



Taking Our Chances in Patagonia (Again) - 2015

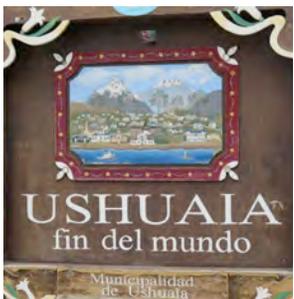
Allison, Marshall, and Sarah win some, and lose some...



Left to Right: (top) Ushuaia art/graffiti, another sunny Wulaia Bay day, Magdalena penguins, Allison/Marshall in Punta Arenas; (middle) memorably high-wind Nordenskold beach, Perito Moreno glacier gazing; (bottom) Allison/Marshall at Lago Azul and near Poincenot, Sarah at Lago de los Tres, Cerro salad, one of many steaks on this trip

Introduction and Overview

Given my generally awesome experiences visiting southern Patagonia three times now (self-guided in 1997, guided in 2008 and 2012), I knew that some of my friends and family would test their luck by visiting this magical but weather-challenging place. And of course, the weather would probably not live up to my good hype in all cases. Such was the partly case for Roger/Susie in March 2015... and such would also be the case for Allison/Marshall and my trip this December/January.



Left to Right: Welcome to Ushuaia, thankfully not our cruise ship, harborside promenade, our cruise ship (Stella Australis)

Part One – Ushuaia to Punta Arenas via Cape Horn

Because of my lengthier break, I headed out a week before Allison/Marshall – intent on repeating a favorite activity from 2008: cruising around Tierro del Fuego with Chile-based Cruceros Australes. And thankfully they did not disappoint... in fact, I enjoyed this leg of the trip even more than I did before. That said, getting to Ushuaia was LONG, grueling, and sometimes annoying. After flying to Dallas (December 13), I slept more than usual thanks to a delicious pasta dinner, bulkhead seating, and quiet neighbors. Indeed, I slept so well that I missed an amazing view as we flew over the Andes, but did catch an impressive profile from near Mendoza - our flight route being this giant L: south from Dallas to Santiago and then a left turn over Aconcagua to Buenos Aires. Alas, two important mistakes I made had been NOT coming with some Argentine pesos in hand (i.e. changing money in Dallas), and not studying the transportation situation between the airport and my hotel (both from the standpoint of assuming there would be a hotel shuttle, and not looking into taxi fares and money conversion rates). Even though I had done all my credit card travel

alerts, 5/6 airport ATM's refused both my cards – and then I took out so little (and paid such high fees) that it was meaningless. After giving up on the assumed hotel shuttle (there was one – but it only took you TO the airport), I walked the taxi area 3 times – getting hassled every time by multiple drivers who wanted to charge me \$25-30 (US equivalent – how I will report all costs) for what I thought was a 3-mile ride (it was actually closer to 8 – albeit convoluted). After making my way to a central transportation desk and paying \$25, I then got harassed by a porter who grabbed my bags without asking and led me to the curb/cab... where he demanded a \$3 tip and angrily guffawed when I only gave him \$1. Although my hotel (the airport Holiday Inn) was in an ugly location, it looked terrible from the outside, and the rooms were perfume-y bad, it was otherwise fine. After cleaning up and taking a nap, I used the free internet/business computer and ate a strange hamburger dinner (the meat patty had the taste and texture of a hot dog, but the fries were good).

The next morning (now December 15), it was BACK to the airport for many PAINFULLY long lines and TRULY crowded waiting areas. Amusingly, this well-tattooed and aromatic punk-rock band (or bands?) seemed to be with me in some way at nearly all stages – raucously talking and laughing with their instruments. I didn't understand a word they were saying but just watching them interact amused me to no end. My two-part flight to Ushuaia (with a short landing/pick-up in always-windy Trelew) took FIVE hours but seemed to go by quickly – thanks to interesting scenery and a quiet plane. Although it became cloudy as we flew over Rio Gallegos, I was SHOCKED when the skies partly opened near Ushuaia, revealing INCREDIBLE mountains, mountains, and more mountains... all covered with a fresh blanket of snow. Indeed, our landing was more exciting than I was expecting because we flew past Ushuaia, continued to descend by flying down the Beagle Channel, and then banked hard - seemingly INTO this mountain - to U-turn back and land. Alas, my camera was packed away! Although this airport seemed crazy and annoying in 2008, it was pleasant and easy this time around. Thankfully, too, I had had the foresight to ask my hotel for a pick-up... and thus a friendly sign-wielding man with a van was waiting for me. The ride into town took less than 10 minutes and scenically wound around this little bay (the airport lies on this interesting peninsula of land). My Ushuaia hotel was overall nice – although they put me in this weird and sometimes-noisy outdoor annex, and breakfast was not included. Having arrived at the hotel around 2 under partly-sunny skies, I decided to stretch my legs and take a long walk around town. Although Ushuaia is small, my hotel was a solid 12 blocks from “downtown” and, by the end of my 1.5 days here, I walked those 12 blocks about 6 times. Ushuaia is also on a steep hillside and so, given that I needed some real exercise, I walked this big loop around town – up and down key hills – a couple times that afternoon and again tomorrow. Of course, as one departs from downtown, the residential area gets interesting: not unsafe-feeling, but more unsafe-looking... to the point I caught myself thinking – well, my mother would NOT like to see me walking here. More than anything, though, it was sad how big and sprawling Ushuaia has gotten, including deforesting a LOT of hillside to make room for tattered development (presumably supporting tourism with a strong emphasis on Antarctica cruises). By around 4, I was hungry but most places downtown were closed; in the end, I opted for this simple café right across the street from my hotel – enjoying a salad and simple vegetarian pasta. Later, I attempted to patronize the nearby grocery store for dinner; while the store was reasonably well-stocked, the lines were INSANE – and the armed guards milling around the heavily barred entrance was somewhat disconcerting.



Left to Right: leaving Ushuaia, the next morning at Cape Horn – disembarking, to the albatross... actual horn in distance

After a decent night of sleep, I slept in and paid for an OK hotel buffet breakfast. Although I was required to check out by 11, the hotel kept my bags until 3 and let me come and go throughout the day – which was nice because there was a quiet lower lobby with nice couches and restrooms (which seemed hard to come by in town). Morning activities today included another double hillwalk around town, some trinket shopping downtown, and a light lunch at the café across the street (excellent soup today!). Around 3, I decided – given the lack of rain – to roll my luggage 12 blocks along the pier and then up 1 block to the cruise office... against the recommendations of the hotel proprietor. After checking in/dropping bags off, I visited Ushuaia's nearby “Museum at the End of the World,” which I thought I'd visited in 2008. But it turns out that that was the OTHER Museum at the End of the World in Punta Arenas, Chile (that had been MUCH better). Feeling sort of done with downtown Ushuaia, I did some bakery visiting followed by eating in the sun along the pier. We were allowed to start boarding the boat at 5 – which meant clearing some security and walking the varied pier. One of the pleasant surprises about the cruise was that it was super-undersold... we're talking 80 clients (still representing 26 different countries) vs. full capacity = 200. This time, I was glad to have my own room and, even though I had been a little intimidated by not having a group/tribe, the ship's crew did a great job assigning tablemates for meals... and, with so few people, I actually feel I got to know more people on this trip than in 2008. Being on my own, I also paid more attention to the group activities – which were publicized on daily printouts and featured extremely well-done lectures. As in 2008, I LOVED the cruise because – after all the travel stress – it was SOOOOO nice to be taken care of for 4 days (December 16-19). No need to think about how to get from point A to point B, or where my next meal was coming from. If it sounds like I am finally ready to do Antarctica, yes... I might be. Anyway – tonight's activities were low-key: some relaxing time before dinner, a lovely pre-dinner ship introduction and happy hour (I did enjoy a calafate sour), a presentation about tomorrow's EARLY landing at Cape Horn, and a GREAT dinner with excellent steak. My meal table-mates included a single Irish businesswoman who had spent the last 35 days trekking around Patagonia, and a pair of newlywed Belgians about to spend 2 weeks trekking around Patagonia (via a similar itinerary to Allison/Marshall/I). In general, all meals on this cruise were a major step up from last time –

particularly because they had more non-fish options. Given a 6 a.m. wake-up call if you wanted to trek up to Cape Horn, though, I was in bed by 9:30 (pretty much when dinner ended). I'm not sure I was super-thrilled with such an early wake-up (keep in mind that in 2008, we departed from Punta Arenas and hit Cape Horn at the end of the cruise).



