

PATAGONIAN PERFECTION

Incredible Adventures in Chile's Torres del Paine National Park

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PART I: THE ROAD TO TORRES DEL PAINE

We're riding in a 4WD van, making our way north from Punta Arenas to Patagonia Camp (www.patagoniacamp.com), an eco-resort on the outskirts of Torres del Paine National.

Rolling hills of multi-hued tundra pass by outside our window: It feels like traveling through an impressionist's artful dream. The clouds boast a surreal depth of texture, mirroring vast herds of fluffy sheep that rest in the midday sun.

Endless miles go by without a sign of human habitation, save for the ubiquitous barbed wire fences that section off wide expanses of unspoiled acreage. There's a stark sense of isolation, yet the Chilean Patagonia region offers plenty of earthy comfort, color and light.

Abundant lakes nurture nature against the harsh, arid climate. We see Guanacos (a.k.a. Patagonian llamas), horses, and gangly Ostriches roaming the open plain. The predatory birds known as Caracaras line the road with such frequency, I imagine them as the handsome welcoming guard to some grand Narnian castle.

We stop at a picnic area, relieving our bladders on lichen-covered Lenga trees stripped nearly naked by the chilling wind (which can blow at gusts of up to 100 mph). As our guide, 28-year-old Santiago native Matias Espinosa, prepares a snack of tea and dulce de leche cookies, a flock of 6 brilliant green Austral parakeets lands on a tree nearby.

As always when we travel, we find kindred spirits among those who love nature. Matias left behind a 12-year career as a surfer to pursue an Ecotourism degree. Though he still chases waves for personal pleasure occasionally, he's working at Patagonia Camp to get experience in the field before completing his final thesis on making national parks more accessible for disabled people.

"Everything in Patagonia is so giant, the sky goes on forever," he says sagely. "It makes me see that I am tiny, and the world is so big."

From massive rock formations known as "The Devil's Chair" and "The Castle" to fields of wind-blown grasses that look like shimmering ocean waves, everything we see on the road to Patagonia seems larger than life. Even tiny flowers such as "7 T-Shirts" boast impossibly brilliant colors, as if Mother Nature wanted them to compete with the picturesque scenery for our attention.

I won't repeat the expletive I uttered the first time we rounded a corner to see the mountains of Torres del Paine in all their glory. But suffice it to say that they were awe-inspired exultations of slack-jawed wonder. There's something about the iconic Paine Massif that's much more monolithic and majestic in person, and I felt truly humbled by its sheer grandeur.

For nature lovers, the remote wilderness of Patagonia is something akin to a slice of heaven on earth. And, despite the fact that it had taken us 48 hours, 3 flights, 2 overnight layovers, and a 5-hour drive to get there, we were chomping at the bit to begin

exploring the natural wonders Torres Del Paine had to offer.

PART II: CHILEAN WILDLIFE

Torres del Paine's "Fauna Trail" doesn't appear on any maps. In fact, there's not much of a trail to be found. But there was plenty of Chilean wildlife en route to seeing prehistoric paintings 3,000-8,000 years old, and hiking this nonexistent trail proved one of our favorite Adventure Life (www.adventure-life.com) excursions in Chile.

We spotted plenty of wildlife on the way there, including a gorgeous red fox that allowed us to get within about 10 feet of it and a tiny grey fox kit that covered in the entrance to its den. Eventually we reached Porteria Lago Sarmiento, a guard station located on the eastern side of the national park.

We basically had the trail all to ourselves. We began spotting animals immediately, including grazing Guanacos, Caracaras and Andean Condors soaring overhead. Though we never saw Pumas, we smelled their pungent scent and knew they were nearby.

The elevation climbed gradually and the wind blew gently, making for an awesome morning hike. Eventually we crested a hill to see Torres del Paine revealed in its glory, with a herd of Guanacos grazing peacefully in the foreground.

