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 a Van Gogh 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 Norwegian 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 dulche 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. In addition to the cave paintings, the team was working that they were in 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 cowered 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 humbly 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 there. 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. We decided to see the Prehistoric cave paintings. The images were painted with a mixture of iron rust 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 unhappy 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.