Left to Right: to the chapel and lighthouse, professional greeting, interesting flora observed on the walk back

The next morning (December 17), it was SHOCKINGLY calm – meaning an easy landing. While the climb up the foliage-hugged wooden stairs also seemed shorter than in 2008, it initially looked less clear and was much colder up top; indeed, as we trudged slowly across the boardwalk to the albatross statue (refurbished since 2008), we were hit by a full-on snow-squall. Thankfully, that was over by the time we were trudging back. Other changes included a HUGE new Chilean flag, the installation of Pope Francis pictures in the little chapel, and a more professional family running the lighthouse (the 2008 family was casually dressed and busily selling bags of Cape Horn pebbles). Today, the man of the house was wearing a proper suit with military badges, greeting us only with free handshakes. After returning to the ship, we enjoyed a real breakfast at 8:30 (pastries and coffee/tea had been placed out at 6 prior to the landing/Cape Horn walk). One surprising and new thrill on this trip – which we hadn't been able to do in 2008 thanks to really rough seas – was a complete circumnavigation of actual Cape Horn and the archipelago. This took a surprising amount of time – during which time I wandered up to the bridge, visiting with the captain and navigation crew. The funniest part of this sub-voyage, though, was that they served “grog” (pretty much lemonade and rum) in the bar and assertively played the Pirates of the Caribbean theme song (presumably because of the “end of the world” theme) in complete seriousness as we rounded the horn around 10:30. And that's why I love Chile and this Chilean crew so much. I wish THEY did Antarctica!



Left to Right: actual Cape Horn, the bridge, look at those skies(!), amazing mountains en route to Wulaia Bay

Sailing north, the skies turned completely blue – snowy mountains in ALL directions. On this trip, I attended all lectures – all of which were excellent. I cannot say they were better than last time, though, because I did not make a strong effort to go to the lectures before. That said, the quality of the guides in terms of speaking, knowledge, and training was improved on this trip, making me suspect that the reason I wanted to go to all the lectures was because the guides were so much more serious; indeed, the lead guide was a naturalist with a lot of academic and research connections. Today's noon lecture was about glaciers, flora, and a little indigenous people/human history. Following an excellent buffet lunch featuring all kinds of amazing salads (vegetarian or seafood), I enjoyed walking several laps around the ship, taking in the views, and enjoying a nap. At 3:30, we assembled into three groups for the pre-landing meeting about Wulaia Bay. Along with 25 others, I was in the long hike option – which departed via the first set of zodiacs once we anchored down. Having been impressed with Wulaia Bay under sunny conditions in 2008, I couldn't believe we got the same experience today. Although much of the area looked the same, more trails have been constructed and there were more objects and verbiage in the “museum” – all upgrades funded/carried out by Cruceros Australis. Indeed, the long hike group ascended to the previous overlook but then continued up a new trail about 500 feet higher to this burned shallow ridgeline – a commanding view over the entire area. En route, we took a side-trip to a former beaver dam site and enjoyed a talk about the beaver problem in the area: namely, beavers were introduced here in the early 20th century – the aim being to develop a fur industry. Not surprisingly, this introduction backfired, resulting in horrible overpopulation and forest destruction. Although efforts are taking their numbers down (notably using satellite imaging studies to identify and target dams), it is slow-going thanks to the harsh climate and remoteness. Our hiking leader, I should mention, was one of several female guides – a welcome addition to the crew. Although the pace was good when we were going, at least 10 people shouldn't have tried this hike because they weren't up for the climb... and so there was too much resting. Given that I REALLY had to pee, I eventually asked permission to go at my own pace down – and was allowed to pretty much jog back. Alas, however, the “museum” has not been upgraded with any kind of toilet – and so I held strong all the way back to the ship given that there were WAY too many people everywhere near the beach. The original schedule said we were supposed to start sailing again around 5:30 - but, with the fine weather and lazy pace, I don't think we started motoring until 6:30... with dinner, once again, at 8 (more steak!). Although some of our better-looking clients were being tapped to participate in some later-evening thing called “International Fashion Show and Bingo,” I was not surprised no one was visiting our table. Indeed, I was in bed at 10, when the event began. One of my good-looking and vivacious new cruise acquaintances (notably from Portland, OR) reported to me the next day that they were

basically asked to model ship gift shop clothing – the purpose being sales, sales, sales! As I headed to bed, we started sailing the long avenue of the glaciers, a parading line of ice tongues descending from the Cordillera Darwin; the 2008 reverse itinerary of this trip passes this area in the middle of the day – something to consider if you really want to see glaciers. Having seen many impressive glaciers (and the avenue of the glaciers in 2008), I didn't feel I missed anything by sleeping through this crossing; alas, a lot of ice here has receded thanks to global warming.



Left to Right: (top) landing, Darwin plaque, new Fitzroy trail, bay & mountains; (bottom) beaver dam, viewpoint – old & new

After the glaciers (still in the middle of the night), we sailed into more open water (including rounding the Brecknock Peninsula via the rocky Pacific), and then started up the Cockburn Channel (our present location). Although I took some meclizine overnight, I still wound up with dock rock by the end of this cruise because much of today continued to involve regularly chopping water. As predicted by Accuweather, the weather come morning was not great... the story for the whole day. Following breakfast, we enjoyed a really excellent lecture about the history of the Strait of Magellan by the lead guide – and a short overview of today's landing at the Aguilar Glacier. Depending on the cruise direction, you either visit Aguilar (heading west) or Pia (heading east). Although the Pia (in 2008) was sunnier and in a spectacular bay, I enjoyed the Aguilar almost as much – probably because there was more hiking involved and you got physically closer to it. Of course, we didn't make this landing until 3 – meaning I got to enjoy some serious reading, napping, lunching, and relaxing.



Left to Right: (top) Cuernos-like tower, marine flora, Aguilar, murtilla/diddle dee; (bottom) lichen & bryophytes, glacier

By 3, I was not sure I wanted to venture out into the steady rain. But given that it wasn't an outright downpour and I knew I should probably earn some weather-karma points for the upcoming hiking in Chile and Argentina, I put on my raingear – including my umbrella - and headed down to the zodiac station. I was actually one of TWO people with umbrellas, the envy of most others. For this outing, we anchored under this very Cuernos-like horny peak. During one of the earlier lectures, a picture of said tower had been shown – with the statement that this was, in fact, the same geology as is present in Torres del Paine. For the Aguilar landing, the long hikers were grouped together again... but, for some illogical reason, we were put at the back of the line today.

