no appetite for much in the way of lunch and so I just laid down and took a nap – wearing pretty much all my gear (layers, fleece, raingear for wind protection). And then it was time to head back down. Back near the top of the moraine heap where the actual trail began, there was this HUGE rock that required a BIG step. Where some of the shorter people body-flopped it, I – having long legs – stepped WAY up (as in - knees bent up to my chest). As I throttled forward to pull the rest of my body up, though, I bent considerably forward. And that's when my big camera, which hangs hands-free in front of my chest, peeled out of its protective case (the partially-zipped cover opening) and dropped straight down on its leash. Given that I can still see and hear most of this event, I will say that I was surprised the camera was so demolished – because, honestly, it did not hit that loudly or hard: it fell about 18 inches before striking a lower rock – hitting the outer rim of the lens at the 4 o'clock position. None of the glass broke and there was only a tiny indent in the lens rim (less than a mm deep). At the time, I just put it away and continued – never dreaming (after plenty of rough treatment the last 7 years) she was a goner. Unfortunately, I pulled it out 5 minutes later and the autofocus would not catch... it just moved in and out, never locking. At first, Andy suggested pulling the battery out so it would reboot all its electronics. Although that did fix the autofocus problem for 1-2 shots, the problem returned... and then I actually LOOKED at one of the post-drop shots and all were TOTALLY washed out, no light control whatsoever. Shockingly, though, I was not as upset as one might expect. First and foremost, I had my smaller digital Lumix camera waiting back at the hotel. Second, I've always had mixed feelings about hauling around a giant SLR, especially being so wimpy (indeed, the last few years have seen more use of my beloved little Lumix). So maybe this was just a sign that I wasn't meant to be a big camera person. And as for the expense, well – the big camera was about \$600... but it is SOOOO obsolete at this point (even the little Lumix shoots higher resolution images AND hi-def video). So maybe this was just a sign that I should invest in a better SLR. Who knows?

The hike back went smoothly, although it briefly spit rain on us during the along/above-the-river section. When we arrived back at Torres camp, we were greeted by the morbid sight of a just-deceased horse partially covered by a tarp on the side of the trail. Disturbingly, no one really knew what happened with that – or how they were going to get rid of it. Climbing back up to highpoint number one, I lost all my steam again... and so Andre babysat me all the way back. Of course, we were yacking away - reminiscing about the characters on the 2008 trip, discussing respective experiences in SE Asia, talking about adventure travel companies and guides. I was disheartened to learn that one of my favorite MTS guides (the great Erik Perez, from Northern Spain) has taken over the cushier Patagonia trip I did in 2008 – partly because of Andre's move, but also because Picos/Pyrenees hiking trips haven't been selling as well. I commented that in the last few years I've noticed that several American companies have developed trips that look a lot like Erik's itineraries – adding that it was too bad someone as physically strong and enthusiastically Spanish as Erik was now leading the cruise-hike version of Patagonia. I also mused that

it is funny how anti-adventure travel I used to be... and even though Andre thinks I'm some big MTS veteran, my list is so small compared with other clients I've traveled with – who literally have done dozens of trips. Of course, I then amused Andre with some younger-day stories of getting hit on by such male clients (all MUCH older, dozens of trips under their belts). Fortunately, I'm finally older, harder, and less adorable than I was in my 30's.

We arrived back at the hosteria around 4, leaving plenty of time to clean up and unwind before Andre's pre-dinner presentation about his climbing exploits in Torres. After another shower/soak, the usual laundry drill, and some preliminary packing, I used the slightly cumbersome (but free!) hotel internet to write home (takehome message: weather GREAT, camera GONE). Having eaten hardly anything at lunch, I then finally broke down and bought snacks (a pear drink and some kind of Pringles knock-off) at the gift shop; my big regret was that I did NOT buy Bryan's wife (Emma) the BEAUTIFUL gaucho belt they were selling here (at the time, I assumed there would be better ones in Argentina). Hauling my food booty into the hotel's lecture hall (for lack of a better word), I crunched my way through Andre's talk – which focused on ascents of the big towers we did not see today... and explained, in part, why Andre (especially those hands and arms) seemed bigger and meatier than in 2008. Heading down for the earliest buffet seating (around 7), I must have forgotten about the fact that me and my GI track hadn't been in the best of spirits today. Consequently, I ate too adventurously – the most damning item being this local dessert: barley and dried plums rehydrated in a thin, sweet, fermented brown syrup, all served in a champagne glass. Yup – just stringing those words together in print makes my stomach reel a little. I don't remember much of the rest of the meal – but it wasn't as good as the night before... a clear understatement.



