

Twitterpated in Patagonia, Part One

Tierra del Fuego and Los Glacieres National Parks



Left to Right: (top) in-flight amusement en route to Patagonia, Pia Glacier zodiac line, Cape Horn; (middle) Wulaia Bay; Fuegian exhibit in Ushuaia, firebush (indeed); (bottom) Perito Moreno, near Lago de los Tres, Cerro Torre basecamp

Introduction

As most people familiar with this page know, I first visited Patagonia in 1997 in response to some major life upheavals. At the time, I could not imagine visiting southern Patagonia again - not only because Sara and my trip had been so amazingly significant but also because, even at the time, we could sense that Patagonia was being developed too fast... to the point that I felt returning there and seeing less wilderness would be heartbreaking. Even so, Allison and I booked a hiking/camping version of this trip with Mountain Travel Sobek (MTS) in 2004 - only to cancel less than two weeks before when I developed a massive ovarian cyst (which I took as a sure sign someone was angry I had thought of stepping foot back in southern Patagonia). Allison and my subsequently dreadful experience in northern Patagonia in 2006 only seemed to confirm that Patagonia was not in my stars. And so it was perhaps surprising that I grew determined to return to southern Patagonia, a decision made late last year. On one level, I had to cast away those senseless, fear-motivated notions... but on a different level, I felt I needed to better define and understand my reasons for returning to this profoundly important place. After various levels of thought about this topic (before, during, and after the trip), I concluded that this journey was strangely similar to my first: not in terms of ending of a long-term romantic relationship, but - rather - the ending of my year-long sabbatical and my eight years of NSF-funded research, something that has provided me with incredible professional opportunities and fostered unforgettable friendships. Despite said parallels, though, I knew I could never duplicate Sara and my trip in terms of simple things like our mode of travel (e.g. I don't know hardly anyone anymore who can afford - time or money - to do this scale of a trip). I also knew that I didn't want to try and duplicate Sara and my itinerary - not only because I felt it would improperly raise expectations but also because I knew, based on things Sara and I didn't do, there were different things I wanted to see (e.g. Tierra del Fuego and the Perito Moreno); conversely, too, there were things Sara and I did - like the Paine circuit - that were, in our strong opinions, NOT worth it. Incidentally, Tierra del Fuego was actually a primary motivation for this trip - specifically inspired upon reading Darwin's Voyage of the Beagle after Allison and my 2007 Galapagos trip. Of course, one thing I will never live down (if Sara finds out) is that I willingly went full-on high-end, staying only in luxury accommodations everywhere, including a five-day cruise all over Tierra del Fuego and Cape Horn. That decision was made on three counts: first, weather is supposed to be less stable in November/December (vs. February/March's theoretically calmer weather, which was when Sara and I went); second, I wanted to actually enjoy my final vacation of the year regardless of the weather; and, third, not camping and eating fine food was definitely NOT duplicating Sara and my trip (i.e. if you are going to cheat, cheat big). Although both MTS and Wilderness Travel, my favorite trekking companies, ran such trips through Patagonia, I went with the former because they did a more comprehensive trip - including the aforementioned cruise around Tierra del Fuego, someplace Sara and I had considered going but ultimately didn't because it sounded over our heads. An equal selling point was the Easter Island extension, which MTS helped me arrange after visiting Patagonia. Although I often questioned many things about doing this trip (i.e. whether I should even try to go back and recapture Patagonia in any way, whether I should spend

THAT much money given the HIGHLY unpredictable and often foul weather there), I have to say: totally worth it, easily one of the top five trips I've ever taken - completely equal to Sara and my trip, but in many surprisingly different ways.



Left to Right: weirdly modern Santiago - palace, Allende statue, Plaza d'Armas various - statue, reflection, church

November 20-1, 2008 - Santiago, Chile

In contrast with my last trip (where Buenos Aires provided Sara and my launching off point), we approached Patagonia from Santiago, Chile - although we ultimately spent about equal time in Chile and Argentina (excluding Easter Island). Indeed, I never saw Buenos Aires on this trip. After an early morning ride into Salem from Bryan's wife, I caught the airport shuttle to placid PDX - arriving there half past nine for my one a.m. flight. My one lingering issue was the power situation: Chile and Argentina used different outlet configurations and 220V electricity, something Sara and I never dealt with because we were camping and neither of us had big digital cameras. Concerned about said issue and my desire to, yes, blow-dry my hair (having packed a mini-dryer), I forked out for a fancy universal plug adapter from a travel store in the airport mall; in the end - totally unnecessary because my four Nikon batteries were sufficient (provided that I didn't review/edit pictures) and everywhere we stayed provided dryers (like I said: this was a high-end trip). I also bought a few nice little luxury items at Powell's: a decent diary/journal, one of Anthony Bourdain's travel books (yes, Bourdain has become quite an addiction the last year), and a monster organic dark chocolate bar. Writing this now (a week after returning), I have been so filled with satisfaction that I actually was surprised to read in my journal that the flight to the always-unpredictable Dallas airport was a whole hour late. While this didn't mess up anything major (because I had a three-hour layover), it did mean that I was STARVING and paid five bucks for, like, paltry aliquots of crackers, nuts and cheese. Although my journal also states that I managed to avoid sitting immediately adjacent to "several screaming babies and a dozen hacking respiratory tract infections," they (both groups) were highly prevalent on all flights and it remains a MIRACLE I have managed to stay healthy, having no doubt indirectly vaccinated myself against a whole host of diseases. However, I do chock this up to eating well, sleeping nine hours every night (except on planes), and the almost daily exposure to shocking amounts of sunlight... not to mention insane levels of crazy hormones. Once in Dallas, I succumbed to a fast food dinner from Popeye's - now down to less than an hour before boarding. Thankfully, I am now a card-carrying American Airlines Gold Card Member - and boarded all flights right after first/business class, which meant zero problems fighting overhead bin storage. Although we did begin boarding on time, this flight took FOREVER to take off, partly because most people had too much and too large carry-on items (i.e. many people needed to check in bags that wouldn't fit in the overhead bins) and partly because of a mechanical problem that seemed to be fixed by inflating the plane tires. Just when I thought we were leaving, some late-arriving woman stupidly tried to bring her dog on board (i.e. yet another item to check in last minute). Although I had - as I always do - reserved a window seat (this was an older 767 with a two-four-two seat configuration), my actual window was eclipsed by the seat in front of me... which was especially frustrating as there would have been great, clear views of Aconcagua (among many other Andean peaks) come morning. My neighbor was also this hacking Russian-American who smelled like cigarettes and initially concerned me because he and his traveling companions (seated across the aisle) were REALLY loud. Fortunately dinner (pasta and chicken served at midnight) calmed them down. However, the airline annoyingly showed a movie that lasted until three a.m. In contrast with newer 767's (e.g. the LAN one I flew to Easter), this plane did not have individual video monitors, meaning blaring light from the big screens at the front of the cabin. My sleep wasn't great but took place over seven hours, marred mostly by the screaming baby around six a.m. An hour before landing, we were served delicious warm croissants and yogurt - the people in front of me going on and on about how great it was to see Aconcagua.

Landing at ten a.m. (an hour late), I navigated customs quickly - particularly because I didn't have to pay the reciprocity tax (now \$135), having done so in 2006. I emerged with my luggage at around eleven, greeted instantly by a sign-wielding MTS representative (a notably very good looking young Argentine from Bariloche). He escorted me to the van, the temperatures outside well into the eighties. The drive downtown seemed long, congested, and tedious; after visiting memorably colorful and colonial Quito last year, I found Santiago less physically attractive (more brown and industrial) this time around. Even our hotel (the Plaza San Francisco) was less impressive than the lighter and friendlier Hilton where Allison and I stayed (courtesy of American Airlines) during our post-Fu flight fiasco in 2006. After too many unnecessarily long wait-steps, I retired to my dark room, showered, and settled down for what I hoped would be a three-hour nap. In contrast with most other recent trips, I would actually be having a "stranger" roommate on this trip. Although most of the reason for this was due to the cost of the trip (including a really steep single supplement fee), I had known - from the moment I reserved this trip - there was another solo traveler woman who was really hoping for a roommate. Something about the tone of the request told my intuition that this was going to be a good thing. But when I arrived Patricia (PJ) had not checked in. An hour into my nap, housecleaning showed up - waking me and, unbeknownst to me, hung the "do not disturb sign." Thus, I actively received a phone-call an hour later, the bellman and PJ put off by the sign on the door. Embarrassed that PJ was going to think I had selfishly hung that sign up without considering her arrival, I could only apologize bleary-eyed. For better or worse (worse - I assumed at the time), PJ left with her laptop, insisting she didn't want to disturb me - at least not until we both needed to get ready for an afternoon city tour. Oh dear, I laid down, this was NOT a good start to our two-week relationship. An hour later, though, PJ returned and I

think we both realized we were going to be a good team. A sixty-something retiree, PJ hailed from New Jersey, where she had worked as a public school gym teacher while developing quite the reputation as a very serious underwater photographer, with almost 2000 dives to her credit (most in the South Pacific). Unlike fresh-from-the-plane me, PJ had been tangoing in Buenos Aires since the beginning of November, an annual journey given her strong interest in said dance. Although PJ had been briefly married over forty years ago, she was single now and very independent - not to mention outspoken and redheaded (the latter points reminding me of Jenn). Anyway, we headed down to the lobby - my head spinning because my food intake so far today consisted of the plane breakfast, a granola bar, and a chunk of dark chocolate. Given that last year's city tour of Quito had featured the opportunity to buy food en route, I assumed I would have the chance to do the same today... but this was not the case. Downstairs, we met up with our party of nine; not surprisingly, I was the baby... but not by too much. In addition to PJ and I, our party consisted of: a couple in their sixties from the east coast (Larry was an English PhD working for the FDA and Gail was an MD); a couple in their forties living in Saudi Arabia (Shona was a British physical therapist and John was an American who did government work); a mother/son pair in their seventies/forties from Canada (Ann was a retired biochemist/academic and David was an archeologist/former-academic-turned-writer); and married-but-traveling-solo Jacques, a seventy-something French-American from Berkeley. Jacques - it seemed - had done or tried everything... his lengthiest formal occupation being with Gillette (which will come up again). Despite his senior status in this group, Jacques was the STRONGEST hiker I've ever had the pleasure of doing a trip like this with. Given that I sometimes do not choose to state names in my trip reports, it should say a fair bit that I chose to do so in this write-up; indeed, this was one of the better groups I've traveled with, particularly given the amount of time and distance this trip entailed.



Left to Right: last stop hillside park - funky stairs in rock, final tower, city views

The nine of us, escorted by an older male guide from Santiago (not our long-term trip leader, whom we would meet tomorrow in Punta Arenas), headed out in our own bus into the blazing hot city. Of all the things we did on this trip, I will say upfront that the Santiago city tour was my least favorite, not to mention the least well-run. After driving around the business district (the guide pretty much droning into a microphone), we stopped and walked around the palace (for lack of a better word) - which unfortunately was fairly inaccessible owing to a state visit by the Italian government. A prominent statue of Allende prompted a brief but careful discussion of Chile's somewhat recent history - which included Castro-affiliated, communist-leaning Allende being more or less replaced by dictator Pinochet (which the US seemed to have facilitated in some way). Pinochet, in turn, allegedly funneled government money into personal bank accounts and was responsible for the death and/or disappearance of thousands of Chileans - most, apparently, liberal academics and free-thinkers. From the palace, we walked a few blocks to this museum that housed a large private collection of artifacts from Mexico to Patagonia (although, in retrospect, I do not recall specifically Fuegian items). Given that pictures were not allowed inside, I have nothing to show for this visit - although I was impressed with the amazing craftsmanship of the clay/pottery musical instruments... although most reminded me of things my middle school pottery classmates tried to pass off as multi-orifice vases but were, in fact, thinly-veiled bongos. Given my rumbling belly, I did enjoy two fruit drinks at the small museum snack stand; in retrospect, I should have also bought one of their large cake slices (i.e. skipped some of the too-lengthy art descriptions). After the museum, we fought extremely dense rush-hour traffic - ultimately only able to visit one final destination: the same hilltop park Allison, the Mississippians, and I stumbled onto during our post-Fu day in Santiago in 2006. On this trip, we actually drove up to the area Allison and company walked to last time. Here, our guide directed us up an even higher maze-like set of stairs cemented to and/or carved out of the natural rock summit. Climbing for ten minutes, we reached this turret-like platform offering huge views over the entire city. Of course, this park was infested by couples TOTALLY making out - which was reminiscent of Sara and my similar observations throughout Buenos Aires in 1997. As the guide gathered up our now-dispersed group, I should have patronized this parking lot snack stand for ice cream and potato chips... but, alas, I would have to venture out later from the hotel for snacks after we returned there - having skipped some even higher overlook because it was now after five. Oh well - I can't say I was as enthusiastic about Santiago as I was post-Fu. After briefly stuffing my face, I reorganized my gear and chatted more with PJ... our welcome dinner scheduled for seven at the hotel. Based on this meal, I have to say that I was very nervous about this trip going well - although not because the other people bothered me. It was more because we had no leader, no host... and, up until now, the lack of consistent or good leadership was frustrating and did not bode well for the remainder of what was a complex itinerary. I actually became deeply concerned that we were just going to get passed from superficial local guide to superficial local guide for each of the different legs of this trip (i.e. Tierra del Fuego, Argentina/Los Glaciers, Chile/Torres). But I tried to stay in the moment and enjoy the present. Unfortunately, all but two courses of the pre-set five-plate dinner were fish (most raw). The next day (i.e. when I told him), our trip leader seemed entirely unaware I didn't eat fish, which was - for the record - reported in my information profile. Aside from teasing me about this issue (and repeatedly trying to get me to eat Conger eel, a Chilean favorite that still sends shivers down my spine), our leader did facilitate meat or vegetarian meals. As would be the case a few times during this trip, I felt like I wound up in the boyz zone (tonight, at their end of the table... later, doing the hardest hikes with them). According to PJ, David and I appeared to have starry-eyes for one another as we chatted away over dinner. And I would probably agree with that (speaking on my part) - but mostly because we are close to the same age, scientists, and writers. Fortunately, that attraction went away for a week... but then crept up on me again once

the serious hiking started. For better or worse, though, David was not the only eye/mind-candy on this trip - and, alas, he wasn't the most obviously charming and flirtatious. Anyway - PJ and I were in bed by just after nine given tomorrow's ungodly early flight. I do have to say upfront that, when PJ first told me she'd spent the last week dancing and partying well into each night, I was concerned she was going to keep crazy-late hours - especially during the cruise. Fortunately, though, she was exhausted to the point that we both maintained nearly the same sleeping schedule (although PJ did enjoy getting up an hour before me to primp, organize gear, and review photographs).