This meant a LOT of stopping to maintain distance between slower groups in front of us. The route entailed hiking a quarter mile along this rocky-beach peninsula, beech forest separating us from the inner glacier/bay; we then rounded the corner and saw the glacier/bay – before then hiking half a mile along the bayside beach to the toe of the glacier. To keep everyone spread apart, the guides did their best to occupy us with on-the-spot flora presentations about algae, forest structure, tasting the murtila/diddle dee berries, and bushwhacking into the woods to show us the diverse non-vascular plants (the lead guide is involved in some collaborative bioprospecting looking for pharmaceutical compounds from lichens and bryophytes here). The only saving grace of our end position was that we enjoyed relative quiet at the glacier itself – ALL other parties dashing back to dry out. Although Cruceros staff stationed a hot drink station (chocolate with the option of liquor) on the beach by the landing area, most people just wanted to jump on the zodiac and get back to the ship. Given my umbrella, I actually enjoyed an alcohol-free hot chocolate in the rain. Nonetheless, I greatly enjoyed coming back to a dry cabin and a hot shower. After that, I met my Irish tablemate in the bar before tonight's last lecture – and she enthusiastically introduced me to a great new drink: Caipirinha, some Brazilian liquor based on sugar cane mixed with lots of mottled citrus. During the hour before dinner, one of the junior guides gave a lively talk about penguins in anticipation of tomorrow's landing on Magdalena Island. Prior to this trip, I had no idea how exciting this little landing would be – largely because our 2008 penguin sightings were really limited... but we didn't visit Magdalena.



Left to Right: all but last are Magdalena and penguins... last shot – Punta Arenas dock

Although I was totally into Magdalena and it was a highlight of this whole trip, I was not thrilled with another 6 a.m. wake-up. In contrast with most others (who didn't make it past the penguin-laden beach area), I hiked immediately up the 20-minute hill to the lighthouse. I did stop to take a few pictures of the cute penguins – but I saved most of my slow strolling for the walk down. I appreciated walking into the lighthouse to a poster-sized picture of Chile's female president, wondering when the US would get with it. I also appreciated the little chapel, adorned with more plastic flowers than I've seen in one place in awhile. Hiking back to the zodiac landing pier, I took my time to sit and watch several clusters of hilarious penguins, cute penguin mother-baby pairs, and at least one definitely mating pair. As I wrote to the family later that night: it was like poor-man's South Georgia Island/Salisbury Plain. Indeed, about 200,000 Magellanic penguins call Magdalena their home. Sadly, however, we were told that the island is being taken over by aggressive gulls attracted by the nearby Punta Arenas city dump that is in easy flying distance. It should be noted that Allison/Marshall toured Magdalena the next day using a day-operator out of Punta Arenas. Allison was as impressed as me; Marshall enjoyed it as well – but mostly because, in contrast with expectations, the penguins didn't stink. Following breakfast, it was a quick ride to Punta Arenas – where we disembarked at 11. From the ship, Punta Arenas seemed massively spread out – much more than in 2008. Thankfully, it was sunny – which was good because Allison/Marshall were arriving soon and I hoped they would get a good first impression of Patagonia. From the dockside area where we picked up our screened luggage, it was a quick walk to my familiar hotel (the one used by Mountain Travel Sobek/National Geographic – MTS/Nat-Geo - in 2008 and 2012). I was both surprised and glad to see the MTS leader (Sergio) there to greet me, given that they had forgotten about my early arrival in 2012. Although Sergio was one of the legendary guides at MTS, I had never traveled with him before. I can't say I had a strong impression of him given that he was not a big talker. Even though the hotel let me check in early, I did not want to squander the good weather – so I spent a few hours walking around town, running errands like getting more cash (alas,

there were ongoing problems with ATM's in Chile!), doing some grocery shopping for lunch, and emailing friends/family. Unfortunately, I also learned that Allison/Marshall were having airline problems – not only because of an angry passenger who had to be kicked off the Dallas/Santiago flight, but also because government airline workers (including LAN) were on strike. Not sure whether I'd see them, I took a nap around 2 – and then went out to sit in the sun to wait for their hopeful arrival at 4. Overjoyed, I recognized Marshall first by his tattoos – bear-hugging him like I hadn't seen friends/family in a month (or more). Both were in good spirits despite having just suffered through all those flights; nonetheless, they took a nap and then we made our way to La Marmita, the BEST restaurant in Punta Arenas (where we were taken in 2012). The next day, Allison/Marshall spent from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. on the Magdalena trip while I ran more errands (specifically – buying more warm gear given more cold on the way) and went hillwalking as much as I could. Later, we all went hillwalking and – alas – made a slightly regrettable decision: much to Marshall's chagrin, the US opening of Star Wars happened while they were in the air. We never DREAMED we could see it HERE but then we strolled by a theatre too late in the day – multiple screens, in Spanish or English. Alas, our group meeting and dinner stood in the way.



Left to Right: alas – we missed our chance... much of the day, arriving in Torres - guanacos, Cascada del Rio Paine

Part Two – Rough Weather in Torres del Paine, Chile

The next morning (December 20), we set out as an MTS group bound for Torres del Paine – albeit after retrieving a late-arriving couple at the airport (who had not made their Punta Arenas connection because of the aforementioned strike). I will say upfront that our first choice for this trip had been the Nat-Geo version (the one I did in 2012) because it was a great itinerary, and it began/ended a day earlier (i.e. they arrived yesterday and were one day ahead of us the whole time). Unfortunately, we missed booking the Nat-Geo trip by one day (a big family took the final spots 24 hours before we called). In my strong opinion, the Nat-Geo version (which is subcontracted through MTS) is better (specific reasons will be obvious throughout this report). I also remain concerned that the Nat-Geo group was given priority in terms of booking better accommodations in several cases. Even as we set out, things were already feeling different, and not in a great way: e.g. Nat-Geo included a group dinner in Punta Arenas in 2012 but there was no such meal for us (ours was on-your-own and became too late given a shifting group meeting time); Nat-Geo included a well-done 5-mile hike at the Milodon Caves day one but there was no such hiking for us today. Most of our first day was bus travel, making stops for bathroom/coffee breaks, lunch in Puerto Natales (a new spot with a nice waterfront view and excellent food), for photographing guanaco Serengeti in front of the shockingly visible Torres, and a famous waterfall (Cascada del Rio Paine). Arriving at Torres around 6, we had an hour to clean up before another group meeting and dinner. I was given a pretty room with a view of the Torres, which I appreciated greatly. On another positive note, the Torres hotel restaurant situation has been amazingly improved. In 2008 and 2012, dining here entailed a suspect buffet that made me and a few others quite sick. On this trip, both our meals here were fancy sit-down/get-served multi-course affairs and the food was well-cooked, well-presented, and delicious. Despite being gun-shy from my last experience here, I had no qualms eating any of the raw salads or fruits – and thankfully, I did not get any GI illnesses on this trip!