Left to Right: last shot of Torres, vast sky over pampas, all but me at Perito Moreno, La Leona flag & hot cocoa

December 28-30, 2012 – Torres to Calafate to El Chalten... Fever Dreams, Diarrhea, and Muddy Dinosaur Bones

I'm not exactly sure when I realized I was really sick during today's long drive. I know I moved from the front of the bus to the back seat for the first time, spreading out all my gear and lying full-body across the seats. I know I started suffering diarrhea at the Argentine border – notably when there was, like, NO toilet paper in the filthy bathroom stalls. I initially resorted to ATM receipts, but then I retrieved tissues and handi-wipes from the bus - returning to the bathroom to do a better job. By the time we arrived at this roadside café for lunch, I had ZERO appetite – and the sight and smell of heavy pizzas and empanadas made me nauseous. Thankfully, the egg-drop-style soup went down, along with some fizzy water... but not after at least 2 more runs (in all senses of the word) to the restroom. After lunch, I began experiencing the most dramatic chills I've felt in recent memory: these cold wave-like sensations that traveled up and down my whole body – head to toe, and back again. An hour later, we pulled out at this classic overlook before the descent to Calafate – and I was freezing in a way that concerned me greatly. Although a few people joked that they were not used to me looking bundled up and chilly, I did not go public with my concerns until later in the day. Arriving in Calafate around 2 (the rest of the day free), I was almost delirious – to the point I sustained another round of diarrhea and crashed in my bed for 2 hours. At 4:30, I awoke and instantly knew I was running a fever... indeed, I was horrified to read: 102.5°F. Incoherently hauling myself downstairs, I found Andre writing emails and confessed the situation, those big eyes memorably larger than usual (but not in a good way). Within the next 30 minutes, I had LOVELY conversations about my diarrhea with Andre, then Mike (the physician), and then Kim (the nurse). As a microbiologist, I have no shame about these topics... but, given the circumstances and potential outcomes, it was intense. I think Andre was relieved that it was I who stated that tonight's dinner and tomorrow's trip to the Perito Moreno glacier were out. As for medical advice, we agreed that a 5-day course of Cipro was in order – plus liver-challenging doses of Tylenol to combat the fever. Other than a couple large glasses of yogurt drink, though, I ate nothing else until breakfast the next morning. Although I did sleep a lot, it was interrupted with sudden bouts of super-watery diarrhea – so bad that, as confessed to Roger and Allison, I resorted to using menstrual pads because there were a few times I didn't make it to the toilet in time.

By 7 a.m. the next day, the GI pain – a combination of the infection, the Cipro, and intense hunger – was unbearable. So I dragged myself down to the nearly empty breakfast buffet and was quietly eating some corn flakes when Andre showed up, surprised to find me but then visibly and verbally horrified I was eating dairy. Indeed, for the next 2 days, Andre sort of channeled my grandmother (Besta, in Norwegian), which was fine because she was wise and she always took good care of me. Indeed, it was then that I started noticing that a lot of Besta's and Andre's English adaptations and sentence structure were similar, both being expressive non-native English speakers. After replacing my cereal bowl with toast and clear tea, Andre then point-blank asked if he should skip the Perito today and take care of me. Although Roger has given me plenty of grief about how I must have responded to that, I unhesitatingly replied NO – mostly because I thought that was ridiculous, and I was more than capable of caring for myself (case in point: 20 hours of intermittent Staph-induced vomiting between Bangkok and Kathmandu, 1998). Nonetheless, Andre insisted and then explained how I should get soup and rice for lunch... I don't think I made any promises – but I said I'd be fine feeding myself, even if that included a short walk. Had we been someplace less familiar than Calafate, I might have been concerned; but, having spent almost 2 weeks in this town, I felt safe and comfortable. After laughing about the "many situations" (Andre's words) this group had already sustained, I returned to my room and slept until around 11. By then, I thought I was 100% up for a walk to the grocery (6 short blocks away)... the sunny

day inspiring. Although I did make it, I have to say that 3 blocks in – as I was heading down the main street – I did have a big dizzy and nauseous spell. Fortunately, I sat down and gathered myself enough to rush into the grocery, buy a huge Sprite, a 6-pack of yogurt drinks, bananas, and a bunch of big soda crackers... oh – and some girly roll-on, having run out a few days ago (stinky, stinky!). Although I did pass an inviting bakery with delicious looking bread and soup, I was too worried about passing out and/or shitting myself – so I returned immediately to the hotel. After sending out a couple emails and eating variously, I slept another 3 hours, waking around 4 and making my way down to the sunny curbside patio so I could greet my comrades (who arrived within 30 minutes, delighted to see I was up/about). Tonight, I did join everyone for dinner – a mostly-pizza place down the street. Of course for me, Andre pre-ordered unseasoned boiled chicken breast, plain white rice, and bland squash soup – but that was fine... and it eventually did the intended job.



Left to Right: Badlands-esque area – amancay (sand alstroemeria... Bryan?), working through muddy clay, T-rex femur