Left to Right: Santiago airport, in-flight amusement over Glacieres (no view outside), Punta Arenas airport, bus

November 22, 2008 - Punta Arenas, Chile

After waking just before six, I dragged myself down for the special mini-buffet breakfast the hotel laid out for just us: a few small pastries, crust-less slices of bread with butter or jam, juice, and tea/coffee. There, I learned that nearly everyone else had hardly slept, owing to some wedding party in the hotel courtyard that started getting louder and wilder between midnight and three. Thankfully, I had my earplugs in all night - something that saved me from occasional external noise as well as PJ's earlier rising. By seven, we were back on the bus and heading to the airport. Thankfully, the traffic was minimal and the morning skies were beautiful, despite Santiago's ever-present smog. Flying LAN, I enjoyed a middle seat between Larry and Shona - having warned Larry I would be gawking out the window (i.e. possibly leaning into his personal space). Indeed, the flight was very scenic for the first hour - with North Cascades-like mountains and then many volcanic peaks. Around eleven, we landed in Punta Arenas, a city Sara and I had planned to visit but never did (mostly because we ran out of time). This somewhat sprawling city was surrounded by low, flat land in all directions - the sky a mix of big puffy white clouds and sun. Punta Arenas is on the Strait of Magellan - Tierra del Fuego visible across said waterway. As we all dumped into the baggage area of the small airport, we met our trip leader (as in - he would thankfully be with us the whole way). Of course, my first mental response was: shit - just what I need - a DDG leader. Indeed, Andre was - as stated in a well-put email to folks back home: a smaller, swarthier, big-brown-eyed Jake Gyllenhal-esque Chilean in his early thirties. From the neck down, he looked and dressed far too much like my infamous James - which I actually found slightly unnerving. Although I'm sure I was starry-eyed over Andre most of this trip (as was PJ - this being a well-worn topic of conversational amusement), I will say that Andre was a shockingly top-notch guide, reminding me of a young Alsek Brian (who was also DDG and had all the women twitterpated across the Yukon/Alaska). Looks aside, both men were my kinds of leaders: totally serious, beyond organized, and completely type A - not to mention comfortable managing people and not pontificating over every little thing we saw. I also appreciated that both Andre and Brian were fundamentally humble individuals and each had their own sets of hilariously nerdy little sub-traits (Andre's being his completely goofy laugh, which still amuses me to recall). But Brian (then in his early forties) still maintains his top-leader title and was more mature... I mean that in the sense of his range of life experiences, his interest in discussing a much broader array of serious and often-controversial topics (and his confidence expressing opinions), and his more settled-seeming being (i.e. I sensed Andre was still searching, where Brian was comfortable with exactly who he was). Of course, rafting the Alsek was a harder trip (physically and in terms of serious decision-making) than this cushy version of Patagonia - even though I would say the Alsek team was slightly easier manage than Andre's lot. And, of course, everyone knows how much I love oarsman...



Left to Right: Punta Arenas main square (note guy touching statue toe), overlook views, manicured cemetery

Anyway - after gathering our luggage, we boarded a smaller bus (i.e. twenty seats for the eleven of us, including Andre and the driver) and drove twenty minutes into town - specifically to the main square. Surrounded by flower-teeming goldenchain trees, there was a central statue of a man (Magellan, I believe) and at his feet were Fuegians. The ritual was that if you touched one of their toes, then you would return to Patagonia. My verbal response: I was back, despite having not touched said toe. Punta Arenas reminded me a great deal of a more colorful version of Tromso, Norway: pragmatic, modern architecture - low buildings spread out along the water, up the shallow hillsides. Punta Arenas is also one of two main South American ports used for ships (research or tourist) departing to Antarctica; consequently, there was more of a penguin theme to the tourist places and souvenirs than anything related to Patagonia. Our city goals for today: checking in at the cruise

office, lunch, and a walking tour. After leaving our gear at the cruise office (just around the corner from the square), we walked a block to this pub-like sandwich place. Although I enjoyed the ambiance of the place and the exquisite raspberry juice, the service was chaotic and the sandwiches were BEYOND heavy: heavy, floury buns (bigger than most hamburger buns), the equivalent of a whole boneless pork-chop, and a cup of mashed avocado with melted cheese. After lunch, we continued on foot up the most immediate hill. Given that it was colder in Punta Arenas, I was wearing my warm clothes - including my red-flame hat (purchased in Italy, worn all over Norway). Near the top of the hill, the sun came out and I thought I hooked the hat onto my camera case. An hour later (as we stepped into the museum), I discovered the hat was gone. Although I made some effort to retrace my steps, there were people everywhere and, given that we were in Tierra del Fuego ("the land of fire"), I accepted that the hat probably belonged here. At the time, I told Andre that losing the hat meant we'd be granted good weather - but I don't think he believed me. Now rushing to catch up with the group in the museum, I skipped the downstairs natural history (i.e. taxidermy specimens) area. The upstairs history and anthropology areas were interesting. In particular, I was surprised I had never heard of Agostini before - a revered Italian priest and the first to photograph and seriously hike and climb in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. Supposedly, there are some pricey books of his original photographs - but no bookstore we found had copies. Other images - some affiliated with Agostini - featured various Fuegian tribes, the most haunting of which were ceremonial costumes: painted bodies, right down to their genitals, with bizarre masks that reminded me of evolved Hopi wear. Indeed, modern artists would be challenged to come up with anything so avant-garde. Of course, it did strike me as odd that warmer climate Hopi wore more actual clothing - where the Fuegians looked like they spent a lot of their time effectively naked. Given that I was unwilling to buy/haul/pack a BIG book containing many of these images, I resorted to collecting postcards of these images. After the museum, we headed down the block to this surprisingly manicured cemetery, where a funeral was just taking shape. Consequently, we only briefly walked the central area before heading back downtown. Here, Andre gave us an hour of free time (in my case, to find a new warm hat). We were then to meet back at the square (fifteen minutes by foot) and, once regrouped, proceed to the ship. Given that I wasn't interested in more extensive shopping (mostly because I was saving my wad for Easter Island), I proceeded to the square early, Jacques already there. Within five minutes, we experienced one of only TWO periods of serious rain on the entire Tierra del Fuego-Patagonia leg of this trip... shocking, I know. Fortunately, we moved back to the cruise office until it was time to walk four blocks down to the pier holding room - where we waited thirty minutes until a formal call to board.

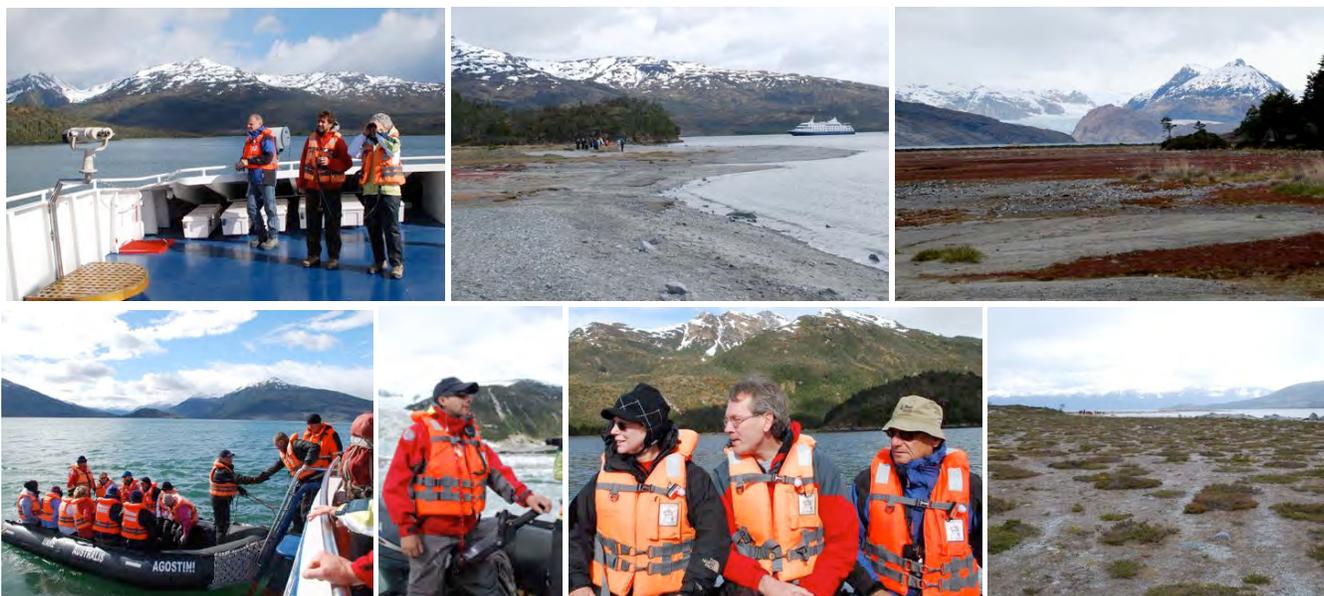


Left to Right: pier area (note tall ships), approaching our ship, our beautiful cabin (note my cluttered bed, PJ's neat one)

So - I am going to go off on a tangent about the cruise because, earlier this year, I attempted my first so-called "adventure cruise" with Lindblad-National Geographic (LNG) in Norway and was disappointed by three major things: First, even with only a hundred people, the venue felt too big and anonymous and there was a lot of frustrating downtime because most off-ship activities were run in multiple shifts. Second, LNG's clientele, based on what I saw, consisted of people who were largely out of shape and had little to no experience or interest in actual hiking (90% avoided so-called "long walks" and 10-20% were obese to the point they seldom/never left the ship); moreover, LNG's programs seemed built around the lowest common denominator. Third, LNG's focus was wildlife and photography; none of their guides had specific knowledge of Norwegian history - and attempts to backfill this paucity using locally guided activities were extremely poorly run. Given my history and those impressions, I went into this comparable (but shorter and cheaper) "adventure cruise" with a great degree of skepticism. This cruise was run by a Chilean company called Mare Australis (MA), which (I learned from their website) has been endorsed by National Geographic. While this might impress some armchair adventurers, I learned that many of the problems I had with LNG stemmed specifically from the NG affiliation. Thankfully, however, NG representatives and guides were NOT present in Tierra del Fuego... and MA should keep it that way. Although I thought LNG's ship and on-board service were top-notch (i.e. worth the exorbitant cost), MA's ship and service were equal to better. Indeed, the overall design of the ship and cabins were truly superior: more generous space (and I felt that way even WITH a roommate), the truly comfortable beds and bedding, and the slightly better bathrooms. Interestingly, too, MA's cabins are all the same; there is no overt class system (as is the case with LNG). While MA's ship actually slept a dozen or so more than LNG's, I never felt overwhelmed or anonymous; while I'm sure that some of that had to do with this not being my first cruise, the greater factor was actually traveling with MTS - having Andre keeping our subgroup together whenever we ate or lined up for off-ship activities. Initially, I was concerned with how MTS/Andre was going to jive with the MA crew and guides - largely because there were several times with LNG where "apparently more important people on board" received differential treatment (e.g. NG staff/family and/or clients who warranted or donated their way into special activities). Because I did not want to be the topic of annoyance or loathing to non-MTS clients on board, I sure as hell did not want Andre to behave in a pushy or arrogant fashion when it came to things like zodiac line-ups or off-ship activities... and thankfully, he never did. In fact, MA crew/guides were far more organized and fair in how they did zodiac line-ups (despite their smaller fleet) - rotating several small subgroups and always moving us very efficiently. Another plus, the MA crowd was more diverse (representing thirteen nations, with large contingents of Americans, Germans, Australians, and Spanish-speakers from various countries) and did seem younger (average age fifties, vs. LNG's sixties). While it was hard to say whether MA attracted more fit/active people, it didn't matter as much on this trip because it was a shorter trip and the scenery/activities were not amenable to long hikes. Indeed, most of Tierra del Fuego is largely and

thankfully trail-less and undeveloped - representing EVERYTHING I hoped Norway would be: an authentic wilderness of velveteen deciduous forests, glaciers spilling into fjords, mountains - both starkly barren and stunningly ice-clad. The fact that we didn't see any buildings for three days, in and of itself, pleased my soul to the point I was fully satisfied. Finally, the MA crew and guides had an entirely different - and far better - energy than the LNG staff. Most of it seemed to stem from the fact that most were Chileans who clearly held a great deal of national pride and were knowledgeable about their land, history, and culture. They also seemed more eager to learn things and communicate, having established relationships with research scientists in the area who had taught them well in terms of flora, fauna, and geology. In short, MA kicked LNG's ass and, while I'm not ready to sign up for any long "adventure cruises" in the near future, I am glad to know that they can be done right.