Left to Right: Torres hike - firebush and post-rain mist, part-way up final climb, into the rocks, lake, Sergio and Andre

Another key difference between the Nat-Geo/2012 itinerary and ours was the hiking direction: Nat-Geo/2012 began at the easier end of the park (Lago Grey) and worked its way north, ending at the most demanding hike (Torres del Paine). Our itinerary began with the knee-crunching Torres (12 miles, 4100 feet up/down – based on Allison's GPS). Given a rocky history with this hike (good in 2008, negative in 2012), I was not sure I wanted to do this hike today – not only because the weather forecast looked shitty, but also because I didn't want to spend energy I might need later on mandatory hikes (i.e. the next few days, we were thru-hiking sections – where Torres was a simple in/out). Although the weather come morning was moderately bad with clouds and light rain, I headed out anyway – mostly to size up the group and stretch out the legs. In an interesting twist of fate, Sergio's assistant guide in Chile was the famous Andre – my leader on both the 2008 and 2012 trips. This time, it felt like Andre and I clashed from time to time... and he seemed more tense and opinionated (I'm sure he would say the same about me). This morning, for example, he could not believe Allison and I were carrying umbrellas... he seemed embarrassed actually. Fortunately, the rain stopped by the time we slogged up the first big climb. By this point, it was clear we were going to be a challenging party,

at least from a leadership/cat-herding standpoint: there were three pace groups among us – this FAST cohort of 5 (1 family and 1 single), this fit but steady group of older people (including me, a couple, and this amazing family of siblings, whom I LOVED), and Allison/Marshall (in the middle, they could be fast but Allison likes to stop a lot – mostly to pee and fuss with gear). Always wanting to give people lots of freedom, Sergio said we would meet at the hut where we could use the bathroom, fuss with gear, and/or enjoy a coffee (provided we were willing to take off our boots – an entry requirement). And so we spread out and when I arrived at the hut, I took off my boots, went in, and ordered hot cocoa because I wanted to wake up more. When Andre, pulling up the rear, found me bootless with a ceramic mug, he forgot about the umbrella as he expressed his shock that I thought we were going to enjoy that long of a break. So I just carried that mug all the way up to the Torres – as he lectured me about how soft I'd become after too much cushy hiking in the Swiss Alps. No argument there! Of course, I felt bad that I upset Andre – especially because I think he was tense about the unstable weather, the fact that the group was fragmented... and maybe because Sergio's leadership style was, like, totally different than his (although it cannot be overstated that both these men were great and obvious personal friends). As a client, I like communicative/assertive type A leaders to set the tone of the trip and keep things together, but I appreciate laid-back assistants (e.g. the perfect Alsek 2004 trip – serious Brian leading, with easy-going Sam and Brock).

Although Sergio hoped we'd all meet again at the branch-point where the Torres side-trail climbs up (and the Val Silencio continues along the valley floor), the fast party pretty much stopped hiking with the group – not only today, but for the remainder of the trip (yes – they started with us every day... but that was pretty much it). By this point, it was outright sunny (with some of the Torres visible above!) – so I was in good spirits (not to mention – caffeinated) as we began the slog up the final 1000 feet. While I thought that this lower section was easier in 2012, it was a bitch this year – mostly because there were SHITLOADS more people making their way up the rocky creekbed, even after the poor weather start. Things were better up high – but they have, once again, changed the route up top because of rockfall. Although easier than in 2012 (when I notably broke my \$\$\$ camera during a nasty boulder downclimb), the route leveled off/ended higher above the lake... to the point I was not interested in making an annoying scramble down to the actual water. Instead, I enjoyed my lunch in full sun, lying in the sand amongst the rocks. While we were eating, Sergio told those near him (i.e. the steady group) that we could go at our own pace/on our own all the way back. In retrospect, this seemed odd because I learned later that he was concerned that – so far – he had not found the fast group... and, during the final climb, told Allison/Marshall not to break off from the party (which seemed to go against his liberal treatment of the fast party). Taking full advantage of the offer to hike back alone, I went for it – as he and Andre continued to search for the fast party and others wrapped up. I enjoyed my hike back – pretty much by myself and in the lead most of the way (2 members from the fast party overtook me a mile from the bottom); it was nice to have some quiet time – not to mention enjoy the weather, views, and feeling strong. And, yes, I returned the mug to the hut en route. Having left around 8:30, I was pleased to get back to the hotel by 4... plenty of time for a good soak and a nap before another excellent dinner!



Left to Right: setting off under Nieto, Lago Nordenskold comes into view, avalanche on Nieto (such a good little camera!)

The next day, we set out on what were three days of hiking without access to our luggage – another departure from the Nat-Geo/2012 experience (on that trip, there was only 2 days/1 night as such – because we returned to a roadside hotel via ferry for our second night out). Of course, we were given a small drybag that was carried by porters across the base of the Torres and Cuernos. The other big itinerary departure for today/tonight was that they had not been able to get the Cuernos cabins... probably because the Nat-Geo had gotten the allotment. Although I had mixed feelings about said cabins in 2012 (the rooms were fine, the bathrooms were capricious, and the eating situation was terrible), Roger/Susie enjoyed the cabins and even praised the improved food situation on their MTS trip in March 2015. Our destination for the night was a new facility (as of 2013) called the Domes Frances – 2 miles beyond the Cuernos. The catch: everyone was sharing one of the four available domes, even the \$\$\$ single supplement payers like me (and the fast single). The guides left “how to divide groups” up to us, and I was quick to claim Allison/Marshall in the Boomer Dome... since they were used to my snoring and even Allison didn't want to subject strangers to THAT! Making matters even more fun, we would be sleeping together the next night too – OH JOY – because of, you guessed it, another booking problem at Pehoe! But I digress: As Allison likes to point out every time I complain about the relative weather on this trip that today's situation did not really suck; in fact, it never rained - although we did get wet a few times from high winds blowing lake water into us around Lago Nordenskold. While we enjoyed good to great views of Nieto and the Cuernos, Paine Grande and the distant peaks to the south were socked in. And it was chilly and, as mentioned, VERY windy – growing nearly freezing with gale force winds overnight. I admit that the winds were very exciting – and it was a good thrill to experience them the way we did today. After hearing me talk about the Patagonian winds for YEARS, there is no doubt Allison finally believes what she probably felt were some tall tales in my head before!

In contrast with our 2012 traverse of this section, we got hiking on time and nobody fell/broke their wrist en route. I can't say any of this route surprised or impressed my expectations, although adding 2 miles (because of the Domes Frances situation) of what is very up and down terrain definitely felt harder and more tiring than before. There were also SOOOOOO many more people this time hiking – a trend that seemed much more pronounced in Chile than in Argentina this year. As stated, our views in the morning were good – with some impressive snow and even an avalanche on Nieto, blue skies around scenic Lago Nordenskold, and clear

skies above the Cuernos. When we arrived at the Cuernos cabins, the views were especially inviting and I was disappointed we couldn't stay here and enjoy the remainder of the day. But alas, we pressed on – dropping down to the lakeshore where the extreme winds were RIPPING in weird bursts across the lake from the south. You could see them in the form of these white, sheet-like waterspouts coming at you from across the blue. Many were so bad that you actively had to duck and hold onto something in order to not be blown off your feet... and then you would get up drenched in this wet spray. At least 3 times, I found myself group-huddling with the steady siblings when blasts ripped across the long section along the water. Although it was a little scary and annoying, it was mostly cool – a serious trip highlight for nearly everyone.