After taking some photos of the herd, we hiked up a ridge to a rocky outcropping, where we found a small cave. You'd never know it was there if you didn't have a guide (which is intentional, to ensure the Prehistoric cave paintings won't be vandalized). The images there were painted with a mixture of iron dust and animal blood, and served as a message to hunters that there were predators in the area.

In addition to the cave paintings, the summit provided expansive views of Torres del Paine, as well as Laguna Los Flamencos. We spent quite a bit of time there, enjoying a snack while watching a pair of male Guanacos chasing each other across the hillside.

Weather is notoriously unpredictable in Patagonia: It's said that you can experience all four seasons in one day. So, as storm clouds began to sweep in, we began making our way back down. In our absence, an even larger herd of Guanacos had assembled around the small watering hole, and I'm fairly certain I elicited a decidedly unmanly squeal when I saw there were several babies in their midst.

Just when we thought the excitement was over, we rounded a corner and got a decidedly more adult sort of show. Our guides explained that the male Guanaco protects his herd by standing watch for predators on top of a hill. But one handsome lad was distracted when a filly pranced nearby, and soon they were mating like newlyweds listening to a Marvin Gaye marathon.

Eventually the female had had enough, making her escape and leaping gracefully over the low fence that divided private land from public. For such a short hike, we saw a diverse array of Chilean wildlife, not to mention stunning views of the striking Paine massif. All in all, it was a pretty incredible day.

PART III: THE MILODON CAVES

From the outside, the Milodon Cave Natural Monument looks a lot like the rest of Patagonia. But on the inside, each cave holds secrets that date back more than 11,000 years.

Discovered by German explorer Hermann Eberhard in 1895, the caves got their name when the remains of a giant prehistoric ground sloth known as the Mylodon were found there. Believed to have lived over 10,000 years ago, these ancient herbivores were twice the height of an average human, with bear-like bodies, long tails for balance, and reddish-brown coats.

The 1896 archeological expedition also found remains of extinct animals such as the Hippidion (dwarf horse), Macrauchenia (prehistoric llama) and Smilodon (sabre-toothed cat). Perhaps most importantly, they found fire pits, primitive tools and human remains, offering ample clues about the earliest human occupation of Patagonia.

When we got to the second of the three caves, we were surprised to see a full-on archaeological dig in progress. University of Magallanes researchers Manuel San Román and Karina Rodriguez, with help from Mauricio Massone of the Museo de Historia Natural de Concepción, were digging through layers of rock and sediment. They would then carefully strain it in hopes of finding relics that would provide more information on early human occupation of South America.

San Román said they'd found remains of fires and the bones of llamas and horses there, indicating these were essential elements in the diet of prehistoric Patagonians. He also said that their findings had helped experts to determine that both animals and humans occupied this area earlier than previously believed.

The last cave we visited was more than 260 feet wide and 650 feet deep, with a 100-foot high ceiling covered in stalactites. Here we found another team of archaeologists digging, lifting, moving and sifting dirt from a cordoned-off section at the center of the cave. One of our guides tried to get a moment of project director Dr. Fabiana Martin's time for an interview, but it was clear from the pace at which the team was working that they were in the middle of something important.

Walking along the path that loops through the interior of this vast cavern, it's easy to imagine the presence of the prehistoric humans and animals who were drawn to the Milodon Cave for protection.

At the end, there's a display of small artifacts found in the cave, including bits of Milodon fur, bones and teeth. There's also a life-sized statue of the prehistoric sloth, which gives you a realistic depiction of just how massive they were. Unfortunately, to see the famous desiccated skeleton discovered there back in 1865, you'd have to go to London, where the British Museum stores it (along with innumerable other treasures stolen during the Colonial era).

It's difficult to describe the sense of awe and wonder we felt while walking the ground upon which these ancient creatures walked, bred, and slept. But there's definitely a sense of deeper connection to mankind's history there. For us, the Milodon Cave was easily among the most moving attractions we visited in Torres del Paine National Park.