Returning to the linear report, our subgroup boarded and PJ and I headed up to our third-deck cabin. PJ will tell you that I "generously" gave her the chest of drawers and most of the closet, preferring to pile my gear on a chair or just keep it in stuff sacks within my luggage. Despite the fact that PJ's side of the room always looked neat and orderly (where mine was one big pile), she will also tell you that - to her amazement - I always could find things much faster (hence, part of the reason she was up earlier than me). Shortly thereafter, PJ and I went to what we thought was our welcome cocktail hour. In fact, we had found the Spanish language version and were enjoying local folk singers and dancers in full gear. At some point, Andre (as he would, on many occasions, with PJ and I) find and redirect us. At the English version, we were treated - again - to the singing and dancing, followed by the always-great presentations by Francisco, the main speaker at all information sessions. The combination of the performance and Francisco definitely made a positive impression on me because both were superior to ALL first impressions I had of the LNG operation. And, again, it had to do with the fact that these people represented the nation we were visiting; it didn't feel like we were a bunch of Americans being isolated from the regional culture on this big ship. As we began sailing within the hour, I made my way out onto the middle viewing deck - into what were true Patagonian winds - to photograph Punta Arenas. Shortly thereafter, we sat down to a big plateful of raw fish starter (par for the course almost every evening on the ship) and I had to break Andre's heart by informing him I didn't do the fish thing. Thankfully, the kitchen made me substitute salads as needed - and the main course always had a non-fish option (i.e. I ate a LOT of steak, which my physician is not going to like). Nonetheless, I hadn't anticipated so much seafood given that Sara and I pretty much encountered only red meat during our trip... but then again, this was a cruise. As for dessert, I had been dreaming about all kinds of fresh fruit on this trip (since Chile seems to export so many berries this time of year) but most meals (whether on the ship or the mainland) seemed to end with heavy cream-based things, often with chocolate or dulce de leche. Tonight: creamy corn mousse - although I have a weird thing for corn-based desserts and so this was one of my favorites.



Left to Right: (top) Ainsworth Bay - first view, landing and ship, Cordillera Darwin and Marinelli Glacier; (bottom) zodiac boarding, macho driver, PJ in awe of macho driver, beach landing

November 23, 2008 - Northern Cordillera Darwin/Agostini National Park, Chile

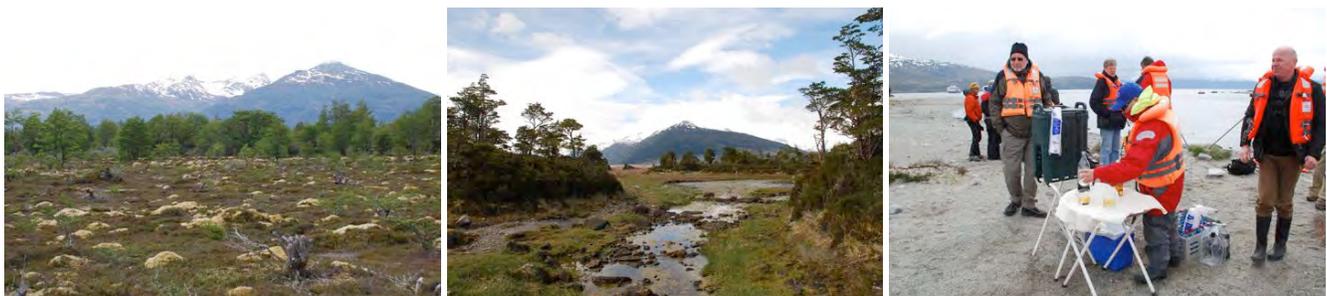
Perhaps one of the other reasons I truly enjoyed the cruise part of this trip was because it was relatively laid back - and I appreciated this because it allowed me to recover from all the plane travel and jetlag without affecting my ability to do the daily activities. Thus, by the time we reached the mainland/mountain leg of the trip in the, I felt completely rested and ready. Of course, when I first landed in Santiago, I did regret not flying in a day early... but, having done the whole trip, I would retract this sentiment given how relaxing and reinvigorating it was to chill on the ship. I was usually eating breakfast, served between eight and nine, during the final twenty minutes. Both breakfasts and lunches were the same buffet style as with LNG - with the same quality and quantity of food (and there were always hot drinks and snacks in a smaller upstairs lounge). Waking up that morning was like my "shit, man" first morning in Norway (i.e. seeing the classic view at Olden) - only there were no man-made structures anywhere: just these lush, green hills striped with occasional waterfalls, snow-spotted mountaintops, placid waterways, and the always-surreal clouds and sky. Although Tierra del Fuego isn't as overall sexy as the more dramatic Patagonian mountains of Glacieres or Torres, the fact that it looks and feels so utterly untouched is as tangibly beautiful... particularly, in my case, after being disappointed with what I tried to find in terms of Norwegian wilderness. Overnight, we had sailed about 40 miles south from Punta Arenas - first down the Strait of Magellan and then to Admiralty Fjord, which separates

the main part of the Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego from this prominent western peninsula containing Cordillera Darwin. In contrast with mountain patterns in the northern hemisphere, the north-facing side of the cordillera was less dramatic. Although we could see Glacier Marinelli in the distance from our anchorage in Ainsworth Bay, the ice - we were told - has significantly retreated. After a talk about zodiacs and safety issues (again, well-done by Francisco), we waited for our time to queue up. Relative to LNG, nothing about the zodiacs was any different - although each life vest did contain a temperature-sensitive beacon device (something LNG only used for sea-kayaks - which was not an option on this ship). I also felt MA's drivers were more strict and consistent with safety rules on the zodiacs (where LNG seemed more loosey-goosey - the NG staff more bold and pushy about standing and moving on the zodiacs to take photographs). Despite having fewer zodiacs, MA seemed to have more staff in terms of dedicated drivers and guides - which is why their off-ship operation seem more smooth and orderly to me. Of course, several of us were amused because MA's zodiac drivers were all these macho guys who drove with the long, baculum-like motor shafts prominently protruding from between their legs. Indeed, I don't think LNG staff would have had the balls to do that - neither with a straight face, nor without embarrassing many of their clients.



Left to Right: flora - sea pink, diddle dee (murtilla), lichen, beech, mossy cliff, tree symbionts, barberry (calafate), firebush

En route to this big flat beach on Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego proper, we passed a dozen elephant seals on a tiny island - some sparring in the water. Unfortunately, I had hidden the camera for the ride - not certain what kind of wave action there might be. Once on the main shore, our group combined with ten other passengers and were officially led by Francisco. We spent two hours hiking around the beach, into the woods, and through this pretty estuary - with stops to discuss the flora and fauna, the former fascinating me the most. Indeed, we hit both Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia at the beginning of its short flower season. Although we had not been required to pack rubber boots (as LNG mandated), I brought my X-tra Tuf's once again. MA did provide boots if you wanted them - although none of their landings were wet, some of the walks were muddy. One of the slightly hokey off-ship things MA seemed obsessed with was orchestrating long moments (like 5 minutes) of silence to appreciate nature. Although it was challenging to accomplish this with five groups of twenty running around, I have to give MA credit for trying; the number of times I was annoyed with LNG's loudness in the wild definitely made me appreciate MA's efforts. Today, said moment was attempted in the forest: in this muddy grotto beneath moss-covered cliffs dripping into a tannin-colored creek that, ten minutes downstream, was partially dammed by beaver activity (beavers having been introduced with the hopes they could be developed into a fur-based industry).



Left to Right: tundra-like area beyond beech forest, estuary area, hot chocolate and free booze stand at landing

Although it was sprinkling during the early part of the hike, the skies grew sunnier by the time we were hiking across the estuary. While our bird people were excited about the geese here, I did not attempt pictures because you needed binoculars to see them. I was, however, intrigued with this odd camp - tents, mountaineering gear, and boxes of food strewn all over. Back near the zodiac landing (specifically - the newly-erected mini-bar), we met the camp's owners: four Canadian men (all scrawny and bearded) who were on their thirty-third day out, having run out of food after crossing the Darwin icefield - all in extremely foul weather. Despite all their apparent skill, they had NOT developed any escape plan, under the mistaken

assumption they could just find fishermen to take them back to Punta Arenas. They also seemed surprised and upset we weren't going to let them board - although we did give them several boxes of food (i.e. the ones strewn about their camp) and we did call the Chilean Navy. However, not even the authorities would help them; instead, the men paid almost three thousand dollars to hire a private zodiac (I know this because we ran into one of them later). Meanwhile, we learned how generous MA was with off-ship drinks (e.g. hot chocolate and all kinds of distilled alcohol), setting up the mini-bar at every landing; by comparison, LNG only did one such set-up over twelve days. Between noon and one, we were back on board the ship and eating lunch. Afterwards, Andre asked that our group meet to discuss whether people wanted to do any optional glacier walks once we arrived in Argentina, all of which employed local outfitters and cost extra (\$150 equivalent). Indeed, another reason I picked this trip was that it provided a full day at the Perito Moreno Glacier, which Sara and I had to forego because Sara fell ill after trekking around Glacieres/Fitzroy. To my initial surprise (because I was DETERMINED to walk on the Perito), Andre seemed to be trying to steer people away from the Perito because these outfitters did not allow anyone over sixty-five on their trips. Instead, Andre felt it was better to visit the more remote Viedma Glacier, using different outfitters in El Chalten. However, to do this option you had to sacrifice an entire day (one of only three) in the Fitzroy area. Not surprisingly, I was the first to state I would be doing the Perito. In the end, three chose this option, three chose Viedma, and three chose no glacier walking. While a few people seemed frustrated by the extra-cost of these add-ons, everything was spelled out in the pre-trip literature - and Andre bent over backwards to schedule everything people wanted.



Left to Right: (top) Tucker - rock cormorant, kelp geese; (bottom) Magellanic penguins, narrow sail through Gabriel Channel

After some great naptime, I awoke shortly before we arrived at our afternoon destination: Tucker Island. Despite twenty minutes of rain and wind right before our departure, it was a good outing, especially for watching birds, most close enough to photograph: cormorants, geese, and Magellanic penguins. After setting out around six, we were back by seven - and, as was typical, I enjoyed my evening shower... which I trained PJ to do because, as she figure out: you definitely were dirtier at the end of the day. As noted in my journal, I really enjoyed tonight's appetizer (beef carpaccio) and this incredible Chilean vegetable soup. Twenty minutes after dinner, we began sailing the narrowest channel (Gabriel) of the cruise and I braved the cold and windy deck as we passed small hanging glaciers and dramatic serrated mountains. Unfortunately, sleet and hail began to blow - definitely bedtime. Tonight would have been our only time to see the elusive and legendary Mt. Sarmiento - and so she remained as such within the clouds. Because we had been warned we would be sailing some open ocean, I downed meclizine before bed; although I never succumbed to dock rock, I was awoken by big ship rolling after midnight.

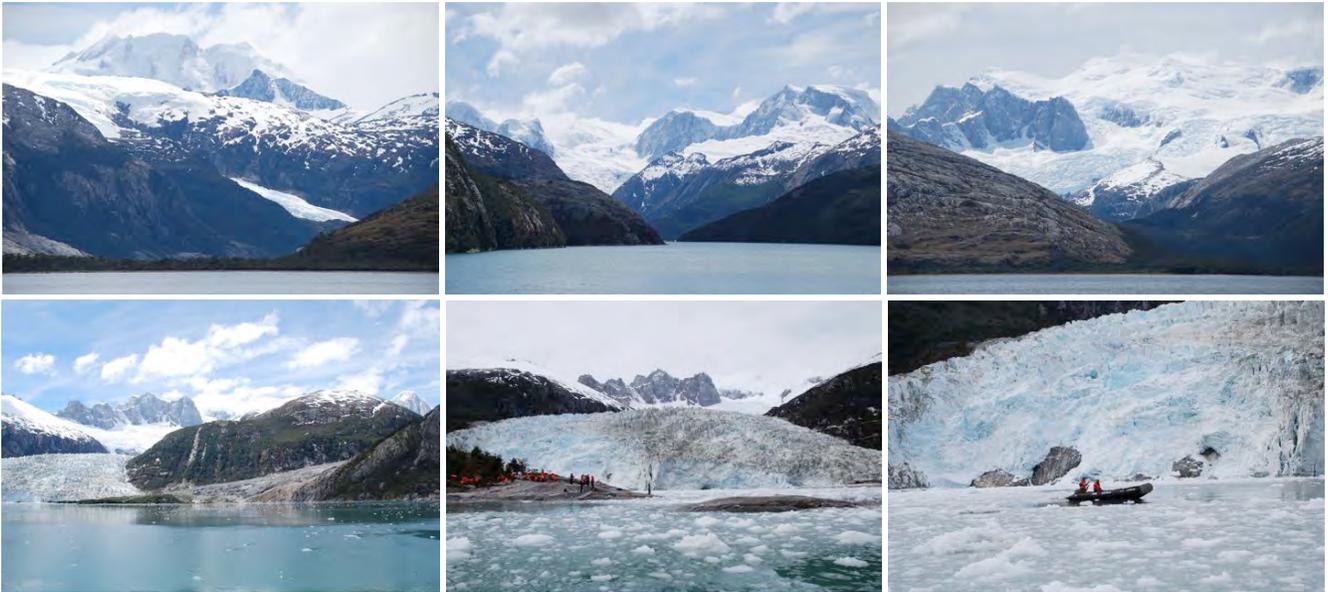


Left to Right: Beagle Channel first views, albatross, dolphin

November 24, 2008 - Southern Cordillera Darwin/Agostini National Park, Chile

Today was a mostly sailing day, covering 208 miles total - including entering the Beagle Channel mid-morning. Although there were several on-ship presentations before lunch, I was content to sip my tea on the deck or enjoy more quality naptime. In addition to extremely beautiful weather and mountain scenery, we were treated to small pods of dolphins riding waves along both sides of the ship - as well as amazing numbers of albatross... both animals in decent photographic range, even for my

camera. As with Alaska, though, all the mountains looked closer than they were... to the point that I took dozens of pictures of each over the two or three hours it took to physically approach and then pass a given peak. This was especially true of the massive Darwin massif, which began appearing just before noon but we didn't physically arrive at it until well after two. Indeed, our one big and very crowd-pleasing off-ship activity was the Pia Glacier, which flowed south off the Darwin massif. Leaving the main Beagle Channel, we navigated up the Pia Fjord - the weather and scenery reaching a stunning acme. After an hour, we anchored in Pia Fjord's easternmost arm (the main fjord splitting three ways). All around were stunning peaks that looked MUCH taller than their actual 6000-8000 feet, especially given all the massive icefields covering their flanks.