Left to Right: (top) refurbished swinging bridge, inviting blue-sky Cuernos, Cuernos and soaked in Torres near 2012 cabins, dropping to the beach; (bottom) windy waterspouts on Nordenskold, Domes – exterior, interior, dining area

After more up and down than I remembered from 2012, we FINALLY came to the Domes Frances turn-off. At a few points during one of the descents, we had seen the domes tucked way down in this small forest clearing. Indeed, the descent to the domes was longer than expected, passing an extensive tent/camping area set in thick woods on the sloping hillside (that is where the guides and porters slept). The “luxury” domes were spacious and roomy: although groups of 3-4 shared one of the domes, each dome actually slept 8, with substantial dividers between the front 4 bunks and the back 4 bunks; consequently, I took my own quiet bunk in the front and Allison/Marshall each took a lower bunk in the back. Each dome had 2 bathroom stalls (with flush toilets) and 2 shower stalls... and, in contrast with the Cuernos cabins, the water was always on and became warm after a short wait. All these features made us give the domes high initial ratings. Unfortunately, it was nearly freezing overnight and there was no heat/electricity... so I was super-cold come morning. There were also super-high winds and precipitation overnight – and all the domes did leak in some way (in ours – mostly around Marshall's area). Although the dining room looked promising and it was REALLY nice to be just us there, the food was a mix of fresh salads and bread with shoe-leather meat (competitive with the equally poor meat situation at the Cuernos cabins in 2012). As stated in 2012, I don't know why these huts don't stick to simple ragu-style pastas if they insist on serving meat (notably, Roger reported that the Cuernos dining hall did serve lasagna-style pasta bowls on his trip in March). Someone in our party remarked during the meat course that he watched the cook physically started pan-frying the “steaks” when we arrived in the dining room and that they sizzled in the dry pans a solid 45 minutes before being served. But no one starved – given extensive meat and cheese appetizers (carried in by the guides/porters), soup, salad... and quite the chocolate dessert. Even so, I was cold all night, probably because my menopause furnace is finally calming down.

The next day, it was still cold, rainy, and windy. In addition to being cold and tired, I was concerned that my throat was sore and phlegmy, which was worrisome because we had a long mandatory hike out tomorrow (to Lago Grey). After hiking back up to the main trail, it was a little over a mile to the junction with the French Valley side-trail – everything muddy and wet. By this point, I knew I was going to conserve my health by skipping the side-hike up into the French Valley. Frankly, I was shocked Sergio attempted it given that he completely canceled this side-trail on Roger/Susie's trip in March, owing to rain, wind, and mud. Having already done this side-trail in 2012 (with high expectations that were not fully met), I had no issues foregoing a viewless day up an ugly trail. Sergio also had no problem telling me I was fine to continue on the main trail to Lago Pehoe on my own. However, when Andre heard about this plan, he insisted I wait for one of the porters to accompany me... despite all the inconsistent practices going on (e.g. I had hiked down from Torres on my own, the fast party was readily hiking guide-free). Having seen me truly sick in 2012, though, Andre – I'm sure – thought I had some kind of debilitating fever... and didn't seem to appreciate that I was just trying to make sure I didn't become THAT sick again. In the end, I enjoyed hiking out with one of the porters (I am ashamed to say I cannot remember his name) – notably wearing cotton shorts and a sleeveless top the whole time. He spoke as much English as I spoke Spanish, meaning we had a few short conversations (usually related to the weather)... but pretty much hiked straight to Pehoe; indeed, he seemed surprised I kept up with him and didn't request a bunch of stops. The weather remained variable but overall bad all day, with huge gusts of wind, on/off rain, and a few moments of blasting sun over the lake. The trail was a real mess, especially the first couple of miles, which passes through this marshy area that features a lot of boardwalks. Unfortunately, the park is not maintaining said structures, which were falling to pieces left and right; at one point, the porter physically broke through the planks on one of the longer bridges. Mostly, though, it was just LONG puddle (often with

broken wood planking) after long puddle. We arrived at Pehoe a little after noon. None of the rooms were ready so I sat down in the dining room and enjoyed my lunch. After an hour, I was told I could check in and clean up. So - I have never slept at this lodge before... and I would definitely not stay there again. In sharing war-stories with Roger, it is clear that the "usual" MTS accommodations here are supposed to be in the smaller-room area of the lodge, which is farther from the hustle/bustle/noise of the dining area; couples or single supplement clients are supposed to get one of the rooms with just 2 bunks (for the record - I found no rooms with anything other than bunks - and Roger/Susie definitely had bunks in March). Because of yet another booking snafu, though, we had been given 4 group rooms, each with three bunks (i.e. everyone shared rooms with 3-4 people). When I stepped into our group room, I was not impressed and - frankly - longed for the domes, which says a lot. The rooms were warmer than outside but they were still cold... and the worst feature was that they were all RIGHT by the lounge near the check-in desk. As the day wore on, hoards of LOUD people could be heard talking, laughing, and singing LONG into the night. After an adequate shower in the group bathroom, I put on almost everything I owned that was dry and crawled into bed to warm up and nap... probably the only thing that saved me from losing even more sleep that night. By 3, the fast people arrived... with everyone back by 4, all wet and cold. Not surprisingly, there is not much to report about the side-trip up the French Valley (they made it to the same first viewpoint we did in 2012); that Allison did not bother taking a single picture sort of says it all. Although the guides talked up the Christmas Eve buffet here as legendary, the food was fine - but not as high quality as, say, Torres. The one nice thing was that our group enjoyed this quiet side-room by ourselves, the guides supplementing the meal with more appetizers and wine (again - which they/the porters carried). As in 2012, Andre's truly delightful wife joined us, although - amusingly - not even she was willing to hike tomorrow's traverse given the nasty forecast. After dinner (concluding around 10) began the NOISE. My earplugs kept most of it out, but Allison was so upset that she went out there around midnight and - in her best camp counselor/adjudication voice - told the large group of mostly French tourists to BE QUIET. Most, notably, were not supposed to be in the patron-only lounge because they were campers trying to avoid going outside to their cold and wet tents. Oh well - the only saving grace is that my snoring was not what upset Allison and Marshall's sleeping... for a change.



Left to Right: (top) ah - family room sharing, Lago Pehoe in momentary sun, Cuernos the next morning; (bottom) fancy lady slippers, Glacier Grey, ginormous snowflakes on Christmas... yes, that really needs a flash!

The only saving grace come morning was that the Cuernos were out - albeit against a threatening, snow-white sky. Paine Grande was half out - but that didn't last. Following a cranky breakfast (everyone complaining about the noise), we set out for a moderate slog (7.5 miles) to Lago Grey. Climbing up the rolling burn area above the lake, we enjoyed excellent flower sightings under cloudy but still dry conditions. But then we crossed over the pass and the rain began for the rest of the day... the umbrellas out because it was shockingly still. The descent to the lodge/boat landing took FOREVER and was very slippery. One of the siblings fell completely, and there were several near-falls... leaving Andre tensely vigilant most of the day. FINALLY, we arrived at the trailside store/lodge but were not allowed inside... and so we ate lunch in full gear on the porch, the rain pouring. The guides were concerned about getting everyone on the boat; when the time came, there was lots of maneuvering and brokering. The good thing, though, is that they have replacing the small old tug-like ship with a Pehoe-style catamaran. That said, the tabled seating configuration could be economized to allow for more room. In 2012, we did this section in reverse and I was disappointed we never got close to the glacier. Well - apparently, that part of the tour is done only on the RETURN trip. Had it been clear, the views would have been AMAZING because we spent a long time touring both sides of the Grey nunatak area. That said, I never left my seat and Marshall suffered a sustained bloody nose (I was banned from taking pictures!). In total, we spent 2 hours on the water - and then another 30 minutes hiking across the rocky beach before crossing the swinging bridge over the Rio Grey. Thankfully, the bus was waiting for us in the parking lot - whisking us to the hotel 5 minutes away. Although Roger/Susie proclaimed this lodge as offering the BEST view in the WORLD, we were not so lucky - either this evening or the next day. That said, we did enjoy a different treat: a HUGE snowstorm (a White Christmas, even in the southern hemisphere).

