



Patagonia Photo Tour (April 2024)

[Link: Patagonia Photo Tour \(April 2024\)](#)

Written by Steve Ogle

Tierra del Fuego

On the first afternoon, we met before dinner in Punta Arenas after we got word of a nice photo subject in a nearby forest. This took an hour to track down a roosting Lesser Horned Owl—a great way to get the photo tour started and to get to know each other. In the morning we were picked up by Robert our driver for the Chilean segment of the trip. It was a short drive at dawn (7:30am at this time of year!) to the ferry terminal. The two-hour crossing to Tierra del Fuego was fairly active with waves so the crew asked everyone to come inside the lounge for a lot of the journey. On the passage we saw a few Black-browed Albatross skimming the waves and snow-clad hills behind us above Punta Arenas.



Lesser Horned Owl © Steve Ogle

Once on Tierra del Fuego we drove through the former gold-rush town of Porvenir and stopped at Laguna de los Cisnes, one of only several in southern Chile with a particular cyanobacteria growing on the shoreline. After stocking up at the grocery store, we drove along the edge of Bahía Inútil (Useless Bay) to the Parque Pinguino Rey, the only known breeding site for King Penguins on the mainland. We had to face into the wind to view the 100-or-so penguins, but a well-built viewing blind helped with viewing, and steadying our lenses. After some much-anticipated penguin photos we continued to our hotel in the oil-and-gas town of Cerro Sombrero. There, the guests enjoyed their first *Pisco Sours*.



Beach formations © Steve Ogle



Pinguinio Rey © Steve Ogle

Pali Aike and Puerto Natales

The next morning we embarked on a shorter ferry ride across the northern part of the Magellanic Strait. There were only a few other people on the large boat, so we had a good position up on the deck but unfortunately there wasn't much to see. One Commerson's Dolphin made a brief appearance, showing its distinctive black-and-white coloration. On the horizon we could see the volcanic landscape of Pali Aike National Park, which would be our main destination for the day. In the meantime, we made a coffee stop and did some wetland viewing just near the ferry terminal. With our small group and just a pick-up truck we were able to navigate areas that normally we couldn't, not to mention work with individual photo styles (eg. reposition for bird shots or get out quickly for a landscape image). The conditions at Pali Aike were excellent (no wind and overcast), so we could capitalize on the stark landscapes and plentiful wildlife. The ubiquitous Guanaco proved to be our best photo subject, although we did get some distant shots of Tawny-throated Dotterels that were flocked up before migrating. A lot of the other breeding birds had already flown north, but that was expected. We had looks at the nearly-dry Laguna Ana and did a short hike in a nearby extinct volcanic crater. After this, we drove along Pampa Larga, which is an alternative to the main highway and takes about the same time, though it is less distance. We had a look for Ruddy-headed Goose but did not find any, but as a consolation we did see an obliging White-bridled Finch—a rare grassland bird found only in this part of the world. We arrived in Puerto Natales tired and ready for a great meal of fresh fish.



Guanacos © Steve Ogle



Lesser Rhea © Steve Ogle

The next day we had a full day boat trip to the Serrano Glacier, which is part of the Monte Balmaceda massif. “Cascada de Condor” provided a cool vista early on, and we saw our first condors there despite some rain. The Balmaceda Glacier spilled off the south side of the mountain and we went for a two-hour hike to the Serrano Glacier, a tumbling style of icefall. Interestingly, two user groups from Puerto Natales converged at the area at the same time—the swim club and the

kayaking club—both providing some entertainment as they plied the icy waters of Serrano Lake! On our way back we stopped at an estancia (farm) to enjoy a lunch of lamb, soup and iceberg lettuce.



Puerto Natales old wharf © Steve Ogle



Cascada de Condo © Steve Ogle



Laguna Serrano © Steve Ogle

Torres del Paine

Torres del Paine is the crown jewel in Chile's National Park system. Before leaving Puerto Natales we had some time for imagery down at the ocean-front promenade in town. Torres del Paine National Park has incredible scenery, awesome waterfalls and lakes, and pumas. This animal is the main attraction for us on this tour. We drove into the park via a back road but it started to rain so we got to the hotel in decent time, although some photos of Fire-eyed Diucon in the rain proved to be keepers. The rain stopped so we went out to the Sarmiento Road in search of pumas, but the rain kicked in again. That didn't stop us from photographing some Chilean Flamingos in one of the smaller lakes alongside the road.