The next day, I was not sure what my fate would be – although I dressed and packed for the best. The fever and runs had gone into hiding for 15 hours – but so had ALL my GI contents (and only a good shit would provide THE sign I was recovered). We enjoyed a leisurely wake-up and departure, the ultimate goal being a 4-hour drive to these rustic cabins beyond El Chalten. En route, we planned to hike at this newly developed area: a Badlands-esque area with dinosaur bones and petrified forest specimens. Heading out, the weather was drizzly, gray, and unpromising (overnight precipitation totals were in the half-inch range, unprecedented for the dry pampas). After briefly stopping at the famous roadside La Leona café/museum, we met our new secondary hiking guide (Cecilia) and headed up this nearby dirt side-road. Although the road didn't seem steep or dangerous going up, it sure was descending – with extended clay sections seeming like ice-rinks. At the end, we parked at a non-descript area with a couple passenger vehicles. I do not recall if there were any signs – but it was raining (to the point I deployed my pack cover, the only time on this whole trip). Within 5 minutes, we were slipping and sliding in inch-thick clay mud, our hiking boot treads attracting the mess into wet concrete platform shoes. Although there was some trail construction along higher-risk/impact segments (e.g. bridges over small ravines, wooden steps up steep hills), it provided little safety given the mud situation. Andre and Cecelia managed to get us MAYBE half a mile in to what they considered the “best” specimen in the area (a T-rex femur)... but we all knew we were not going to make the big loop and down into some bigger canyon-y sections. Returning to the bus, we only sustained one spill – Andre took a nice muddy half-body hit/slide while leading everyone down a shallow hill that lacked any steps. Back at the bus, we changed our shoes and eagerly returned to La Leona for a now-indoor picnic lunch – most folks supplementing carried sandwiches with hot drinks and/or French fries. Although I diligently ate only soup, Andre definitely gave me his bad-face when he saw me buying a big hot cocoa.



Left to Right: rustic cabins – (top) cabins, bathroom cabin - showers; (bottom) delphinium, dining hall & door, TOO-tempting appetizers, Andre's lecture-face (e.g. also applied to unauthorized food consumption), dinner

Wrapping up lunch by 3, we drove to and then through El Chalten (which now features several paved roads, new since 2008), continuing beyond via the still-dirt road along the Rio de las Vueltas for another 30 minutes. Privately owned, the Fitzroy cabin complex was significantly more luxurious than the in-park Cuernos cabins... but they were somewhat rustic in the sense that

you walked 10 minutes from the road to get to them, the bathroom facilities were shared, and the rooms were basic. Being that it was REALLY cold when we arrived (tons of fresh snow visible on Fitzroy the next morning), I also thought the cabins were chilly – despite ceramic wall heaters. Others reported similar feelings, not to mention some cabin insects. Having said that, the bathroom facilities were excellent – plenty of hot water, continually flushing toilets - and the main hall/dining area was stunning. That we were the only ones at the cabins/using the hall was equally important. After unpacking, I took a shower and then enjoyed about 90 minutes of reading and napping. At around 7, there were drinks and appetizers back in the big dining hall. Of course, when they carried out that big tray of meats, cheeses, and veggies, I thought I was going to die I was so hungry for real food. Although I was not Andre-authorized to eat any of this, I earned another bad-face for sneaking ONE piece of the DIVINELY fatty prosciutto-like ham... and possibly one of those tomatoes. At some point, Andre did his presentation of our next 3 days in Los Glaciers... and then there was some downtime, most occupied by this local bar game involving swinging a ring on a string; sadly, there was a strong male/gender-bias in terms of success in this game. For all but me, dinner featured soup, ricotta-like cheese-filled pasta cannelloni, and salad. I ate the soup, plus my own special bowl of plain pasta lightly dressed in oil. Given that tomorrow featured a 14-mile hike to the Pollone viewpoint of the North Face of Fitzroy (a new destination for me), I was itching to get some sleep so I could make this trip. Equally motivational, I should add that I am a big Art Wolff/"Travels to the Edge" fan – and tomorrow's route was something he featured/hiked on his "around Fitzroy" episode, ultimately continuing past Pollone and ascending fully up the Glacier Marconi and onto the Southern Icefield.



Left to Right: Fitzroy from dining room, bridge over Rio Electrico and Marconi massif, Fitzroy massif reflected in Rio Blanco

December 31, 2012 – Rio Electrico to North Face Fitzroy Overlook

In 1997, Sara and I backpacked much of today's route along the Rio Electrico to the Piedra del Fraile camp, staying there 2 nights. At the time, we understood that this area offered the only trail-accessible route to see Fitzroy's North Face. Based on our interpretation of the maps (and watching/following other groups), we were under the impression that the only way to see the North Face was this REALLY steep climbers' path straight up from camp... which we accomplished. When I mentioned that that is what we did to Andre, he seemed surprised (and hopefully impressed) - because it is definitely big... one that not even he has done. He then explained that the older route to the North Face overlook was actually the one we were doing today: hiking 2-3 miles past Piedras del Fraile, then scrambling another 2-3 miles around and eventually up the Rio Pollone drainage... and ultimately winding up at the foot of the Glacier Pollone, directly under Fitzroy. Apparently, this was also the original/historic climbers' approach to summit Fitzroy – but problems with rockslides and glacier recession have moved the preferred route to directly above Piedras (i.e. the thing Sara and I hauled our asses up in 1997). Indeed, today's Pollone access hike was – overall - easier than the beast Sara and I climbed – but, having said that, it is not a well-marked or publicized route; looking at my current copy of the Lonely/Lying Planet guide, only the big beast is mentioned or map-featured. In 1997, Sara and I did meander toward Pollone along the flat Rio Electrico valley section - but we saw nothing that looked like a trail and would never have guessed there was a scrambling route up in those rocks at the time. Could I do it now? Probably – but only after having been guided there.