Part Three - Improving Weather, Argentina I

The next morning (December 26), we set out for Argentina. Although I really thought the weather would cooperate (i.e. finally giving us blue-sky views on the way out), the cloud ceiling was only 300 feet, meaning EVERY high feature was socked in.

Dropping Andre off near the border (where his wife was waiting), we said our goodbyes and headed through what seemed like a busier and more inane/officious set of customs procedures. Despite HUGE bus/car/people lines coming from Argentina, Sergio worked some his sometimes Jedi-like magic and we were done in less than 30 minutes. Although no one but Sergio, the driver, and I appreciated it, we then drove across something truly amazing: the pampas COVERED in snow... over a foot deep at the pass above Lago Argentina. Although the distant mountains were shrouded in puffy clouds during said descent, the overall skies above the lake were sunny and blue, and Argentina was looking VERY promising!



Left to Right: leaving Lago Grey, AMAZING snowy pampas, sunny Marshall and the cute empanada dog on the promenade

Our next 2 nights were in El Calafate, specifically at this \$\$\$ lodge (Posada Los Alamos) that MTS thought would make up for our 2 challenging nights in shared quarters. Reminding most people in our group of an antiquated retirement community, I think it is safe to say that we didn't feel that this hotel was a fair trade (believe me, several of us compared lots of notes on this front). In my case, too, my TINY room was next to some kind of boiler room that made constant thumping and water noises in the walls. And even though there was a small tub in most rooms, no plugs were provided. The other corner-cutting component of the itinerary here was that both dinners were on-your-own. Arriving around 3, Allison/Marshall and I cleaned up and then headed out for a walk along the scenic lake/marsh-side promenade. En route, we enjoyed some empanadas and fruit (along with El Calafate's fine selection of muddy marsh-dogs) – before returning back downtown and stumbling upon Sergio's favorite steak-based restaurant (El Cucharon), which we'd hoped to patronize tomorrow. Unfortunately, we learned they are closed Sundays – forcing us to commit to an 8 p.m. seating tonight (which, frankly, we were LUCKY to get!). HIGH ratings all around. Much to the chagrin of Allison, though, Marshall and I began a steak-eating bonanza that didn't let up until we returned to the US.



Left to Right: (top) snow down to Lago Argentina, road to Perito, first view of Perito, shark-fin peak by glacier; (bottom) close-up of peaks above glacier, look at all that snow on the ground, boardwalks through beech, AMAZING snow and ice!!!

The next morning, we enjoyed a leisurely start under shockingly blue skies ALL AROUND – the goal: Perito Moreno. Although over half our group wanted to pay extra to walk on said ice (which I'd done in 2008), not even Sergio's Jedi-like powers could make that happen... EVERYTHING was booked solid. Once again, it seems like MTS needs to book things earlier. Of course, in the end, no one cared because the day was AMAZING! Even I – never much of a Perito aficionado in 2008 – was, like: this is fucking awesome! And there were many reasons why: First, yesterday's snowstorm had blanketed all the topography 500 feet or higher, meaning EVERYTHING was THAT much more dramatic. What had seemed like a sort of boring hour-long drive from El Calafate was, this time, like driving through the heart of the Andes – massive white peaks in all directions. Second, we arrived before the HUGE crowds and, while not empty, it was shockingly quiet as compared with the upsetting experience in 2008. That there was snow on the ground even around the boardwalks was novel, scenic, and peaceful. Third, the park has extended the boardwalk since 2008 – adding this dramatic section that allows you to start at the top of the hill, zigzag down to the base, and then walk around the peninsula to this beach by the lake. Here, a new inn/restaurant complex has been built; had it not been pretty quiet when we arrived, the place could have been offensively annoying but – by this point – the crowds were arriving up top, but we were at the bottom/end of the tour. There were a couple calving events as we were leaving – but not nearly the numbers

we were expecting given the outright heat. Following another lackluster buffet that had been overhyped a bit, we returned to El Calafate by 3 – the rest of the day (including dinner) on-your-own. Since most of us felt we needed more exercise, we headed out on a longer promenade walk pretty much across town – and then headed to the grocery store for a simple snacking dinner.



Left to Right: (top) Perito faces; (bottom) new boardwalk with amazing lake views, El Calafate's marshy outskirts

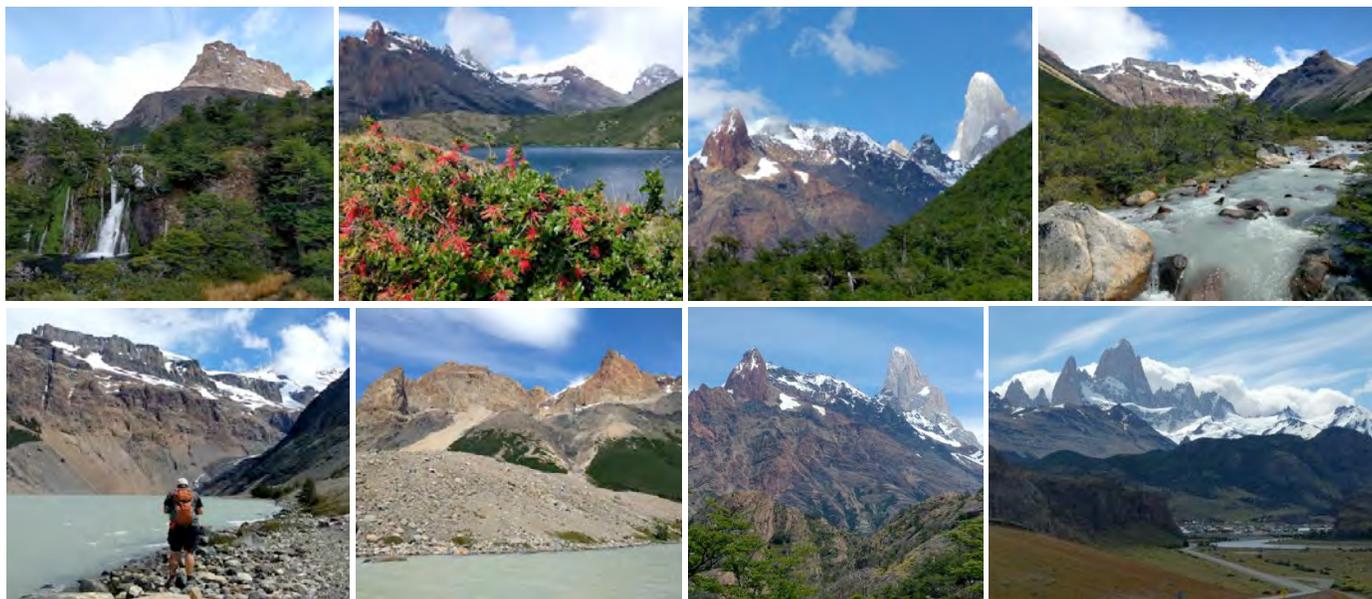
The next morning brought crappier weather. Even so, today was mostly bus-riding – with short stops to see Lago Argentina, La Leona (Butch Cassidy/Sundance Kid outpost), a habituated fox, and Lago Viedma. After arriving in El Chalten around 1, we enjoyed lunch, met our local assistant guide (I am ashamed to say I cannot remember his name), and then took the short (3 mile) hike up from the visitor center to the Condor viewpoint (no pictures this time – see 2008 report). Alas, there was yet another booking problem associated with this leg of the trip: namely, the usual itinerary (both MTS and Nat-Geo's) included staying at this quaint cabin/lodge complex 30 minutes down the road (see 2012 report). But we totally skipped this accommodation – probably because Nat-Geo was staying there instead. This time, Sergio didn't make a point to state to our party what we were missing. Although I didn't mind staying where we did for 3 consecutive nights, I was troubled that MTS didn't come clean on this snafu – particularly given how many other serious booking problems there were on this trip. Tomorrow's situation, though, was more disappointing to me. In my pre-trip information forms (as well as via phone conversations and emails), I requested to repeat the beloved but LONG (14 mile) 2012 hike into Fitzroy's north basecamp via Rio Electrico. I brought this issue up early because Roger/Susie's March trip defaulted to a shorter hiking trip (partially repeating the Condor trip near the visitor center) to accommodate people who insisted on paying for a Viedma Glacier tour (notably never even mentioned/offered on our group). Although I was assured we would do Fitzroy/Electrico in all said communications, Sergio announced we'd be doing a shorter/less intense hike to Lago Diablo & Azul instead; this hike, north of the national park, was one drainage north of Rio Electrico in the private Huemul reserve. It seemed that Sergio had never been told of my request and, although I had broached him about doing my hike earlier, he flat out said he didn't like that area or the trail. Mostly, it seemed he was concerned about pushing some members of the group too much – including, possibly, himself (as he seemed to be slowing down and sick). Of course, some members of the party were openly more upset than me, confronting Sergio about doing a mostly forest hike instead of something directly in the shadow of Fitzroy or Cerro Torre.