Left to Right: (top) working our way up the Pia Fjord; (bottom) Pia anchorage, views from zodiac

By around three, we were briefed about the subsequent outing - as the zodiac reconnaissance crew (visible in the bay) took their time finding (or plowing) a route through what was a LOT of small ice between the glacier face and us. But we were soon on the water-ice slurry, making our way toward the impressive glacier face. Although we never, like, climbed on the ice, we made our landing on this substantial arm of bare gneiss that was half a mile from the face. While waiting for Francisco to organize his presentation (which, yes, included another long moment of silence), we watched three major calving events. Jacques, it should be noted, was - at some point - yelled at/yanked back for venturing out closer to the ice face; indeed, the sight of seventy-plus Jacques adeptly friction-scrambling the steep gneiss formations definitely freaked out the MA crew... although it was impressive how far he stealthily managed to go.



Left to Right: (top) zodiac landing, gneiss, me, calving; (bottom) views from the upper beech forest, rope trail

Although Pia was not the most beautiful glacier I've seen (it was variably dirty, its face was irregular, and our viewing angle was weird), what made the experience special was the shockingly good weather... I mean, this IS Tierra del Fuego...right!?! After the glacier talk, we hiked fifteen minutes through beech forest - ropes strung between the trees for people to hold onto - up to this higher viewpoint. All the while, the previously sunny light was constantly changing - clouds rolling past, resulting in these huge but brief sunbursts. I stayed twenty minutes at the top, having removed two layers of clothing following the climb.

After making my way down, I enjoyed hot chocolate at the landing before a crunchy zodiac trip back to the ship. Although we were thirty minutes late, we hit the next big feature - Avenue of the Glaciers - within the hour. En route, there was also a mandatory briefing about tomorrow's planned landing at Cape Horn, the big take-home message: there were no guarantees the weather would allow us to anchor... and the landing would, if it happened, take place BEFORE breakfast (i.e. seven a.m.). Francisco's powerpoint presentation wisely included slides of bad zodiac rides, including an impressive shot of what looked like a raft in class five whitewater. Needless to say, people seemed more willing to accept whatever decision the captain made based on these provocative images. After the briefing, we began to see the first of several channel-side glaciers (the four main ones being Espana, Romanche, Roncagli, Italia, and Holanda). Sailing by the Avenue of the Glaciers lasted just under an hour - the glaciers smaller and less numerous than I was expecting. Consequently, this area was a letdown for a few people - including me. Of course, there was an upside: steak dinner and bed happened sooner.



Left to Right: highlights from the Avenue of the Glaciers... I only know for sure that Italia is the bluest one

November 25, 2008 - Cape Horn National Park and Wulaia, Chile

The next morning, I was up at six because Andre insisted the final approach to Cape Horn was worth getting up for (hmmm, not sure I felt as strongly). Given very overcast skies, I wasn't sure what the captain's decision would be - and I certainly did not predict things would (by the end of the day) grow gorgeous. But the seas seemed calm and, watching the zodiac reconnaissance crew move between the ship and the cliff-climbing stairwell, it seemed likely we would land (and we did).



Left to Right: (top) cliff-hugging stairwell, zodiac landing (note crew in water); (middle) various images while hiking to Memorial, MTS subgroup; (bottom) various perspectives on albatross Memorial, poem

Given a low tide, the crew constructed an elaborate safety walk over the slick, rocky beach - with five crewmembers in the frigid water (wearing wetsuits) steadying the zodiacs as people disembarked. Wearing our life vests, we then climbed the 160 wooden stairs built into the foliage-covered cliff (the prominent plants resembling hardy boxwood shrubs). At the top, there was a funny cabin, a helicopter, and a bunch of cargo boxes. We were advised to follow an obvious boardwalk first to the

Cape Horn Memorial (i.e. albatross statue and companion poem, installed by the Chilean Society of Cape Horn Captains in 1992) and then to the lighthouse. Of course, the statue was flooded with people when I arrived. It was also obvious that where the statue is erected does not actually represent the southernmost tip, which in fact lies across the bay - on this higher, crumbling hill. Given the craziness, I wisely head over to the lighthouse, arriving there and signing the guestbook (which a lot of people could not do because things got too crowded and they ran out of time). After buying a bag of Cape Horn rocks from the family who lives at the lighthouse (a yearlong position affiliated with the Navy), I walked up into the lighthouse and visited the little church, which prominently featured the last Pope. After backtracking to take a few people-free shots of the memorial, I decided I was feeling simultaneously hungry and sort of brain-dead exhausted.



Left to Right: visitor facility things - church, flag, lighthouse, Pope

Consequently, I was on the second zodiac back to the ship... where I ate breakfast and took a nap until eleven. I then caught up on journal writing and reading - before I met up with Gail, Larry, and Andre for a special tour of the ship kitchen (we'd all been invited but only three of us turned out). That I - having just put down Bourdain - showed up should be no surprise... not to mention with my camera. Of course, I was later told that most ships do not let the public view the kitchen - and definitely would NOT have allowed photography. As a microbiologist (which, had they known that, they probably would have not let me in at all), I can honestly say that the ship kitchen and staff were lab-worthy clean and operated in a completely organized manner. I believe it was the head chef who - with great pride - opened his oven to show off his prize turkey breasts roasting deliciously: our lunch (and, yes, it was possibly the best turkey I've ever had). All our meals also featured these tasty little rolls - and so it was great to see the dough operation... to meet the man with the industrial mixer. I was surprised it was all men in there, though; come to think of it, I don't believe I met a single female crew member on the entire ship.



Left to Right: dining room, main kitchen, the man with the dough balls, the head chef and his delicious turkey

Given the turkey lunch, I had to take another nap before our afternoon landing. At around four, we dropped anchor in Wulaia Bay under astoundingly sunny skies - and surrounded by snowy mountains that reminded me of the Olympics and Alaska. Apparently, there were many different tribes who lived in Tierra del Fuego. Wulaia represents the place where Darwin and Fitzroy (the very Christian captain of the Beagle) first had close encounters with some of these people. Later, Fitzroy tried to establish a missionary that aimed to unite and convert said natives. Ultimately, however, they didn't get along with each other or the Christians - and burnt the place to the ground. Indeed, Fitzroy (who apparently suffered from lifelong depression) committed suicide... a culmination of many things, possibly including the whole Darwin thing and his failure with the Fuegians.



Left to Right: Wulaia - snowy mountains, structures at beach, view from top of hillside hike (note red-roofed museum house)

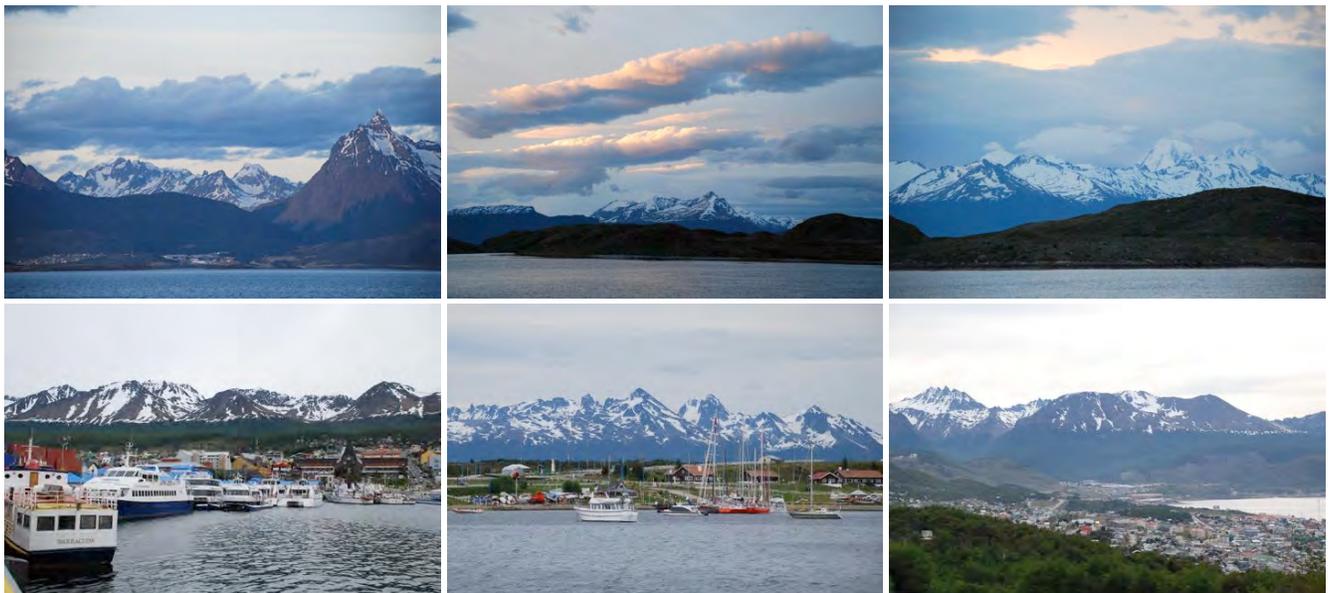
For this activity, we split into two groups: short walkers vs. hill-walkers (where everyone from our group was). The hill-walkers were first to board the zodiacs, landing onto this rickety pier that led to a grassy beach with some old structures, including a house (which I believe belonged to later European settlers - not Fitzroy). Currently, the house serves as an unmanned history

museum, with wall-sized posters showing and describing reproductions of historic pictures and a replica of a Fuegian canoe. After amassing by the museum, all the hill-walkers proceeded in a couple loosely organized sub-parties up this zigzagging trail through gorgeous evergreen beech forests - ultimately climbing to this high clearing (although it felt like someone had cut down trees to create this spot). En route, we passed a replica of a Fuegian beech teepee, crossed a pretty stream, and saw many interesting plants: HUGE groves of firebushes, edible parasitic fungi called "Indian bread" on many trees, and Magellan strawberries just coming into bloom. Just as the MA guides were gearing up for another big moment of silence, I snuck off and enjoyed a peaceful stroll back down through the stunning forest. This also allowed me to quietly enjoy the museum and (bypassing the mini-bar) return to the ship to finish packing my luggage.



Left to Right: all Wulala - (top) snowy mountains, structures at beach, view from top of hillside hike; (middle) beech forest, creek, and firebush along trail; (bottom) canoe, teepee, edible "Indian bread" and Magellan strawberry

Remarkably, we sailed around Isla Navarino and arrived at the watery border with Argentina by dinner - directly across from Ushuaia. Here, we anchored for the night so passports could be checked by Argentine customs people, one of whom showed up for the Conger eel-featuring farewell dinner. After shoveling my steak dinner, I ran back to my cabin for my camera, missing whatever champagne whoopla was on the roster because the evening light on the surrounding mountains (including the Darwin massif) was too stunning.