Left to Right: Marconi massif & Rio Electrico, Piedra del Fraile camp - Cerro 30 Aniversario in back, flat plateau past camp (note mound in distance... we will scramble that), Fitzroy

Setting out around 8, though, I was skeptical of my ability to complete today's 14-miler – even though the elevation change was minimal (about 1500 feet). Just walking 10 minutes back up to the road was sort of tiring, frankly. Driving back to the big bridge over the Rio Electrico, we set out in full sun – the fresh snow on Fitzroy testimony to what had been, like I said before, a chilly night. Given that the first 5 miles of this hike are nearly flat, though, I promptly woke up and kept a strong pace... the completely clear, sunny, and warming skies HIGHLY motivating. Despite one fall (our youngest, on a wet-log stream crossing a mile in), we quickly arrived at Piedra del Fraile camp – which I hadn't seen in 15 years. Much to my satisfaction, the camp hasn't changed hardly at all... I could even find where Sara and I put our tent. One thing I did learn, though, is that the Rio Electrico drainage is NOT part of the national park – and, being on private property, there is some fee system just for visiting (which probably explains why we saw hardly anyone, in contrast with the next 2 days of crowds IN the park). If such a fee

system existed in 1997, Sara and I were totally oblivious (and no one was demanding – ‘cause we did not pay). At the camp, we took a decent snack-break; Andre FULLY channeled Besta (whose favorite medicinal food of all time was PRUNES) by handing me this tub of deliciousness. I’m sure the hand-over was accompanied by some knowing expression (e.g. “I can tell you haven’t had a good shit yet”)... but, being that I LOVE prunes, I only remember the glistening fruit well. As a consequence of eating least 20 prunes that afternoon, I think it is safe to say that I achieved GI nirvana that evening. We continued past the camp another couple of miles – the way across a mostly flat plateau (occasionally interrupted by short rocky mini-moraine mounds). And along the entire way were GLORIOUS views of Fitzroy and the crazy climbers’ path... MORE glorious than I remember from 1997. As noted in the legend for the previous set of pictures, we eventually left the plateau and scrambled this obvious mound (which, I am fairly certain, blocked any other land route up the valley). By this point, there wasn’t much of a “trail” – you just sort of headed up through a mix of rock, stream, and meadow. Although there were some tricky spots (mostly on the first big climb to the mound “top” - and mostly due to stream-wetted rocks and boulders), I LOVED, LOVED, LOVED this section... it reminded me of hiking high in the North Cascades or Alps. Everything I hoped the French Valley would be came true on this hike... but, as is sort of well-established, I still have that first-love thing for/with Argentina. Once we reached the “top,” we more or less traversed this rolling bench. After 20 minutes, we arrived at this grand overlook of Lago Electrico – which was also where Rio Pollone flowed down from the left.



Left to Right: (top) on the scrambling mound, self-portrait, traversing the mound – meadow, tarn, and rock; (bottom) Lago Electrico, Lago Pollone and Fitzroy North, FANTASTIC lunch

The bulk of today’s elevation was during the final mile – mostly above Rio Pollone, but then meeting with Lago Pollone (the source of the river) at the foot of the namesake glacier and Fitzroy. Fortunately, most was a gradual climb on a very civil climbers’ path. Having said that, the entire view to the left was an impressive rock-heap – from which, even in the last year, MAJOR boulders had fallen. Arriving at Lago Pollone around 1, we enjoyed over an hour – full sun, NO ONE else around, magnificent condors riding the thermals against the rock walls, the baby-blue Pollone Glacier, and the unique profile of Fitzroy from this angle (not my favorite – but more special given the context of the day). With minor exception (i.e. our starch-atarian vegetarian), we also voted today’s lunch as the BEST: a hand-made vegetarian salad (tomatoes, corn, lentils, carrots).

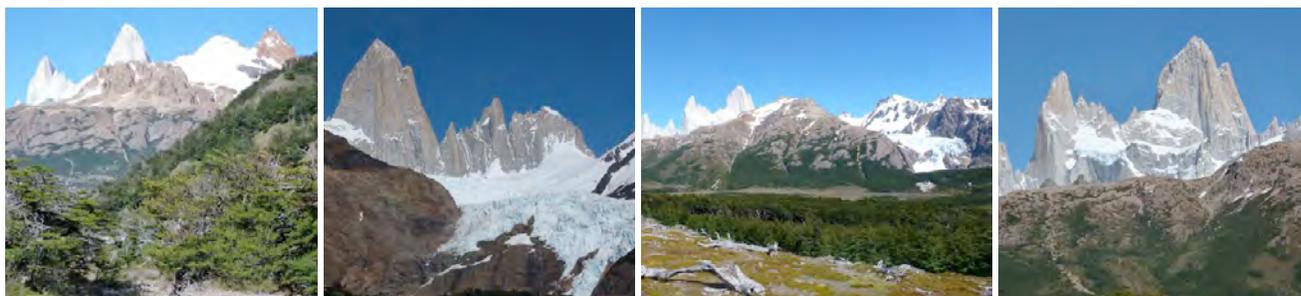


Left to Right: heading back down – across the upper mound, lower mound, plateau... New Year’s Eve asado