Left to Right: on the road to El Chalten – Lago Argentina, La Leona, fox, El Chalten under cloudy Fitzroy

After all the fuss, one of the siblings and I woke up feeling like shit (sore throats, stuffed heads, exhausted) and skipped today's hike altogether. After sleeping in, meeting for breakfast, and sleeping some more, she and I enjoyed a 2-hour walk about town, quickly determining that we were both suffering ALLERGIES... not horrible colds! After testing responses on many flowers, we enjoyed a GREAT stop at this delightful bakery, stuffing ourselves silly as the skies above town totally cleared – revealing Fitzroy AND Cerro Torre. Given that the rest of the party was WAY north (in what looked like nasty clouds), we were worried after all the drama that the upset party might now be missing this view. In fact, they enjoyed reasonable weather during most of their hike. Basically, their route began near Rio Electrico and involved hiking 9 miles and 1800 feet up/down on a lasso route: in the trees to Lago Azul (with some interesting waterfalls and a cool-perspective view of Fitzroy), then up a long and mostly-forested drainage to

Lazo Diablo – all along this flooded/marshy river area with famous “torrent ducks” (no good pictures). Diablo was tucked high in its own cirque, Fitzroy eclipsed by the surrounding walls. After returning to the marsh area, they followed a different forested loop back to the trailhead (a couple good views of Fitzroy through the trees). Because the skies were pretty clear by this point, they drove back to the big roadside viewpoint as you enter El Chalten before returning to the hotel.



Left to Right: (top) to, at, and just above Azul – with Fitzroy tower; (bottom) at Diablo... Fitzroy from north, from El Chalten

One of the reasons the sibling and I held back on the forest-lake hike was because we didn't want to miss today's BIG traverse across the front of the Fitzroy massif. That said, I was the LEAST confident I would make the grueling side-trip up to Lago del los Tres – an ascent that seems to get harder every time I do it. And the first hour, I was sleepy and moving slow – both Sergio and I openly commenting that today was probably going to be the first time in our lives/careers that we wouldn't see Lago de los Tres. For whatever reason (probably Sudafed), I woke up once we hit the big plateau and did the whole thing - feeling more energetic than in 2012, and as excited as on my first time in 1997. Unfortunately, Sergio did sit out this climb – leaving our poor assistant to manage our disparate groups: we hadn't seen the fast people since being dropped off; Allison/Marshall smoked the siblings and I; the eldest of the siblings (62) set the BEST pace for me that day... I never felt winded or like I was holding people up. I must also note that Marshall, who is not quite as into hiking, mountains, or international travel as Allison/I, LOVED today's hike and was thoroughly impressed by Fitzroy. Indeed, she is a magnificent mountain and Argentina delivered big-time today!



Left to Right: (top) Fitz setting out, Piedras Blancas, plateau view, the big climb... continued (bottom)

One of the reasons I probably enjoyed the big climb more this year was that there were far fewer people than in 2012. A park surveyor at the base on the climb confirmed that the usual numbers on this hike were down today: only 400 today, vs. 1000 yesterday (1000 was also the usual daily number this time of year). Roger was rather horrified to hear that we thought 400 was light, having only dealt with 100 in March (similar to Sara and my experience in 1997). After carefully piecing our way down the rocks and meeting back up with Sergio (waiting at the base), we briefly (and SLOWLY) hiked together until near the Lago Capri junction. At this point, not even *I* could handle what seemed to be constant stopping/starting/waiting – so I finally bolted,

determined to get back early and enjoy some down time. As with the Torres descent, I greatly enjoyed hiking on my own and at a good clip all the way back to the hotel. Tonight's dinner featured another amazing steak (pictured in the opening montage) – which was deserved after 12.4 miles and 3200 feet up/down.



Left to Right: Lago Sucia and de los Tres with Fitzroy, Marshall and his favorite mountain, Valle Vuelta – descent to El Chalten

Our final day and hike in Los Glacieres – Cerro Torre - was one that I was on the fence about... not because I felt bad, but just because I have done it so many times and the first 3 miles are tedious and annoying (it's also an in/out hike so you have to do everything twice). Although I had in mind this hike was about 10 miles, Allison GPS'd it to 12.3 (nearly as long as yesterday) and 2200 feet up/down (mostly via constantly up/down climbs over multiple old terminal moraine heaps). In the end, 4 members of our party did not make the hike, including our leader. Some of it was being sick, some was being hurt (one person took quite a fall during yesterday's descent to El Chalten), and some was being exhausted. I could totally understand because this was the hike that sort of did me in back in 2012 – setting me up for catching a horrible flu that made my return flights scary and took me out of winter term for a week. But today I was feeling energetic and so I ended up doing the whole thing – if only because it was a glorious day and I owed it to the many people (e.g. Roger/Susie) who come to this part of the world and never see the elusive Cerro Torre because of bad weather. In contrast, today was a truly banner day – one of those rare days where the skies became clearer after some high clouds briefly moved in; other notables: several chirpy pygmy owls trailside, and half the party saw an enormous male Magellanic woodpecker going at it for a solid 5 minutes (I was racing back at the time). Although I really enjoyed the final view, the first 3 miles and the last mile were REALLY annoying today... and I pretty much had to jog back to make my 4 p.m. hot tub appointment at the hotel (which wasn't exactly worth it because the tub wasn't exactly hot). Our final meal (being New Year's Eve) was at a new restaurant (for me) in town. It was interesting but the portions were WAY too big and the seating/atmosphere was too crowded and noisy. Thinking I was going to finally give up heavy steak, I ordered vegetarian pasta... which Allison stated contained about a stick of butter per serving bowl.