Left to Right: (top) Argentine border - Ushuaia (first), sunset, Darwin massif (last); (bottom) Ushuaia - harbor, lookout views

November 26, 2008 - Entering Argentina: Ushuaia to Calafate

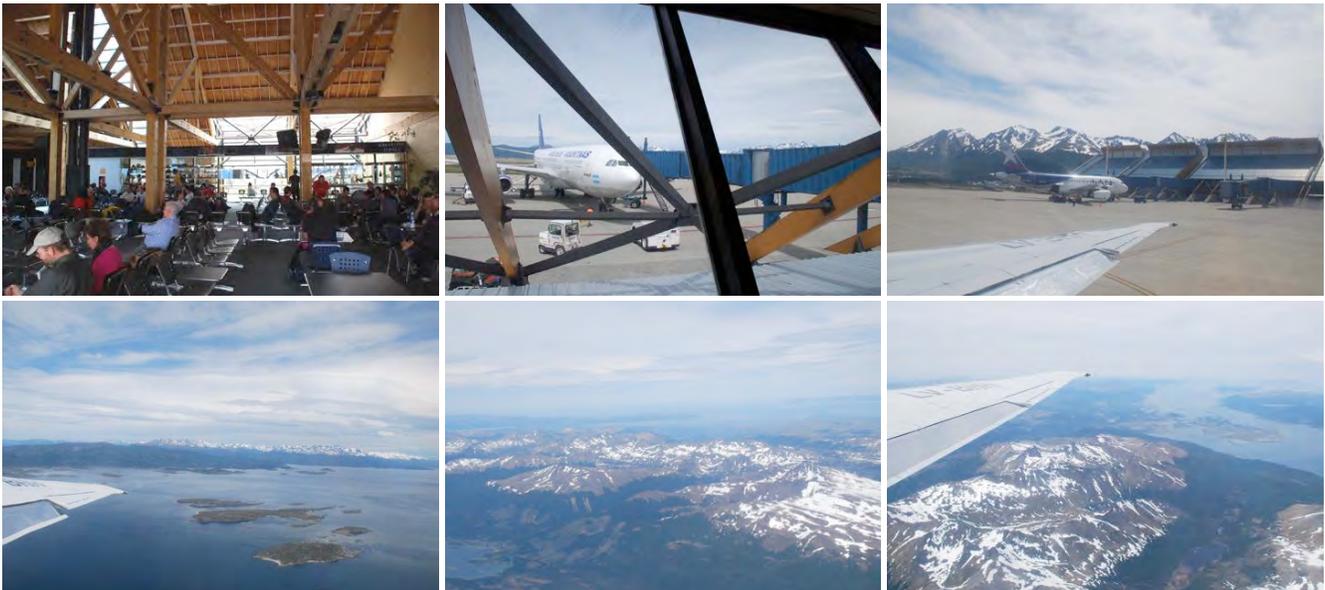
After breakfast, we were fully disembarked and through another ill-defined customs luggage checkpoint by nine. Our passports, which the ship had retained for the duration of the cruise, were returned to us - complete with some really impressive stamps (including a full-page one from Cape Horn). From this point on, it was just the nine of us plus Andre (i.e. the MTS-only group) - plus a driver and at least one local guide who helped with activity options each day. Our short time in Ushuaia was the only day that was different from the pre-trip itinerary and a little chaotic because of flight issues. Original trip

information suggested we would drive an hour out of the city to visit Tierra del Fuego National Park, including a short hike. I am not sure whether this is no longer an option on any trips or whether it was not an option for us because our only flights to Calafate were, by chance, too early. Given that Andre was told our flight was confirmed and on time (for one), we proceeded on a shorter city tour.



Left to Right: various prison-turned-museum (including cat), downtown, pink forget-me-nots to match adjacent building

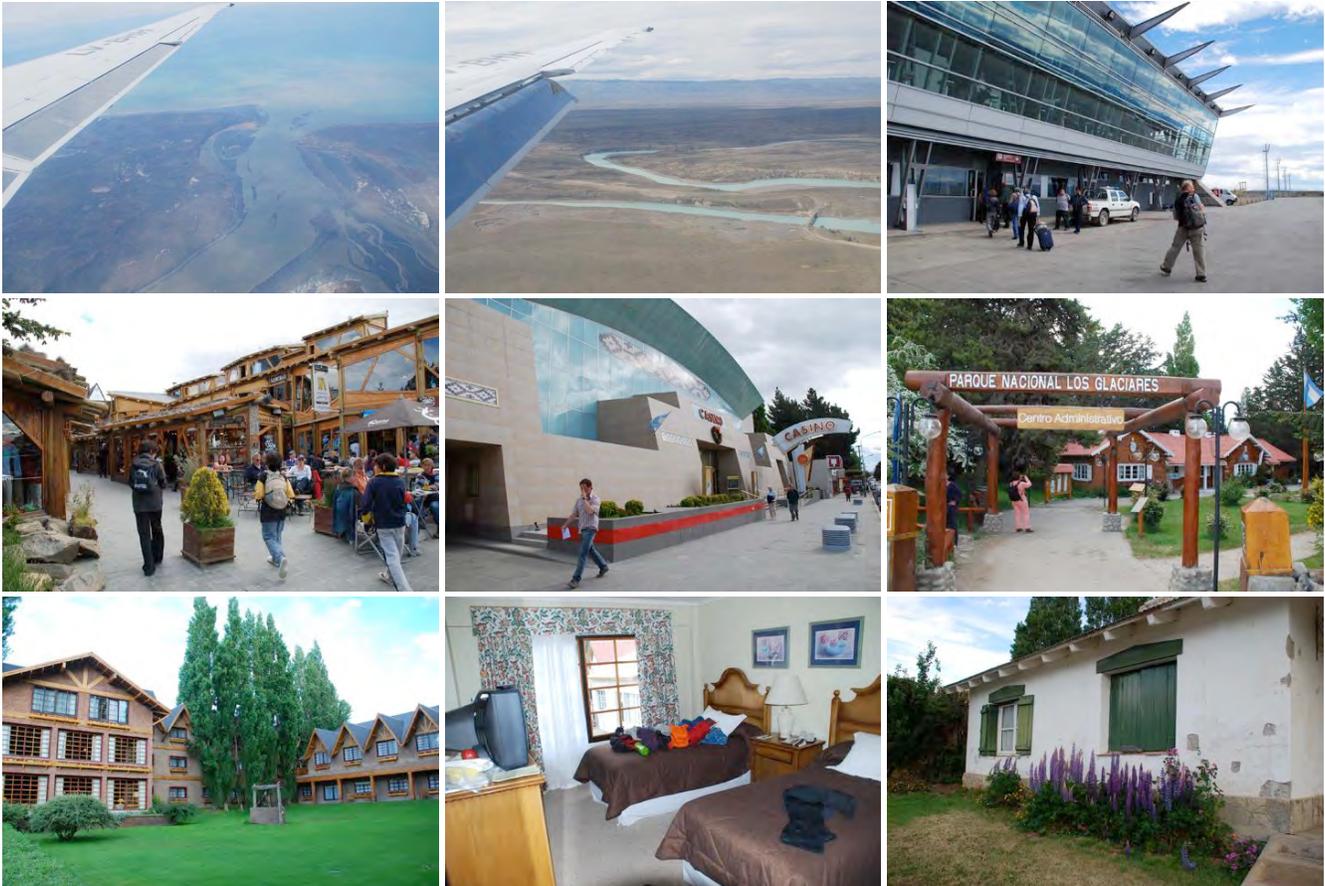
After driving up to this nondescript overlook, we made our way across town to the old-prison-turned-museum that covered art and history - maritime, general, and natural. I believe we were given an hour to roam freely about this place. Although I liked the layout (i.e. each prison cell housed mini-galleries or exhibits), some of us thought the showers (preserved in their original state) had a sort of Auschwitz feel to them... which, given Argentina's history in terms of hosting Hitler-era fugitives, was sort of eerie. I was also dismayed to see sad little displays about regional flora and fauna adjacent to expensive, corporate exhibits touting a HUGE offshore natural gas drilling project. Eventually, I made my way outside to wait for everyone else - and, remarkably, it was sunny and outright warm AGAIN. We then proceeded downtown for thirty minutes, allowing people to buy a few trinkets and try to withdraw Argentine pesos (unfortunately, several people had big problems with the ATM). Fortunately, I only dropped a small wad on a bunch of small books and Fuegian postcards.



Left to Right: (top) Ushuaia airport; (bottom) Beagle Channel, Isla Navarino's legendary Dientes mountains, Fuegian Andes of Tierra del Fuego National Park north of Ushuaia

We then made our way out to this industrial peninsula - where the very modern (but under construction) airport was. After promptly learning that our flight was now three hours delayed, we started gearing up to do the aforementioned Tierra del Fuego trip. But then Andre, who'd vanished to have some words with the manager, talked us onto an earlier flight. Indeed, some of those words pertained to something that happened to an MTS group earlier in the year: namely, several pieces of luggage (including Andre's) had been cut into during the Ushuaia to Calafate transfer - with a fair bit of expensive gear stolen, all presumably by airport baggage handlers. Although Andre had made us put locks on all our bags, he was justifiably

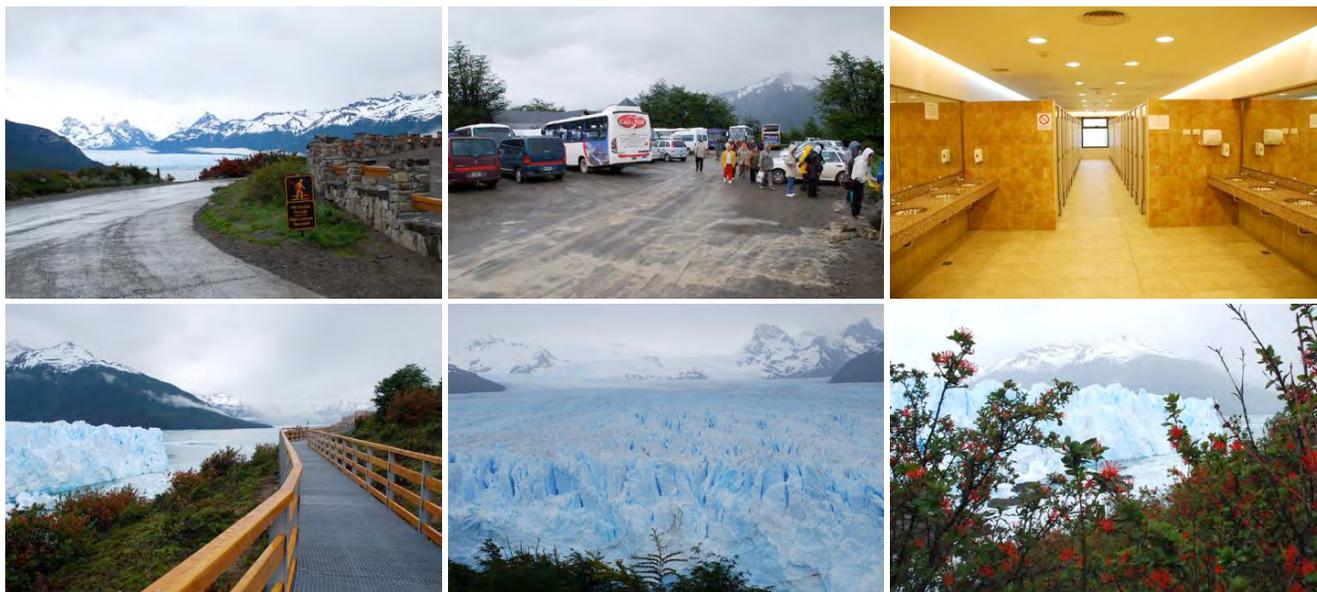
concerned about leaving our stuff at the airport for what would have been five hours... which was why he argued that we get on the soonest flight. In any event, we still waited at the airport two hours - including enjoying a snack (freshly squeezed orange juice and yogurt, in my case), to go with bag lunch sandwiches. Soon, though, we were in the air - circling up over the Beagle Channel with a great view down upon the Dientes, a mountain range on Isla Navarino that is said to offer some decent trekking. In contrast with Lonely Planet warnings, though, the Dientes looked hospitably friendly - awash in sun, at least today. We then started heading north, flying over the more intense-looking Fuegian Andes (which lie north of Ushuaia and comprise Tierra del Fuego National Park). After just under an hour, we passed over the dirty mouth of Rio Gallegos (where Sara and I flew during our trip, because there was no jet-worthy airport at Calafate at the time) before following the long road (that Sara and I rode in on by bus) to Calafate, the pampas brown but pockmarked by water-filled potholes. Eventually, the opaque-blue Santa Cruz River came into view - famous, to me, because this was the closest Darwin came to the Andes from the Argentine side... floating to near Lago Argentina, but then giving up. Indeed, MASSIVE Lago Argentina was soon visible too - the Andes (behind it) partially visible through billowy clouds. Calafate's now-ten-year-old airport lies fifteen minutes east of town. It was small, clean, modern, efficient... and all our bags emerged unscathed. Outside, we met our driver (Juan-Carlos), who would be with us for the remainder of the trip - logging nearly 1000 miles. Indeed, this really should emphasize how distant EVERYTHING is in this part of the world (howsoever close these places might look on, say, a map of South America).