The hike back was glorious but uneventful. Oddly, descending the sketchy sections of the mound was not nearly as treacherous as the ascent had seemed. For much of that section, Ken and I had been talking research – as work talk, in general, started creeping back in (signifying the end was near). As we dropped back onto the plateau, it came out that Ken was sick with the same symptoms I had a few days ago – although he spoke mostly about the impressive chills (it wasn’t clear whether he was as wracked with diarrhea as I had been... although Ken was not one to hold back, being a biologist and all). Although he completed this hike, it would be his last on this trip... which made me sad. Arriving at the camp, we took a short break (including, in my case, a FILTHY restroom stop... YUCK!). Thereafter, the Sarah’s, Ashley, and Cecilia started smelling the barn... leading a FIERCE pace and covering over 3 miles an hour to within a mile of the trailhead. I really enjoyed Cecelia,

a beautiful 36-YO native Argentinean originally from Buenos Aires. Interestingly, she was one of El Chalten's first and original settlers, the result of an ongoing border dispute/discussion with Chile (the region in question lying about 20 miles upriver from the Fitzroy cabins). To demonstrate they had a more populous hold on the area, Argentina basically offered super-cheap land/housing to citizens who would relocate (sort of like homestead acts in the US), ultimately creating El Chalten in the late 80's/early 90's. Although Cecelia came here with her then-husband (both climbers and guides), she is now an independent home-owner... and, sufficed to say, we had some common ground and perspectives on many things.

I hiked the last mile to the bus in front and on my own. It felt good to know and feel I was well and strong again. Back at the cabins, the roast lamb/asado (the New Year's special) had just been set up (it was around 6 p.m.) – the anticipated meal time around 9, meaning plenty of time to shower, launder, FINALLY have a good poo, do some packing (as we were moving to a regular hotel back in El Chalten tomorrow), and enjoy a nap. The only exciting annoyance of the evening was that it appeared as though I was starting my period AGAIN – and I say again because I came into this trip JUST ending the last round. So – as with my famous double-period Wind River-Colorado trips of 2000: I don't know if it was a more powerful alpha-female, Andre, all that spring in the air, my increasingly crazy peri-menopause... but SOMETHING got my ovaries BEYOND excited! As with the night before, the appetizer tray came out a little after 7 – and (yeah!) I finally got to eat whatever I wanted... which meant ham, ham, ham. Dinner was served more like 9:30, perhaps because they thought we'd, like, all be staying up until midnight. Exhausted, I annihilated the salad, potatoes, and lamb in 30 minutes and was under the covers by 10:30 (although I do recall having to get up and pee – which required a 5-minute walk to the shared facilities – pretty much at midnight).



Left to Right: Fitzroy – setting out, from Piedras Blancas overlook, from big flat plateau, Lago de los Tres trail

January 1, 2013 – Fitzroy Traverse Kicks My Ass (Apparently Again)

So – we did this traverse in 2008 (a couple exceptions noted below). In the name of keeping this report under 25 pages, I am going to be brief. At the time, I was under the impression that I did not think this traverse was that hard; but in re-reading the 2008 report, I noted that it did – in fact - kick my ass (especially the Lago de los Tres section). And today, it kicked my ass a second time. Beginning near yesterday's Rio Electrico trailhead, we ultimately hiked across the front portion of the Fitzroy massif, winding up in El Chalten (indeed, hiking right to our hotel). For the first part of the day (i.e. to the big flat plateau), I thoroughly enjoyed talking with Ken's wife Kathleen, also a professor. We compared notes about resisting administrative pressures to deliver on-line coursework, among MANY other common-ground academic themes. Indeed, one of the reasons I love to do trips like this is that I invariably meet other faculty – and it is usually nice to commiserate. At the big flat plateau, we took a bathroom stop before descending to the big camping area and crossing the Rio Blanco. After a short break, we promptly tackled the HUGE Lago de los Tres side-trail, a 1500 foot climb over about 1.2 miles. Where in 2008 only half our party chose to do this side-trip, EVERYONE in our group headed up. It was hotter than hell, the sun was blazing, and I was TOTALLY sucking wind (in retrospect – it was probably all that iron/blood I had just lost and now I was losing again). For the first third of the climb, there were regular shaded spots – under which substantial groups of hikers could be found huddled and resting. For the second third, there were hardly any trees – and the way was a rock stair-master, many steps super-high. For the final third, things get a little more gravelly and meandering – first reaching a false summit (which Andy gave me a hard time for forgetting about), and then climbing the final moraine. Although there were not QUITE as many people as there were in 2008, it was still a madhouse – both on the trail and at the lake.



Left to Right: Andy at false summit, self-portrait on Sara and my rock, Lago Sucia, aerial view down trail, Magellanic snipe

We took another hour-long break at the lakeshore, allowing me to take pictures at my big rock (we didn't drop to the lakeshore in 2008 – so it was a thrill to sit on the Sara/Sarah rock once again 15 years later). Today's lunch featured another homemade salad (rice, currants, raisins, and almonds). After an hour of relaxing, we headed 5 minutes partially around the lake to the Lago Sucio overlook, which unfortunately bothered my fear of heights (another sure sign that I was full-throttle period-ing). I was dreading the big descent – but it wasn't THAT bad, although I was nowhere near the front of the line. Indeed, it remains a MIRACLE that my knee never acted up in any way on this entire trip! As with impressions in 2008, the hike back to El Chalten