Left to Right: (top) setting out, magnificent early views, mirador sign and view, Marshall is enthusiastic; (bottom) pygmy owl, the final LONG mile, lake and close-up views of Cerro Torre

The next day seemed like a sort of meandering waste of time – and, in my strong opinion, could have been planned out differently given that our flight from El Calafate to Buenos Aires didn't leave until almost 6 p.m. In 2012 (given a similar flight configuration), we drove back to El Calafate and were turned loose before our late lunch – and then it was airport time. This gave everyone a chance to pick up knick-knacks at the end of the trip – and if you want to shop, El Calafate is a good place to do that. Today, we were stuck all morning in El Chalten... and then we ate lunch at La Leona (not a highpoint of eating on this trip). We were dropped off at the airport around 3 so Sergio could himself drive back to El Calafate and locate someone's spare glasses (left at the big \$\$\$ hotel), leaving us twiddling our thumbs for a solid 3 hours. The one saving grace was that we – in contrast with 2012 – enjoyed a shorter direct flight (no crazy stops in Trelew!) to the downtown domestic airport (not the international – an hour outside the city). Even so, we landed in the dark, the earlier 95°F day still a humid 80-plus. While my hotel room and overall experience was better than that in 2012 (in the full throes of influenza), our 10 p.m. hotel dinner SUCKED... one of the worst meals in my

personal history of traveling (Marshall and I ordered something called caprese gnocchi... it was as though the pasta had been canned – it was both rubbery and metallic... same with the mashed tomato product).



Left to Right: (top) Recoleta from hotel, Evita's garbage pail and gravesite; (bottom) street Tango, El Ateneo bookstore, snowy PDX, gearing up for a snowy drive back to Salem (check out the new PDX carpet!)

Our final day in Buenos Aires was a pleasant end to this trip – and made up for my horrible memories/experience in 2012. While it was still hot (lower 80's), it could have been worse – and we had full access to the hotel's spa area (meaning showers and a change of clothes at the end of the day – before jumping on our overnight flight). We limited our goals initially to a few nearby activities: finding Eva Peron's gravesite at the hotel-adjacent Recoleta, visiting the nearby craft fair/street market, lunch followed by gelato. In contrast with 1997 (my last time at the Recoleta with Sara), Allison/Marshall/I had no problems finding her gravesite this time around; there was a labeled key and a shitload of stuff (labeled trashcan, flowers everywhere, tour-groups) giving it away. Indeed, the Recoleta seemed 100 times more busy and crowded today than in 1997. Likewise, the craft fair is that much bigger and even more crowded – and, not surprisingly, not as folksy/handmade as it used to be. Although there were a couple neat miniature paintings I enjoyed, they were all overpriced. From the craft fair, we easily crossed the street to the pleasant but busy La Biela, an historic café that reminds me of the place in Pamplona that Hemingway apparently favored. The overpriced lunch was minimalist but filling – and service was faster and less clunky than I was anticipating. Just beyond the fenced outdoor seating area (under the giant rubber tree), some street Tango was performed – which I enjoyed greatly. That the woman had multiple tattoos (including one of a garter on her thigh) was apropos. We walked to one of two competing gelaterias but were not outrageously impressed. And then Marshall entertained us by dragging us through an obscenely overpriced shopping mall, hoping to buy some new clean clothes (no success there – although he did buy some cheap tourist T-shirts at the fair). After a little relaxing in the hotel lobby, Allison decided we needed some more walking – and so we did about 15 blocks to a famous bookstore (El Ateneo) in an old theatre. We bought nothing... but did enjoy the walk – especially the underwear kiosk that, not surprisingly, was closed as it was Sunday. After walking back to the hotel, we occupied our final hour by cleaning up in the spa – going in shifts so that someone could watch our pile of luggage in the lobby. Although the drive to the international airport seemed less crazy than in 2012, the airport was a mess and we basically needed the entire 3 hours to get through at least 3 LONG lines and onto the plane. Alas, my bulkhead seat (one row up) had been taken when I booked my tickets; initially nervous that a mother with an infant and a young boy sat behind me (and there was some prolonged seat-kicking), I was shocked at how silent they all became after dinner - pretty much the entire flight. Dallas proved crazier with lines – although I fared better than Allison/Marshall, who got stuck with a different set of return flights (I was direct to PDX but with a longer layover, while they barely made their Dallas to Phoenix flight – and then had to switch planes again). Although everything ultimately worked out and we both landed at PDX within 30 minutes of each other, about 3 inches of new snow (with snow actively falling) proved to be our final challenge of the day. But Marshall managed the roads extremely well – the snow/ice continuing all the way to Salem and beyond. Despite heroic efforts to get me back in time for lecture the next day, WOU closed the campus because of all the ice... which was very much appreciated because I needed a little breather.

Closing Thoughts

For me, this was the most far-reaching trip to this region I've done, encompassing five national parks: Tierra del Fuego, Cape Horn, Agostini, Torres del Paine, Perito Moreno, and Los Glaciers. As someone who likes to revisit favorite destinations, I know it is often challenging to recapture the "first love" impressions that often provide the reason for wanting to go back. Despite being a remote and challenging place to physically visit, though, Patagonia proved herself to me three times strong via very different experiences – and so I was crossing my fingers she could do it again this time. While this trip was the least favorite of all my adventures in Patagonia, though, we definitely had some great weather, views, and experiences - and some things were redeemed on this trip... though other things lost some of their luster. In terms of Tierra del Fuego, that experience was as good as in 2008 – even though this was a different and reverse cruise itinerary. It's hard to say which direction I prefer because both had different merits (e.g. the penguin tour on this trip was really great, but the glacier portions of the 2008 trip were better). The MTS vs. Nat-Geo itinerary is a no-contest victory for Nat-Geo at all levels: the amount of hiking, the breadth of hiking, the

accommodations, and the number of on-your-own activities/expenses. That Nat-Geo is a mere \$400 more does not make up for the poorer accommodations and on-your-own meals on the MTS trip. In addition to classic mountain hikes, Nat-Geo insists on visiting some of the geologically important areas like hike the scenic Milodon caves (a more substantial hike on day one) and even this wild dinosaur bone area between La Leona and El Chalten. Additionally, on our Nat-Geo trip, we did a slightly more substantial mountain hiking itinerary, including the Fitzroy north basecamp. While many common hotels have upped their menus in a better way since 2012, the accommodation situation on this trip was all over the board and overall not up to the MTS standards – largely because of failures to book several key hotels/lodges and/or target kinds of rooms. As someone who paid a substantial single supplement, I do not feel I got my money's worth on this trip because of the prevalent accommodations snafu's. Overall, I was also concerned about some leadership and team dynamics issues – and, in general, surprised how fragmented our party was allowed to be. This is not the first trip I have done where many different paces were represented... but it is the first trip where I have seen large party subsets vanishing most of the day with no guide. While I'm sure the fast party enjoyed much of their time alone (as did I when I did my own pace on some of the descents), I often wondered what MTS (e.g. whoever develops their liability waivers) would think of everything. In terms of overall region impressions, Chile seemed like SUCH a CF this time – HORRIBLY crowded, beyond anything I've EVER seen there before... those feelings exacerbated by the poorer weather and the higher rate of bad lodging experiences. In contrast, Argentina regained a lot of her luster – particularly after Chile had been gaining ground in 2008 and 2012. El Calafate seemed more pleasant with its peaceful promenade and sunny skies, the Perito was AMAZING, and El Chalten/Los Glaciers – while crowded – were less crazy than in previous years, and offered up the best weather on this trip. Having not gotten to actually enjoy Buenos Aires since 1997, I also found our short time in that city pleasant and positive. For these reasons, Argentina deserves the following closing images - Cerro Torre and street tango – that represent the resonating memories from this long and epic trip.