Left to Right: (top) Rio Gallegos, Santa Cruz, Calafate airport; (top) Calafate - one of many maze-like boutique areas, casino that needs to be destroyed, park headquarters; (bottom) our hotel, room, old homes in adjacent neighborhood

One of my tremendous fears about this trip was that all the places Sara and I enjoyed (i.e. Calafate and Glacieres, being our favorites) would be completely overdeveloped. This fear sprung from the fact that Torres seemed already overdeveloped even when we were there, including new road improvements, and major facilities throughout the park - even European hut-style services in the backcountry. Although things - taken as a whole - weren't as bad as I thought they would be, I have NOTHING good to say about Calafate, which has - minimally, doubled in area (mostly in the form of incongruous sprawl). YUCK. YUCK. YUCK. Of course, I have no doubt it all began with the building of the airport. Had Calafate looked and felt like this when Sara and I visited, I'm not sure we would have stayed as long as we did, or returned. YUCK. YUCK. YUCK. It was sort of like Las Vegas and Banff merged, shitting out these shameful boutique-y entities (stores, restaurants... even a CASINO) right into what remain rustic and still relatively poor neighborhoods. My recollection, when Sara and I were there, was that La Tablita (our favorite restaurant - still there, but I didn't go) used to represent the eastern edge of the town. On this trip, we traveled through multiple block-equivalents before we even passed La Tablita. While the main street still exists, the trees down the center are HUGE... and what used to be basic, single-front shops (very few restaurants, hardly any good) has now turned into this insane labyrinth of mini-mall shop complexes. I will confess that, for a brief moment, it reminded me of Bend and I was almost ready to forgive Calafate... but then the GIGANTIC casino came into view: an UGLY, UGLY, UGLY beast of a building that in no way matches the Banff-y facades most places are trying to pull off. Leaving the main street, things get worse: a third of the "real" former neighborhoods (all dirt roads, one story houses, well-tended gardens of food and/or flowers, quaint little backyard farms with chickens) within the first two blocks of the main street have been fully converted to multi-story, cookie cutter hotels. Our shameful accommodations, occupying a couple city blocks that included a tree-lined golf course with spa

and conference facilities, were four blocks off the main street. Despite appearances, though, our high-amenity room looked out onto a dirt-road cul-de-sac where representative local families lived simply, where kids and skinny dogs played and screamed and kicked/chased loud pieces of garbage around until deep into the night (i.e. others were kept awake, me and my earplugs did fine). Bottom line: in STARK contrast with my last trip, Calafate was the absolute LOW POINT during this Tierra del Fuego/Patagonia leg. After settling into the room (our home for the next two nights), PJ and I headed into town - having arrived around four and been given a couple hours to enjoy some free time. My to-do list included documenting the horrors of Calafate and getting Argentine pesos, which I needed for tomorrow's Perito Moreno glacier walk; PJ, who I would not describe as an experienced hiker, had been advised to pick up a rain-resistant poncho... likely because Andre's last trip had featured fairly solid rain for thirteen out of fourteen days (par for the course in this part of the world - EVEN in summer). For many reasons, including major PMS, I was not in a good mood most of our first night in Calafate. But PJ and I persevered in terms of all our tasks. Afterwards, everyone regrouped and we dined at this exceptionally modern, shiny, expensive parilla that was smack in the middle of the boutique-iest area off the main street. When Andre found out I thought La Tablita had the best steaks in all of Argentina (Sara and my impression eleven years ago - based on both quality and value), he insisted this place was going to be better. But, to me, it was no contest: La Tablita (at least in 1997) was half the price, but the meat (the same cut, bifu de chorizo) was bigger and more tender. Although I don't regret not going to La Tablita (because I was certain, given everything in Calafate, it would disappoint me too), part of me - after this meal - did want to believe that La Tablita's service and quality still HAD be better than this place. My other disappointment was that - despite everything - I had had my eyes on this tasty-sounding dessert (wine-poached pears and calafate ice cream) but, in the end, we voted to skip dessert (due to painfully slow service). A few of us (including me) patronized one of a couple new gelato stands - Andre insisting they would have calafate ice cream... but no, there was none. Nevertheless, the raspberry-dark chocolate double scoop sufficed - even though this super-rude bunch of German tourists, like, totally cut into line and were discourteous when some of us called them on it. Although PJ and I attempted to do some trinket shopping, we remained empty-handed because nothing seemed authentic... even though Calafate seemed to be trying to exude (and/or sell) this self-proclaimed artist/artisan energy in the context of many stores and products. Despite the chocolate, I was asleep by ten thirty - earplugs drowning out both the neighborhood as well as these buff-necked ibises that squawked and gobbled in the trees.



Left to Right: Perito - (top) first viewpoint, INSANE main parking area at around noon, women's room at main visitor center (at least forty stalls); (bottom) decking and right face, main face, gorgeous ice and firebush

November 27, 2008 - Thanksgiving at the Perito Moreno Glacier

Today's activities were all about the Perito Moreno - which I discovered was a bigger and more attractive local feature than the Fitzroy region (both areas representing parts of the larger Los Glaciers National Park). As someone who is more interested in hiking and mountaineering, I always assumed that seeing Fitzroy and adjacent Cerro Torre were, like, among the great pinnacles of international mountain trekking. And that's why Sara and I emphasized them; at the time, Perito was on our secondary wish-list but, like I said, Sara fell ill and I decided - given poor weather - that I should take care of Sara and rest up myself. But apparently, most people who come to this part of Argentina are only interested in an easy, quickie: a daytrip to Perito Moreno, a two-hour drive from Calafate. Once there, you can walk the boardwalk decking, pay a small fee for a boat ride out along the ice face, or pay a big fee to do a full-on glacier walk (which, includes a boat ride, a short hike, and ninety minutes of climbing around the impressive ice). Anyway - we were on the road by eight... after a good European-style buffet featuring, in my case, spoon-standing hot chocolate. At the time, I cannot say the skies looked promising; indeed, they sort of reminded me of how the skies looked when Sara was ill. Although the bird people in our group got excited about a few sightings en route, we were on a mission: to get to the Perito before the insane crowds. Plus, those not doing the glacier walk (which included all the bird people) would be stopping for some short bird-watching along Lago Argentina's extensive marshy beaches on the way back. Although the rain generally increased the closer we got to the Perito, it actually stopped briefly at this impressive roadside viewpoint (ten minutes from the end) where we got out of the bus for a picture stop. Looking up at the mighty Perito, all I could think about was Silas (see previous Patagonia report): whether he was still renting a place in Buenos Aires, whether he was still coming down here to follow Shipton's early routes - climbing the Perito high onto the Hielo Sur (the southern icefield) in search of new summits... whether he's been in touch with Sara. Silas and I had briefly been in touch in

2004 - right before my aborted trip to Patagonia; alas, I couldn't even remember the last time I talked with Sara. We continued to the end of the line: a gravel parking lot amidst beech trees. At the time, there were less than five cars and buses and the visitor center bathrooms were empty. Walking into said facilities, though, I was struck with how massive and new they were. I then consulted with Andre about going off on my own, meeting back up at around eleven thirty - and so it was.



Left to Right: thick beech forest down to edge, north arm through beech, face butting up to land, wood's lady's slippers

Over the course of the next ninety minutes, I walked pretty much all the boardwalk decking that exists - some of which was being actively built or remodeled (and, hence, was closed). Despite the Perito's apparent popularity (evident by the time we left the main viewing area), I would not call the decking walking easy - especially for many of the older people who seemed aghast when they looked down the endless stairs. Case in point: my mother would NOT have enjoyed them, particularly in the slick rain. For the first thirty minutes, it was drizzling so much that I had to wear my raingear and protect my camera in a mini-drybag. Even so, the Perito was a very scenic glacier. As the glacier flows down into this upper channel of Lago Argentina, it butts up to the land on the other side of the channel, dividing the channel into the north vs. south arm. After a few years, this basically dams up the water, creating a lake to the south - which eventually bursts through the glacier. Evidently, this is a popular event; some people fly in from all over the world if burst conditions look promising. When we saw the Perito, the dam was in place (i.e. the glacier face was buckling up to the land, which was impressive from the bottommost decks) but the water wasn't high enough to be a threat. After becoming inundated with at least twenty busloads of people, I finally climbed back up - initially hoping to enjoy a cup of hot chocolate at the visitor center (of course, that urge vanished upon seeing the insanity). Arriving ten minutes early, I dried out and warmed up in our bus - devouring this delicious potato-corn empanada in our packed lunch bag. Soon, we all amassed, driving five minutes to this quiet pull-off where we ate lunch - the day now looking to be gorgeous. At half past noon, the non-glacier walkers were on their way to the north arm boat launch and we (John, Shona, and I) made our way to a different boat launch on the south arm.



Left to Right: (top) south arm, boat, glacier face from boat; (bottom) visible walkers from boat, disembarking, beach walk

Although the glacier walk was a major trip highpoint and the views were stunning (just getting to the glacier was mind-blowing), the whole operation and crowd experience was a little crazy, hokey, and weirdly Disney-like. Fortunately, the three of us were the first ones on the boat - followed by at least two busloads of people who dumped onto the beach five minutes later. Even though the guide:client ratio was 2:20 on the glacier, the experience of being in this HUGE throng of four parties of twenty was not satisfying... although I met some pretty cool people that afternoon, including a young Japanese tourist traveling on his own, some newlywed Americans on their honeymoon, and several solo female travelers (also from the US). Our final party was one of two English-speaking groups, with the others German and Spanish. We traveled across the south arm in three boats, requiring thirty minutes - a third of which was spent unloading or waiting to unload. After climbing this rocky hill, we were encouraged to leave all our major belongings in these rustic three-sided cabins with open shelving (needless to say, I did not - and not only because I wanted my warm clothes in case the weather got crazy bad). We then were split into groups (based first on language and then on size) and hiked ten more minutes to this big sandy beach - behind which SOARED the

totally blue face of the Perito. Our leader, easily given away by his crazy hat, then gave a ten-minute lecture about glaciology, the Perito, the ice dam thing, and the Hielo Sur. And then we were off to the crampon fitting station where I was pleased to see a couple female guides - both of whom did both fitting and glacier walk leading. One of these women fitted full-on metal Scottish style crampons (with fabric webbing laces) over my Keen boots. Keens, I can assure you, are NOT mountaineering boots; nevertheless, they were beefier than 90% of the shoes most people were wearing. And the bottom line: I felt secure in them - which was good because we were walking on really hard ice.



Left to Right: glaciology lecture on the beach, beach view, crampon station, getting my crampons

Indeed, in contrast with most other glaciers I've walked on (wearing rubber boots, mountaineering boots, and/or actual crampons), this glacier was not partly covered with snow or gravel or rocks. It was actual ice. I would describe the difficulty level of this walk as exactly what I was expecting: although it could have been harder and freakier, they didn't totally baby people. You had to walk correctly and you had to climb and descend moderately steep angles. Our front man (responsible for choosing the slightly variable route, which did involve cutting steps using an ice axe at least half a dozen times) was this leather-faced, scraggly-haired man wearing 1980's-era sunglasses (sort of like mine, actually) who looked like any number of really serious mountaineers I've met over the years. Watching him, though, seemed less awesome and more sad because - if his history was as I suspected - then being relegated to this job (i.e. leading hundreds of sad-ass tourists - most wearing tennis shoes - on this icy roller coaster equivalent) likely explained his complete lack of interest or conversation. Meanwhile, our funny-hat group leader either pulled up from the rear or scurried between the rear and middle positions to cover people on what were dicey spots where you did not want to fall.



Left to Right: all on the Perito glacier walk - note step-cutting in first shot, crazy mini-bar ice drinks (again) near the end

Although the views were astounding on the ice, I have to admit that I thought I'd take more pictures. On one level, I was too busy trying to not fall while taking in the scenery. At the same time, though, you also lost perspective in the ice - to the point that it wasn't as tempting to want to shoot. Also, the light was so-so - especially viewed through my urine-yellow-impairing sunglass lenses. While the weather was sunny and warm during the first and last thirty minutes, there was this definite section in the middle where the clouds blasted overhead and frigid winds roared down the ice. But I was never concerned it would rain (or worse). While John and I (both experienced hikers) were of the same ilk when it came to our impressions of the walk (i.e. it was not physically rigorous), Shona (not a hiker) was exhausted by the route. In my estimation, though, we only walked a mile (if that) and gained a couple hundred feet overall. Near the end, we also amassed at yet another impromptu field mini-bar (ice chipped from the glacier, served over any number of distilled liquors). While I'm sure some people think stuff like that is cool, I was not amused and only enjoyed some glacial ice water - which was refreshing and tasty. We then headed down, removing our crampons ourselves and making our way back to the boat launch. We rode back to Calafate with everyone else (i.e. courtesy of the glacier group), arriving there an hour earlier than expected. The bus soundtrack was especially odd: including "YMCA" (which the Americans did the arm movements to), off-the-wall Steve Miller, the German versions of "Ninety-nine Red Balloons" and "Rock Me Amadeus" (which I am only able to hear as Weird Al's "Eat Me I'm a Danish"), and Michael Jackson's

"Beat It" (played twice, back to back). My only major faux pas was embarrassing the aforementioned Japanese kid - who looked MAYBE nineteen; when I asked if he was in college, he was shocked - given that he was a working engineer in his mid-twenties. Arriving back in Calafate, I turned down John and Shona's dinner invitation (as we were all on our own tonight) because I HAD TO patronize the grocery store (the same one Sara and I struggled with in terms of finding backpacking food) and enjoy a light meal, preferably with yogurt and bananas to repopulate my meat-stuffed GI tract. In addition to these items, I found DELICIOUS fatty sausages, crackers, and cookies - reminiscent of Sara and my backpacking menu while the Fitzroy area. Although the grocery was bigger and more well-stocked than it was eleven years ago, my "Thanksgiving dinner" only cost ten bucks - and that included a one-dollar fabric bag (as, thankfully, Calafate has banned plastic grocery store bags).