was obscenely LOOOONG. Making matters worse, I FULLY ran out of water after the descent from Lago de los Tres – and I could feel a mild headache brewing. Fortunately, we made a big pitstop at Laguna Capri (30 minutes later) and I snagged a couple DELICIOUS and juicy plums from Andre. I remain perplexed how it was that we visited Capri this year but skipped it in 2008. Capri remains the most magical and memorable camping night from the 1997 trip – but, given my map impressions back then, I totally THOUGHT the lake was a dead-end side-trail. Thus, I was shocked to round the corner and see the lake... not to mention this semi-permanent yurt-like eco-camp operating nearby (YUCK!). Oh well – any ire vanished once those plums came out... there were more important things on my immediate needs list! Arriving in El Chalten around 5, we walked about 3 block-equivalents between the trailhead and our hotel, a new structure since I was last in town. While not as luxurious as the place we stayed in 2008, the rooms, fast/free internet, and cable selection were all great. For dinner, we headed over to the same place we first had lunch back in 2008 (with the great little empanadas and juice – and the Mr. Holmstrom-esque greeter – in paper mache - shown below). Over half the group ordered the steak and fries – each steak measuring approximately 4X6X3 inches. Needless to say, many peoples' eyes were bigger than their stomachs (including mine).



Left to Right: So – Mr. Holmstrom was a secret Gaucho (for Diane), heading out through town, start of trail, first viewpoint

January 2, 2013 – ANOTHER Clear Day at Cerro Torre, the Epidemic Grows

So – we also did this same hike in 2008 (a couple minor exceptions noted below) – thus, I'll keep this fairly short. Today, we were down two, with both Ken and Kathleen out sick; two others reported feeling under the weather but hiked anyway. At this point, though, the common/epidemic symptoms were not GI... they were flu-like respiratory. We headed out from the hotel around 9, hiking across town (opposite direction relative to yesterday's exit point) to the Cerro Torre trailhead. Although I have always thought of this hike as pretty easy (and, relatively speaking, it is), it is REALLY up and down... gaining and losing at least 1500 total over 10-12 total miles. Today, though, it was way more exhausting than usual for me – although I was apparently prodromal again – succumbing to our growing epidemic the next day.



Left to Right: Cerro Solo, Cerro Torre and massif, Poincenot and Fitzroy, the first flat meadows

Disturbingly, there were SHITLOADS more people than I have EVER seen on this hike – every one of the viewpoints clogged with crowds. Indeed, the first third of this hike is up, down, up (to a big viewpoint), down, up (to another big viewpoint), then down. The second third goes is more flat and open, crossing several meadows. Up until this point, the skies were mostly blue, the day warm (but not as hot as yesterday). But it was clear there were LOTS of high clouds moving in – to the point that, by around 1, clouds obscured the upper parts of Cerro Torre... and it became surprisingly chilly (as should be obvious by the progression of clothing). The final third of this hike is a little more up and down, hiking through some beech forest and then along the gorgeous Rio Fitzroy – before re-entering the forest near the tent-camping area. In contrast with our route in 2008 (that went by some semi-permanent eco-camp – which we never passed this time), we actually hiked through the public tent/camping area and then found a social trail right along Rio Fitzroy. This trail provided a sort of secret back-route to the lake, avoiding the more crowded main trail and emerging at a less crowded spot along the lake. We sat down lakeside around noon – Cerro Torre against a wall of white, and just about to be partially consumed. It was chilly (to the point most of us donned much of our gear) and slightly windy. When hiking out of El Chalten in 2008, we were treated to these amazing lunches that were apparently made by some woman in town. So - needless to say, I was hoping for the same today (even Andre was surprised I remembered – in great detail – the delicious little onion/potato cakes and nutty brownie-like bars, among other things). Consequently, he was also a little sorry to have to disappoint me with the fact that, no, they weren't using that provider anymore. But lunch was fine – I ate the pita-style chicken sandwich, albeit with little fanfare. After an hour, we started packing up. Unfortunately, I decided to take one of Ellen's jumping pictures... and – stupidly - I thought I could pull it off with a full-on backpack. Apparently, this is not possible... I TOTALLY fell on my ass; my feet slipped, my balance was thrown by the pack, and my knees fully failed the second I hit the ground. Ellen would have been ashamed. Shockingly, I wasn't hurt – and immediately busted up laughing. In contrast with that goofy move, the hike back was uneventful – although we took a slightly different route back into town, leaving the original trail about 1.5 miles from the trailhead and cutting more directly down (IMO, this alternate route back was a third of a mile shorter and not nearly as up/down). Being that we were

back at the hotel around 3, there was plenty of time to kill. Unfortunately, I did not make progress on any key goals: (1) after walking the ENTIRE length of town in flip-flops (8-10 block-equivalents), I discovered that the ATM was down; and (2) the place I bought gaucho belts for Ellen/Allison last time eliminated its stock and, despite several other attempts, I could NOT locate any gaucho belts (again – this time for Emma). Original plans to dine at a different restaurant fell through somewhat last minute, leaving us back at yesterday's place (with Mr. Holmstrom's paper mache ghost again); this time, I went vegetarian, enjoying a couple empanadas (spinach and corn), a salad, and a delicious chocolate thing for dessert.