Torres del Paine © Steve Ogle



Chilean Flamingos © Steve Ogle

On our first morning in the park that rain had turned to snow, which was the first time we'd encountered a wintry scene in Torres del Paine. Still, we drove to Laguna Amarga where we aimed to meet our puma guide at sunrise. While waiting, we hoped for the towers to light up but alas, they did not. But that did not stop at least a dozen other people to tromp through the vegetation and down to the lake (another one with sensitive cyanobacteria on the shoreline). Thankfully, we were

soon in search of cats and in the next few hours, Miguel our guide did his best to get us onto some puma action. Indeed, it was only 20 minutes in when we saw our first one, although it was too distant for good photos. Then another puma joined in; it turned out there was a fresh kill nearby. Shortly after, we were called over to an area where another puma just crossed the road in front of some other guides, and sure enough we were ushered into the forest to come face-to-face with a resting female. This one was named Fiera, one of the less shy cats and we photographed her through some foliage for a few minutes from no more than five metres away! This was one of those moments that nobody will forget. Our attempt at securing lunch was less successful because on the way to the restaurant we came across *yet another puma*, and we decided to eat salty crackers instead of turning down this opportunity. This one was a male and we got some decent photos as it lounged in the autumn light. Of course, later on it felt like a mistake to skip lunch but we saw Fiera again, this time with a different male, and though we positioned ourselves for a photo moment they did not head in our direction. We instead headed back with memory cards full of puma images from the day. The count was six or seven— we kind of lost track!



Puma © Steve Ogle



Puma © Steve Ogle



Sunrise at Lago Pehoe © Steve Ogle



Sunrise at Los Cuernos © Steve Ogle

Our second morning had us photographing sunrise from the hotel, which must be one of the most spectacular vantages from any hotel on the planet. Although the place is a bit antiquated, the views can't be beat! After a modest breakfast, we went to Grey Glacier on what turned out to be a windy day, and spent some time walking in the forest looking for photo subjects. We did see a distant Torrent Duck and some closer Thorn-tailed Rayaditos. One of our guests was a birder so even seeing these species from a distance was a treat. The intensity of the Patagonian elements was evident as wind-blown snow poured down from the Southern Patagonian Icecap to the Grey Glacier in dramatic fashion.