Left to Right: (top) bus, La Leona rest/snack stop, pie; (bottom) La Leona café and fry bread, passing the mate (yes, I declined as usual... being a microbiologist)

November 28, 2008 - To El Chalten, Basecamp for the Fitzroy Area

Admittedly, Sara and I had a "first love" relationship with Fitzroy in 1997 - which was friendlier to us than Torres, particularly in terms of weather. Convinced I couldn't be so lucky twice, I tried hard to expect little from Fitzroy this time around. As in 1997, you still have to make a LONG bus-ride (just over four hours) to access El Chalten, backtracking to near the airport and then heading north so as to end-run Lago Argentina. Although the Argentines have improved major stretches of the road (i.e. paving the first and last sections), the middle is still slow-going gravel. Having since moved to Oregon, I have to say that most of the drive reminded me of our state's eastern high desert. After a couple hours, we arrived at familiar La Leona, a standard rest stop. Eleven years ago, there was one tiny room where you could order the dessert of the day (I recall only one option before: some kind of apple tart) and one bathroom (total, serving both genders) with a rather suspect toilet and no paper. Like Calafate, La Leona has grown considerably: developing a full-on café with several tables, a gift shop, extensive bathrooms with toilet paper (the women's room had eight new-looking stalls), and a museum room that featured local history and artifacts (to accompany its status as a Historic and Cultural Heritage Site). Indeed, I learned several things on this trip, none of which were publicized or obvious before: in the late 1800's, Francisco Moreno (i.e. the explorer for which said glacier is named) was attacked by a female puma (i.e. leona) near where La Leona was ultimately built, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid lodged here a month in 1905, and even Agostini patronized La Leona during his forays into the mountains (circa 1920's). Given our early start, we were - thank god - the only ones at La Leona for thirty minutes. During this time, we enjoyed various desserts (in my case, the local fry bread... although that lemon meringue was awfully tempting) - and several of our men swooned, twitterpated over the woman behind the counter. Unfortunately, our decadence was interrupted by a couple giant busloads of tourists who swamped the otherwise quiet ambiance of the middle of the pampas. Needless to say, we continued.



Left to Right: on the road (an hour from El Chalten), phlox-like flowers on side of road, Viedma lake and glacier

From La Leona, the road rounds the eastern end of Lago Viedma and then makes - more or less - a B-line to El Chalten... the often straight road looking straight into the mountains. At some point (probably an hour from the town), we pulled over to this little mound of dirt. Here - in addition to partial views of Fitzroy to the west - we enjoyed decent views south to Lago Viedma

and its prominent, same-named glacier. In a couple days, three of us (not me) would be taking a boat from near this spot to do a glacier walk on Viedma using guides in El Chalten. At the time, the weather seemed uncertain: big white puffy clouds that (based on my northwest experience) suggested good weather, but ferocious high winds that (based on my Patagonia experience) suggested anything could happen. Given that our Perito glacier walk had, not surprisingly, unleashed my period, I was a bathroom machine for the next couple of days - using EVERY opportunity to lose all the water I'd been retaining and deal with the usual things. Despite Andre's warnings that I make sure I fully understood the wind direction before dropping my pants behind this small shrub, I managed - of course - to hit one of my shoes pretty well. Oh well - nothing a little pampas grit didn't fix. Of course, I never confessed this to Andre so if he ever reads this, I know he will laugh that goofy laugh of his - and hopefully drop me an email to make some more fun of me.



Left to Right: (top) El Chalten from various places; (bottom) hotel lounge and shots of our gorgeous room.

One of the different experiences on this trip was hotel-base-camping in El Chalten. For Sara and I, who spent all our days tenting in the mountains, El Chalten seemed exceedingly small - offering maybe a dozen total hotels, restaurants, and gift shops. Although El Chalten needs to seriously watch itself in terms of overdevelopment, it was this trip's Calafate: peaceful, beautiful, homey, and still small. Nevertheless, when I compared the shots above with comparable pictures from 1997, the amount of new construction is totally scary: with half a dozen of EACH kind of facility above... plus mountaineering outfitters and a microbrewery. Having said that, our hotel was the newest monster in town: the red-roofed beast on the highest hill (and, yes, that would be the new "four-star hotel" highlighted in the 2003 Lonely Planet Guide's "Winds of Change" box... interestingly, El Chalten didn't even make the index of the 1992 Lonely Planet Sara and I used). Much as I want to feel embarrassment for staying at this beyond-extravagant place, the truth was: it was FAN-FUCKING-TASTIC and I would do it again. It was quiet, gorgeous, had some of the most comfortable beds and linen I've ever slept on, served incredible food, and every room had a jetted bathtub. Indeed, PJ and I were dumbfounded for some time while we unpacked - stunned by the magnificent view up the Valle de Vuelta, the snowcapped Andes. Andre had given us forty-five minutes to get ready - and then it was off to lunch and a three-hour hike. Although I didn't record where we had lunch, I am 99% certain it was Patagonicus, one of the oldest places in El Chalten. Famous for its desserts and chocolates, Patagonicus was a great restaurant and I would really have loved to go back there for more. They were especially good for vegetarians, offering many delicious non-meat dishes. My lunch consisted of two medium-sized empanadas (one filled with well-seasoned tofu and the other with corn and potatoes), plus a too-huge salad. I also decided to order one of their homemade carrot juices, which really hit the spot once I added sugar. Needless to say, I was highly regular for several days to come.



Left to Right: park HQ/trailhead, valley trail, red-flowered shrub, red-breasted male meadowlark

We then headed over to the park headquarters, which Sara and I had visited before. Given that it was after two, Andre and our local guide Merlin (yes, like the wizard - with us for all hikes in Fitzroy) decided we should get a move on the hike (as opposed to stopping inside first). Unfortunately, John had twisted his ankle pretty badly (actually, that happened way back at Cape Horn) and yesterday's Perito glacier walk had agitated it; consequently, he and Shona didn't join us. Anyway - the

unassuming yet very scenic trail we hiked that afternoon proceeded right from the headquarters, the route having only officially been sanctioned in the last couple of years. Zigzagging gently up the hillside, we hiked to this fork - left went to the Mirador Condores, right went to Mirador Aguilas. Heading right, we proceeded up this shallow valley that felt almost flat. Halfway up, we passed a small lake supporting a small beech oasis - the rest of the landscape looking parched and dry. Nevertheless, a number of stunning flowers were beginning to bloom, the most impressive being these red-blossomed shrubs. Jacques, Ann, David, and I hiked well in the front, although we did heed Andre's request that we stay in view. After reaching the final lookout promontory (several rock bulges that offered good views all around), we scrambled around beyond the official trail end - before re-joining the rest of the group - most of Fitzroy and half of Cerro Torre ultimately visible amidst the dynamic clouds. Although the pictures of me (and my hair) suggest big wind, I don't recall it being that bad. At some point, Merlin relayed to us that he'd heard the weather was definitely improving (which probably didn't amuse Andre, given that he didn't believe in forecasts) - although tomorrow was still up in the air. After about an hour, we started heading back - this time Jacques and I hiking way out in front. After killing some time by trying to photograph this red-breasted male meadowlark, we sat down in the final meadow before the major descent and enjoyed the view until the others caught up.



Left to Right: (top) final rocky promontory shot while scrambling, Jacques, Andre, me at final promontory; (bottom) Jacques and his view of Fitzroy and Cerro Torre - as good as each got that day

Given that we were not back at the trailhead until after five, we missed our chance to visit the headquarters. Returning to the hotel, we had an hour to clean up - before a pre-dinner meeting about tomorrow's hiking options, including celebrating John's birthday. Andre accurately portrayed tomorrow's long hike option (lead by Merlin), a traverse of the eastern Fitzroy region, between the Rio Electrico and the Poincenot basecamp trailhead in El Chalten: ten to twelve miles with 1500-2500 feet gained/lost (the variation depended on whether you hiked the steep spur trail to Lago de los Tres). Not surprisingly, John, Shona, and PJ would do the shorter option (lead by Andre): a flat, five miler to Lago Electrico from near where the long hike began. After the talk, we enjoyed my favorite meal on this whole trip (notably at the hotel) - both tasty and perfectly portioned: chutney/pate appetizer and a sage-mustard lamb osso buco (THE dish Sara and I ate when we decided to visit Patagonia in 1997). During dinner, however, Andre and Jacques managed to disarm me for different reasons. Given John's birthday, we started talking astrology and I insisted zodiac signs were amusing BS; but then Andre - with those big eyes - guessed my sign, explaining why based on his assessment of my character/personality... and was correct. Indeed, although Andre occasionally had that soulful way about him, I still maintain his answer was not based on any kind of intuition; it was because he remembered my birthday from my paperwork (perhaps because it is almost the same as his wife, also a virgo). Later, I learned that Jacques spent many years working for Gillette (yes, the company that makes shaving products). Thus, I felt the need to warn Jacques that my unshaven legs (of twenty years) would be coming out if Merlin's prediction about the weather was accurate. To my surprise, Jacques replied that he was well-aware of my legs, having noted them when I was running around Santiago in shorts... but he added - in his CLASSIC French-American accent, "but do not worry Sarah, you are not a hairy woman." Definitely not something I would have ever predicted anyone saying to me during a trip like this. And so I retired, uncertain which was weirder: Andre's knowing comments about my character or Jacques assessing my legs. But I was sure about one thing: today - like every day so far - was a gift in terms of stunning views and weather.

November 29, 2008 - Fitzroy Traverse and Lago de los Tres

When Sara and I backpacked Fitzroy, we covered the same area we would hike in nine hours over the course of four days - not only backtracking some of it (because we didn't have the luxury of a shuttle/pick-up) but also doing all kinds of additional side-trips. Nevertheless, I think it is correct to say that the Fitzroy region of Los Glacieres is small in terms of available trails (not that they should develop more trails) - and I didn't really appreciate this until today's traverse. I haven't decided whether this realization diminishes my greater "first love" status for Fitzroy or not. All I know is that I could hike Fitzroy over and over - and today was grand but also felt different than Sara and my trip in many ways. After a GREAT buffet breakfast at the hotel (which featured the best pastries I've had in awhile), we all drove together via a fairly rough dirt road - north from El Chalten, up the Valle de Vuelta. The weather looked a lot like it did during yesterday's hike: blue skies but big white clouds... but not a

lot of wind. After twenty minutes, the road curved west/right - and the views of the northern Andes were impressive, particularly with the clouds. Curving even more west, we eventually looked straight up the Rio Electrico drainage (where the shorter hikers were headed and where Sara and I stayed two nights when we visited the north face basecamp of Fitzroy, a side-trip from the camp at Piedra del Fraile). Much to my amazement, nearly all of Fitzroy was visible from near the end of the road: this stunningly tall formation given that, from our lower but more distant perspective, you saw the forest, the low hills, the higher mountains, and the GIGANTIC towers. In contrast, Sara and I - hiking a much lower route that was right up against the forest flanks - never had any sense that Fitzroy was, like, RIGHT above us.



Left to Right: along the Rio Electrico near the trailhead looking north/northwest, Fitzroy from near trailhead, setting out

After a short picture stop along the side of the road, we continued five minutes more and then turned briefly up this side-road that quickly terminated in a parking lot, which served hikers as well as Hosteria El Pilar patrons. Interestingly, said hosteria does not appear on my 1997 park map; thus, I assume it is a new facility. Likewise, neither the trailhead nor the trail we hiked to Poincenot do not appear on my 1997 map. Indeed, Sara and I hiked this section pretty much in the riverbed of Rio Blanco (which is depicted as a "low visibility" trail on the newer map... which probably explains why we lost the trail many times as we neared the Rio Electrico valley). In contrast, our morning was spent mostly in thin beech forest - often high above the river valley (hence ongoing views of Fitzroy). As Andre predicted, it took us just about two and a half hours to hike to Poincenot, which provides camping for backpackers and climbers. En route, we made a couple stops to admire Fitzroy as it emerged and re-emerged from the clouds. I was especially surprised how little time passed before we could see Piedras Blancas (lake and glacier), a side-trip Sara and I hiked (well, scrambled); sadly, too, I was surprised how much obvious glacial recession had occurred since 1997 - particularly between the upper and lower sections of Piedras Blanca's distinctly blue hanging ice face.



Left to Right: (top) first overlook, second overlook view of Piedras Blancas; (bottom) approaching Poincenot camp, actual camp - Sara and I camped where green tent is, OMG - is that an actual camp BATHROOM?!?! (mts = meters, not minutes!)

This new trail was shockingly well-maintained - even during a few marshy sections we crossed just before hitting the main plateau before Poincenot - many actual log-crossings and boardwalks. But the MOST shocking thing today - for me - was that when we arrived at the formal camping area, there were real toilets... as opposed to the extensive, stinky shit-fields Sara and I endured here (and at nearly all campsites throughout both Los Glacieres and Torres). Bypassing the backpackers camp, we crossed the Rio Blanco on a log bridge and briefly ascended to the climbers camp. Hell, there were even toilets here - and one of them, I can personally attest to, was functional (disturbingly, the other one looked like it had been torn down for firewood). Amazingly, neither campground was crowded - although it was still early in the season. Also, the excess of dayhikers met today was beyond anything Sara and I experienced... so maybe the tourists have shifted from backpackers to dayhikers, particularly given all the accommodations in El Chalten. Indeed, the sign below (describing the Lago de los Tres side-trip) is testimony to this fact. Merlin said that Lago de los Tres is, easily, the most popular dayhike in Los Glacieres - and I believe it. Lago de los Tres apparently represents the trail that allows hikers to get the most physically close to Fitzroy; it is also the first stage of Fitzroy's major climbing routes, providing access to non-north faces. I don't think Sara and I appreciated

any of these facts when we awoke on morning two to clear skies (our first after a couple fairly challenging days backpacking through fog, mist, rain, and high wind) and headed up to Lago de los Tres. Both times climbing to said lake, though, were major hauls: 1300 feet in just under a mile (one-way). My impression, though, is that the park service has changed the route somewhat; before, I remember more trees early on, more clawing up mobile, dirty talus during the last hundred vertical feet. In just the last month, the park service completed the new trail, which seems to climb this low, more open hogback and then is pretty much a giant rock stairmaster until the last hundred vertical feet. Here, the route veers more to the south - curving around the end of the last ridge (as opposed to scrambling crazily over the middle of it). Given these challenges, Ann and Gail elected to skip the brutality and wait (Merlin accurately estimating the rest of us would take two hours).