Left to Right: back-route to Lago Torre, last full view of Cerro Torre, Andre, Cecelia and Nathan, bad jump, trail out

January 3-5, 2013 – Nightmare Return

The next morning, I awoke knowing I was tremendously ill – but this time with the group respiratory infection. Initial symptoms included a weird taste, a deep cough, the sensation that my lungs were heavy with congestion, a 100° fever, and an overwhelming sense of exhaustion (that verged on delirium). In consultation with others who'd succumbed earlier, I – along with half those reporting similar symptoms – began emergency antibiotics (in my case, the Levaquin that I'd been given a year ago when visiting SE Asia). Following breakfast, we hit the road for the 4-hour return drive to El Calafate. There, we had 30 minutes on our own before lunch. Despite feeling like shit, I found a gaucho belt (for Emma) in the gift shop adjacent to the pizza place where we ate – and then I sat on a nearby bench, overwhelmed with the idea of traveling back home like this. I could barely eat lunch... or much else the entire rest of the day. For much of this trip, I had been worried about saying goodbye at the airport because I figured I was going to be a big emotional wreck (a la Alsek); in the end, though, so many of us were ill (or preoccupied with illness) that everything felt anticlimactic in a selfishly ignoble way. While waiting at the gate, I remarked that this trip, represented graphically, would easily display the greatest and most sustained satisfaction highs, but it would also have the MOST steeply descending line from that acme that I had EVER experienced while traveling.

We also all agreed that the moment Andre left us, it seemed like the comfortable fabric of our prior traveling experience came apart to a great extent. Now we were at the whims of other people's arrangements or guidance – and it was not as good. Promised flights back to Buenos Aires were different than pre-trip literature reservations – and significantly later (we were supposed to fly out at 4, with a stopover in Bariloche... in reality, it was an hour later and we stopped in Trelew – following at least 1 aborted landing attempt given extreme winds). When we arrived in Buenos Aires (around 9 p.m.), our representative seemed flighty and imprecise. I was given an extension on my hotel room – but mostly because I was so obviously ill. By this point, my symptoms became outright scary; I felt like I was drowning in mucus (a phrase often associated with extremely virulent influenza) – uncontrollably coughing and wheezing through sheets of liquid pouring off the tissue between my throat and several inches down my trachea. My only relief was to hot shower steam myself. Given intense memories of the 2005 pneumonia incident, I was so stressed out that I couldn't sleep... and so my showering and HUGE coughing fits kept up well past midnight. Eventually, I called my mother – who wasn't much help (her final words: I'll be praying for you)... and then I called Bryan and said I needed rationale advice: calm down and do EVERYTHING to survive the flights home. Our physician and nurse both agreed with Bryan's statement – regardless of all other considerations (i.e. the possibility that I could get worse to the point of needing medical attention, or the possibility that I could infect more people en route).

In the end, I managed to sleep about 6 hours before dragging myself to breakfast. But then it was back up for more coughing, more shower steaming, and more sleeping. They kicked me out of my room around 3 p.m., leaving me with 3 hours before returning to the airport for our overnight flight home. During that time, I sat by the pool and read, ate a salad, and drank plenty of water and OJ. Of course, the company-arranged shuttle was 45 minutes late – and we BARELY made our boarding time. And then some kind of freak lightening storm blew in, shutting down the airport and ultimately delaying our departure 3 hours (which meant lost connections in Dallas). But that was not the worst thing about the flight: even though I'd paid for "economy plus," they changed plane models and I somehow lost that category of seating. My new seats were in the center area near the back of the plane. I have never had SO little legroom (when the person in front of my put their seat back, it hit my knees) and I have never been so uncomfortable on a plane in my life. Any concern I had about infecting others vanished given that my seating area alone showed 20-25% respiratory infection rates (most others actually coughing MORE than me). Fortunately, my seat neighbors were healthy and helpful – both (along with most others on the plane) having just finished a 28-day cruise all around South America; they reported that this illness had been heavily circulating through cruise patrons. Landing in Dallas around 9:30 a.m. (following MAYBE 4 hours of sleep), we were subjected to an obscenely inefficient customs line, followed by a slightly inefficient re-ticketing line. Fears that American flew few flights to Portland, I was STUNNED to learn that the next flight was only 90 minutes away. After gorging on Starbucks food, I called my people; unfortunately, I also learned that my shuttle between PDX and Salem had NO seats open for any later arrivals (it being the most popular return day of the holiday break) – and so I begged Allison for a pick-up, which she readily obliged... although she rightfully arrived wearing a surgical mask (which, as a microbiologist, did not offend me). But I have already jumped too far ahead... because there was, of course, another STUPID delay with that last flight: a coffee machine leak in the first class kitchen that required some kind of vacuum service truck (that took AN HOUR to even arrive). Fortunately, my seat neighbors (a retired couple from Medford,

fresh off the aforementioned cruise – the wife as sick as me) were great... albeit mostly because we could commiserate in our shared sufferings. The husband, dressed in full cowboy attire and sporting an impressive handlebar mustache, was hilariously dark in his loud and sharp-tongued mockery of the stupidity of the current situation (in retrospect, he probably scared the shit out of everyone else). Although I did everything in my power to rest for the 2 days before winter term was to begin, I learned it was flu on Monday – when I dragged myself to the clinic, CERTAIN it was pneumonia. At the time, Oregon had not been hit with flu and so I remained at home for the week – sleeping 20 hours a day through Friday. Meanwhile, nightly national news reports escalated their flu coverage and Oregon was finally swallowed by the epidemic come Wednesday. It should go without saying that I did get a flu shot (mid-September); as of this writing, though, this year's flu shot efficacy rates have dropped to only 52%. As a microbiologist, I understand perhaps more than most people that contagious illness is a risk of traveling... but it is a risk of anything public, particularly when mixed groups closely interact. All you need to do is read my SE Asia report to see HOW seriously prepared I was for that trip in terms of its high potential for infectious disease. And it's not that I prepared any less seriously for this one... it was simply that my number was up and circulating flu strains were more virulent this season, as noted by always-logical Diane. Indeed, the flu plus at least two other serious pathogens (RSV and Norovirus) have been ripping through 10-20% of students and faculty all term, providing constant reminders of the latter point above.