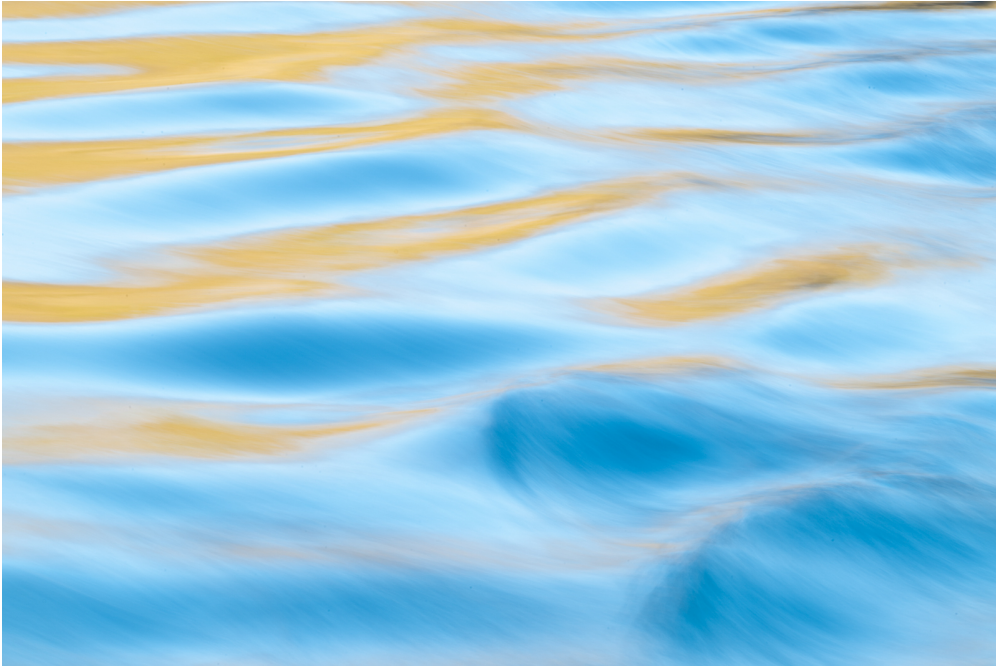


Windblown snow © Steve Ogle



Tree scene © Steve Ogle

On our last morning in the park we woke up early and took a hike to the Mirador de Los Cuernos ("The Horns lookout"). We hiked in the dark for an hour but the results seemed worth it, and the team split up to get different vantages of soft rays hitting the Cuernos and Cerro Paine Grande. Some other photographers poured in later on, and we felt good about our early arrival. After this session, the Salto Grande waterfall had poor light on it, but we still took some images. Later when we drove across the park on our way to Argentina, we stopped at the Cascada Rio Paine with better results. One other stop we made had us mingling with a herd of "wild" horses; at least they were roaming free in the national park when not being used by the hotels for riding sessions with tourists.



Salto Paine © Steve Ogle



Cascada Rio Paine © Steve Ogle



Horse scene © Steve Ogle

Crossing into Argentina

We now had a new driver, Jonathan, who took us into Argentina with a larger van and the proper documents to cross the border. We arrived to El Calafate in time to discover a planned power outage that lasted about three hours longer than planned, making it difficult to find an open restaurant and plan for the next day. We eventually settled in for a decent sleep as the lights came back on. We did find a great steak place, don't worry!

Perito Moreno Glacier and El Chaltén



Perito Moreno © Steve Ogle

This morning we commuted to the Perito Moreno Glacier, a massive flow of ice that spills into Lago Argentina inside Los Glaciares National Park. At the entrance gate we were politely told that our van did not have the proper documentation to enter, given that it was a Chilean commercial vehicle and the new Argentine president had imposed restrictions. Some sidestepping found us catching a ride there and back to the glacier, and we were able to catch the glacier in decent light (Eagle-eye bought the wine that night!). We spent a good three hours on the boardwalks and promenades—long enough for some ice chunks to break off in front of us, as the early-afternoon light warmed things up. Thankfully there were blue skies, which highlighted the colours of the glacier. We drove back to El Calafate for some shopping then onward to El Chalten, arriving just in time for an early Argentine dinner at 8pm.



Fitzroy autumn colours © Steve Ogle



Fitzroy sunrise © Steve Ogle

The next morning was a sunrise session on the shrub-steppe in front of El Chaltén, or Fitzroy. This has evolved over the years and now the area has become quite popular. On any given morning we now expect more than a few other photographers in this more-or-less uncontrolled area outside of the national park. But in a way, it is nice to mingle with some other photographers now and then and it is truly an incredible location. Other prominent peaks in the frame include Cerro Torre, Poincenet, Torre Egger and Cerro Solo. Again, we were lucky to not have clouded-over peaks as we were in an uncharacteristic weather system: warmth, blue skies and no wind. After a second breakfast at the hotel we packed up and traveled along the bumpy road toward Lago Desierto. The day's clear forecast prompted a decision to make an out-and-back hike to Lago Huemul, a gorgeous turquoise subalpine lake named after the rare deer that lives in the area. The fall colours of the *lenga* and *nirre* trees were absolutely at their best. Again, this was a popular place, despite the hiking approach, but the images were striking. We finished the evening at Orbeja Negra (Black Sheep), for more asado, or Argentine barbeque.



Laguna Huemul © Steve Ogle

On our last full day it was frosty but promising to again be clear and warm. We started at Salto El Chorillo, near town, then doubled back and started driving back to El Calafate. On the way we pulled over to photograph Fitzroy again with some *coirón* grass in the foreground. Upon arrival to El Calafate we took a walk in a regional wetland known as Laguna Nimez, then wrapped up the tour with a final dinner at La Tablita restaurant. We collectively came to the realization that the food on this tour was a highlight on par with the superlative landscapes, the dynamic wildlife and the warm people of southern Chile and Argentina. We'd like to thank the participants for joining us on this



adventure!