Left to Right: crossing the Rio Blanco (view north), Lago de los Tres trail and sign about damage

And so - as with some of my other memorably great trips - it was just me and the boyz: Merlin leading a hardy pace, Larry, David, Jacques, and me (usually in that order once we hit the stairmaster). Needless to say, my photographs capture an embarrassing number of hiking ass shots throughout this trip - which has not helped my reputation among colleagues, most of whom have decided I must have some power to choose these situations. Alas, I should be so lucky. But I digress: after five minutes, we were out of thick beech forest - climbing this low, subalpine hogback. Larry, who'd trained for this trip by climbing dozens of flights of stairs several times a week, remained impressively in the lead all the way up. Jacques maintained the closest uphill pace for my cardiovascular abilities; indeed, Jacques was my favorite person to do uphill sections with because his pace was the most steady, he was always excited and adorably positive about the scenery, and there wasn't this temptation to chit-chat (which easily wore me out). Even though Jacques was TOTALLY flirtatious (and definitely brought that out in me), he was thirty years older (and married) and so that kind of stuff really was all in great fun. David and I also often hiked the same pace but I felt more of a temptation to want to talk to him when we wound up together on the trail - probably because he was more quiet, shy, and mysterious (in a perhaps purposeful way). In any event, I made it up on my own terms. As we began the final haul, the views of Fitzroy were good - albeit against a whitening sky. Once we arrived at the final ridgeline, though, this big cloud began wrapping around the Fitz - obliterating the summit for the rest of the day. Even though the skies were not as clear as they were for Sara and I, I was shocked we saw what we did.



Left to Right: (top) final thirty minutes of the climb; (bottom) various shots near and at end - Lago de los Tres frozen (!)

To my complete surprise, Lago de los Tres was frozen and covered with snow - completely different than when Sara and I were here (during the equivalent of their Indian Summer). We hiked far down along the immediately crowded ridgeline above the lake, settling variously to eat our lunches. Merlin gave us an hour up there - which was generous but pleasant, particularly given that, despite clouds around the Fitz, it grew downright sunny and hot over lunchtime. During our last twenty minutes, the men trotted down to this lakeside gap where one can see Lago Sucia. I did not feel compelled to do this side-trip because it hadn't impressed me before - plus I felt the need to trade that up for future good weather karma. Larry returned first but there was some confusion because the others scrambled some lower route, bypassing the ridgeline trail. Given that Larry was more afraid of heights than me - and less experienced descending rocky terrain - Merlin held back with him. Despite Jacques' nice,

steady uphill pace, he was an animal going down everything on this trip, including this hike: leaping and running down every grade of rock (with David barely keeping up). And thus we descended, in order: Jacques, David, me... Larry and Merlin. And all the while, we passed throngs of dayhikers (plus a few climbers) on their way up - FAR MORE than when Sara and I hiked this trail in 1997. Although we'd hoped to arrive around two thirty, it was more like three by the time we all regrouped with Ann and Gail. Having fully run out of water, I borrowed Merlin's filter to pump from what was looked like a highly impacted trickle running through the meadow - all while we rested twenty minutes before deciding that it was time to get a move on it.



Left to Right: (top) heading down, views over landscape northeast and southeast; (bottom) looking down stairmaster section, Fitzroy from past Poincenot as we headed back, plateau bogs above Poincenot

Even though I knew it was a LONG (almost six miles) slog back to El Chalten, it felt much longer than even I had been expecting. This section was, after all, something Sara and I split into two days - stopping halfway down to camp at Lago Capri for our memorably fantastic alpenglow images from sunset and sunrise. By now, though, the weather was breaking down: clouds descending, the temperature dropping ten degrees, a cold wind blasting variously. Although I recall a few spitting raindrops, it never rained outright. After dropping to and crossing the Rio Blanco again, we climbed back up through the Poincenot backpacking camp (which now seemed to have more people) and then made what felt like a much longer slog across this central plateau area - crossing a number of boggy areas that were only slightly more well-maintained than when Sara and I hiked this region. The trail felt like it meandered a lot more - plus it tunneled through all these low beech areas that I don't remember before (i.e. the trail was cut into the beech-like shrubbery and it felt like you were walking through a maze - the foliage forming a narrow passageway, the walls seven or eight feet tall). Eleven years ago, there wasn't a sign for Lago Capri and thus I assumed - based on my impressions of the landscape - that we'd passed it within the first twenty minutes; in fact, Capri is now fully signed - and we hit it forty or fifty minutes after Poincenot. Much as I cherished Sara and my night at Capri, this was a spot I did not regret skipping - specifically because there was zero chance of recreating those ephemeral moments and emotions. Indeed, even though I felt it was appropriate to come back to Patagonia in search of what I felt was a very magical energy, I still accept that some places there were sacred (at least on this trip). After passing the Capri turn-off, the route did a bunch of crazy up and down shit through terrain that felt entirely unfamiliar to me. Eventually, we climbed to this shallow, sylvan pass and then the big descent (which I remembered well) formally began.



Left to Right: llamas, Valle de Vuelta, trailhead

While not as joint-stressing as Lago de los Tres, it was a LONG way down - all sidehilling a fairly steep slope, with nearly constant views over the Valle de Vuelta indicating how much farther we still had to go. At some point, we passed this llama crew; Merlin said that Los Glacieres has now banned all pack animals except llamas, which I think is great (having seen a few horse- or mule-supported groups here before). Admittedly, though, Jacques and I were both chomping at the bit to go faster - because, I can assure you, it sucks to not be able to go your own pace downhill. While I did my best to respect Merlin, Jacques totally ditched us - making up some lame excuse about nature calling and then vanishing... all the way back to the hotel. I have to say, though: this is the first time in my history of doing guided trekking that I have been among the fastest

hikers in a given group. So maybe this version of Patagonia was too easy for me (and would be as well for strong hikers)... even so, being in an intermediate level of fitness and desire, I still know this was the better trip for me at that moment in time. And besides, sometimes it is nice to feel strong... having pulled up the rear on so many hard hiking trips. Anyway - once in sight of the trailhead (an obvious yellow-roofed shack), I asked Merlin if I could plow off on my own - which I did, walking into the hotel just after five thirty. There, Andre told me the short hikers had been back since three thirty; thus, I assumed PJ would have had done whatever she needed to do in the bathroom by now (i.e. I could enjoy a soak with the bathtub jets before our pre-dinner meeting in an hour). Alas, though, PJ had just started her similar plans... having completely let time slip away. Given that I was starving, stinky, clammy, sweaty, that my pants were bloody-ing (today being my peak period day), and the ibuprofen was running thin, I will not lie: I was irritated. Apologetically, PJ shortened her soaking plans - admitting that she felt completely overwhelmed by our schedule since leaving the less active cruise. Unfortunately, I cannot say dinner improved my mood; we walked a few blocks to this place that I wasn't thrilled with. Had I JUST ordered the gigantic salad (and not the steak, which was too big and tough), I might have been happier. Fortunately, I had the personal self-awareness to excuse myself early and recharge with an actual ten-minute soak (jets on) before enjoying a great night of sleep. Nonetheless (and much as I loved PJ), I definitely wanted my personal space that night - and will keep that in mind for future trips.



Left to Right: first viewpoint (right gap is second); Jacques and my not-so-smooth legs at second viewpoint, middle section

November 30, 2008 - Cerro Torre Basecamp, Lago Torre

During last night's pre-dinner meeting, I (at the time, still irritated and hungry) remarked that I didn't think the weather would be with us for Cerro Torre; thus, I would only hike past the first highpoint if said feature was visible. At first glance, today's weirdly white skies were not promising. Thus, I figured it would be a short walk for me. Although today represented John and Shona's first long hike after resting the ankle, we lost Gail, Larry, and PJ to their Viedma glacier walk option - done with about fifteen other clients (mostly Europeans). Despite my mood, I set out. Andre and Merlin co-lead today's hike, which involved ten miles and about 1000 feet of very rolling ups and downs. Shockingly, I have now hiked this trail three times: it was the first thing Sara and I backpacked when we arrived in El Chalten (the skies never clearing that day, night, or the next morning); after completing our Fitzroy trek, Sara and I then jogged back up to Cerro Torre (having ditched our packs in El Chalten) given that it was totally clear. And now today. Not in a million years would I have predicted that I would see Cerro Torre under the same conditions... but it grew as clear and sunny as when Sara and I sat up there pondering whether we would ever see this place again. Today's Cerro Torre hike proceeded straight from the hotel, crossing a short flat section by several farmhouses and then climbing up to this higher rolling terrain - before climbing again to the first viewpoint. Given that both Cerro Torre and Fitzroy were visible, I had to suck it up, wake up (having frequently yawned - if not outright napped - during the initial climb), and keep going... but only after changing into shorts. Following suit soon thereafter were Jacques and Andre - with me insisting Jacques and I pose with our unshaven gams... plus a few "couldn't help myself" shots of Andre and those cute little calves (not that Jacques' were not just as cute). Although David never elected to don shorts, I - given few big climbs - gave in to the temptation to talk with him about family and academia for several long sections throughout the day.



Left to Right: austral parrots, Andre along Rio Fitzroy, boardwalk, final moraine

From the first viewpoint, we lost a couple hundred feet and then gained it back in a meandering manner, climbing to the second viewpoint (where Jacques and I posed). And of course, from there it was down again... this time for quite awhile, all following this long flat valley floor. En route, we finally encountered austral parrots - something Sara and I had only seen once (as we hiked up the Rio Electrico). In contrast with 1997, we passed two well-signed junctions along the flat valley section: first, the previously unofficial route to/by Lagos Madre y Hija (and Poincenot, beyond); and second, what I believe is a new trail to a "tour operators" camp (i.e. a semi-permanent camp for officially-guided groups) - which also formed a loop trail with the backpacking/climbing camp and Lago Torre trail. Anyway, we stayed left both times - eventually walking along the Rio Fitzroy for ten minutes... before crossing a swampy boardwalk section (another ten minutes) and reaching this area before the final moraine. In contrast with my last time here, there was no toilet paper dangling off the subalpine shrubs, no obvious piles of feces... it was, honestly, shocking given how tremendously bad this area was before (e.g. before, I recall carrying my trowel

in this pre-moraine area - only to dig into, you guessed it, buried human shit EVERYWHERE). Eventually, we all found our sometimes-different ways to this central rocky beach between the heaping moraine and the lake. I would say that it was about one when we all sat down - ultimately staying there ninety minutes: eating lunch and then - in most cases - napping.



Left to Right: Lago Torre - (top) me, fearless leaders; (bottom) clear skies, moraine behind lake, main moraine, parting shot

Although the skies were clear but still whitish when I put my hat over my face to catch some sleep, they were stunningly blue when I awoke an hour later. In some ways, I was a little surprised we didn't make more of an effort to hike all the way to the official moraine overlook... but, then again, I suppose I could have done this instead of nap. In any event, we did ascend the moraine a third of the way out towards said overlook - but then followed the aforementioned loop trail back by the "tour operators" camp. There, I pumped water, drank half a bottle, filled again - and then there were my ungodly number of bathroom stops (probably three before we returned to the hotel). Indeed, I dawdled well behind Andre (who, like me with students in Yellowstone, preferred to lead from the rear) most of the way back to the second overlook. Perhaps not surprisingly, my habits seemed to mildly concern Andre - who was promptly shut up by my simple explanation: "women things." After regrouping and resting under some lovely beech trees below the second overlook, we loosely continued back to the hotel. Still pulling up the rear, I was shocked when this incoming backpacker recognized Andre from WAY back at Ainsworth; he was among the Darwin icefield climbers who'd hoped to hitch a ride with the MA cruise. Other than that, we were also frequently distracted by yellow flowers that I was surprised I'd missed on the way in.



Left to Right: more lady's slippers, some kind of yellow iris, and the ever-present non-native dandelions

Arriving back at the hotel around four, I was too hot to want a good soak. PJ, who'd arrived an hour before, seemed highly animated about how hard the Viedma glacier walk was - how she was going to have a talk with Andre about the fact that it was NOT flat (as she felt he'd suggested). Nevertheless, she admitted it was an unbelievable trip and she was clearly proud of herself for having made it. Of course, I had the sense that she had been effectively short-roped to one of the four guides in charge of the group. Given that tomorrow required an early departure (i.e. breakfast at six, leaving at seven), I spent the time between my shower and dinner shopping in town (i.e. gaucho belts for my sisters and post cards) and then packing. Dinner, at a different restaurant, was FAR better (both in terms of quality and portion size). I enjoyed some kind of grapefruit-fennel salad, lamb ribs (which I ate with my bare hands), a lemon mousse for dessert... and, given that it had been downright hot much of the day, a delicious beer. To read about the rest of this trip (Torres del Paine and Easter Island), go on to the second part of this report.