Conclusions and Gaucho Belt Karma/Magic

Illness aside, this trip was incredible, offering the opportunity to hike nearly as much as Sara and I did in 1997 – but in the context of comfortable (to stupendous) lodges. Being able to complete the entire W hike (and finally closing Paine Circuit gaps) was completely satisfying – and, as with 2008, I remain most drawn to new hiking prospects in Torres/Chile. Although the new Rio Elctrico/Pollone hike was my favorite hike on this trip, I do not have a burning or growing wishlist with regards to Argentina. Indeed and as written in my trip evaluation, I have ZERO desire to go back to Buenos Aires; I (and most others) actually wish they would eliminate this part of the itinerary given too-long flights and too much city after so much peaceful time in the mountains. Santiago/Punta Arenas are FAR better entry AND departure points given the nature of this trip.

It's still hard for me formulate an opinion of NG given that I view this itinerary as an MTS entity, which it has been for ages. I thought it was interesting that all my teammates were attracted to this trip because it came with the NG name-brand (which they considered synonymous with adventure travel – even though NG has only entered the business in the last 10 years, often sub-contracting through companies like MTS... a name NOT familiar to hardly anyone in this group). I still think we were extremely lucky because everyone was a strong hiker – and this is a very demanding hiking trip. Given that NG seems (IMO) to attract a more diverse crowd, I would wager that other groups are not as uniformly fit or experienced. Indeed, one of my secondary missions on this trip was to check it out on behalf of Roger/Susie and Allison/Marshall. While I have, overall, recommended it to them, it has come with a couple caveats: (1) you must go with Andre; and (2) the hiking is very intense in the sense that you are doing LONG hikes back to back to back (e.g. we hiked almost 40 miles in 3 days just in Argentina). I'm not sure, if they were in charge of their own planning, that they would willfully schedule things that busily (not that most trip days couldn't be shortened or opted out of). Having said that, when you are handed amazing weather in Patagonia, you do have to go with it... and we were/did. As for point (1), it should be obvious that Andre – in everyone's opinion – is an outstanding leader. Looks aside, Andre is someone I appreciate most for his all-around positive attitude and joyousness, and for his genuine love for wilderness and simple living. He doesn't have to force things like leadership or charisma – those things don't feel imposed, fake, or distancing, like they can with some leaders. Of course, I do appreciate that he's gotten more free-spirited in his late-30's; the older I get, the less I care about what others think, especially in terms of what I look like or how I express myself... so I hope Andre will continue to be appreciated for his unabashed laughter/humor and wild hair. Indeed, I feel like Andre has now become part of the Patagonia experience – to the point that if I go back again (which is likely – as Allison and I have it on our 5-year plan), it has to be with him. And if not, then we'd rather self-organize our own trip than not travel with Andre. I just hope NG fully understands and appreciates what they've got in him.

Given that Patagonia always stirs up some magic, I will end with the following story: on all my trips to Patagonia, I have brought home gaucho belts. In 1997, I bought myself one and – 2 months later - wore it to the interview that landed me my current position (it hangs in my livingroom to this day). In 2008, I bought them for Allison and Ellen because each was struggling with career decisions; within a year, both landed positions. At a few points in this report, I mentioned finding Emma one – for a similar purpose. Indeed, it should say a lot that – despite near delirium – I found/bought her one at the 11th hour in Calafate. As fate would have it, Emma was interviewing at the same time – and was offered a great new position the day I returned. During our last lunch in Calafate, I passed Emma's belt around our table, explaining my/my sisters' stories. Always on the mystical side of things, Andre appreciated that story but went on to explain that one of the real purposes of the gaucho belt was to provide a hiding place for your knife... and then he did his impression of wrapping the belt and pulling the knife out, fully accompanied with that laugh (hence – those hints of Pirates of the Caribbean). All us gaucho belt career women appreciated this story nuance for whatever reason (heh, heh, heh). In the end, I don't mind paying (in the form of short-term illness, cameras, plenty of money, 10 lbs of lost weight) for things like the privilege of seeing Patagonia again, astoundingly spectacular weather, coming together with incredible people, or sending gaucho belt karma Emma's way.

So I went from day to day... I was feeling part of the scenery, I walked right out of the machinery... Climbing up [anywhere in Patagonia], wind was blowing, time stood still. Condor flew out of the night - he was something to observe, came in close. I heard a voice. Standing, stretching every nerve... had to listen, had no choice. I did not believe the information. I just had to trust imagination. My heart going boom, boom, boom... He said, grab your things. I've come to take you home." Patagonia-Adapted/Inverted Solsbury Hill, Peter Gabriel

