

Patagonia Photo Tour Report - April 2023

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Tierra del Fuego

On the first evening of the tour, seven eager participants met in Punta Arenas, a substantial city at the southern part of Chile. Guide Steve Ogle arrived just at the tail end of dinner, due to a delayed flight, however all were joined together in the morning ready a ferry ride to Tierra del Fuego. Our driver Jonathan arrived before sunrise to escort us to the terminal for the 2hr ferry crossing. Wind and ocean spray were notable on the journey—one particular wave was enough to cause a fire extinguisher to detach from the vehicle deck down below, and entertain us with a decent hosing of the deck! On the passage we saw numerous Black-browed Albatross, several Magellanic Penguins and many South American Terns. Some Peale's Dolphins were also sighted but nobody was quick enough to capture a decent photo.



Cyanobacteria

Once on Tierra del Fuego we continued through the former gold-rush town of Porvenir and stopped at a nearby alkali lake (Laguna de los Cisnes) – one of only several in southern Chile with a particular cyanobacteria growing on the shoreline. A boardwalk took us across the delicate rock-like features and we snapped some images along the way. Further along the winding road we traversed along the edge of Bahia Inutil (Useless Bay) and arrived at our 4pm appointment with some dapper penguins. The gated and well-protected Parque Pinguino Rey is the only breeding site for King

Penguins on the continent. We enjoyed the antics of around 70 penguins including a dozen or so juveniles in their downy plumage. After this we continued for an hour to our hotel.



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King Penguin

Pali Aike and Puerto Natales

The next morning we drove a further hour from the hotel to access a shorter ferry ride across the northern part of the Magellanic Straight, just beside the Atlantic coastline. A brisk Patagonian breeze continued and thus, wildlife photographs were tricky. However, we did manage to see three species of cormorant, and one Commerson's Dolphin. We continued on the mainland past a wetland containing Chilean Flamingoes and later, several Lesser Rheas, to the volcanic landscape of Pali Aike National Park. The wind would prove to be a nemesis and inside the park we found even walking around to be somewhat difficult. An uneven, rock-strewn trail was another blow to progress, but everyone ended up persevering for the 2km round-trip to the Devil's Crater. We only began to photograph interesting wildlife on our exit of the park: a large herd of gorgeous guanacos on the slopes of an ancient volcano. A lengthy drive ensued, and we ended up in Puerto Natales, a community on the Pacific—our second ocean of the day!



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Pali Aike hike



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Pali Aike guanacos

The next day we had a full day boat trip planned to the Serrano Glacier. This trip ended up being both exhilarating and rewarding, as the “breeze” continued blowing off the Southern Icecap, making it difficult to be on the outer deck of the ample vessel. For those who dared, jaw-dropping landscapes were offered along the entire voyage, and some calm moments in front of “Cascada de Condor” were welcomed, as were the condors! Fall colours lit up the steep mountainsides along the

entire voyage and the Serrano Glacier itself was an interesting foray, which involved a short hike to its toe where we could see all the details of the tumbling seracs. On our way back we stopped at an estancia (farm) to enjoy a late lunch of lamb, soup and other fare. Here we had a chance to see both Upland and Ashy-headed Geese, a Fire-eyed Diucon and a Ringed Kingfisher.



Waterfall of the Condors



Balmaceda Glacier



Serrano Glacier

Torres del Paine

This much-anticipated segment of our tour did not disappoint in the slightest. Before leaving town we had a sunrise photo opportunity on the ocean promenade in Puerto Natales, where the sun didn't really materialize but some images sprung to life regardless.



Puerto Natales dock



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Hotel Lago Grey

Torres del Paine National Park promises sweeping vistas, feature attractions and the chance of seeing pumas and other wildlife. On the day we arrived it was still windy, but the biggest problem was a vehicle issue (cooling system valve) that forced Jonathan to return to Puerto Natales to exchange ours for another van. The next morning, with a spiffy new van at our disposal, we visited Lago Pehoe and Salto Grande ("Big Waterfall") for sunrise and late morning photos. Cerro Paine Grande loomed large in most of our images. Mid-morning we encountered a roadside Austral Pygmy-Owl that photographed well. Later on, we enjoyed an early return to the hotel with enough time for an afternoon walk into a windswept *Lenga* forest. We could not coax out a Magellanic Tapaculo (but we did hear one) and we struck out on Torrent Duck.



Paine Grande



Austral Pygmy-owl



Paine Grande

Our third day in the park started with a drive across to Laguna Amarga where we photographed the actual Torres del Paine themselves, reflecting in the still waters of the alkali lake at sunrise. It was not lost on us that there was an utter lack of wind! Soon thereafter we met our dedicated puma guides who promptly led us to a guanaco kill that was visited by six different cats. These pumas (two female sisters with two young each) were the first lifetime encounters for everyone in the group, and were well appreciated. Although the views were somewhat distant, nobody complained in the slightest with the sight of half a dozen pumas (two adult sisters with two grown cubs each). A foray to Laguna Azul ("Blue Lake") was excellent, as we were able to incorporate some fall colours into a panorama that included the towers from the northeast. Birds such as Crested and Chimango Caracara, and another Pygmy-Owl were the subjects of many photos.



Laguna Azul



Puma

Meanwhile, our puma guides were scouting ahead, near where we met them in the morning. Luckily, they were communicating with other guides in the area who had three pumas in their sights, and shortly thereafter we all huddled in a strategic roadside location. We would have been happy with the morning encounter however this being a photo tour, everyone was keen on some puma pics. Nobody was prepared for what happened next: the three cats strutted one after another between

group and another one, not more than two metres away from our lenses! It was all we could do to snap one or two photos but for the most part everyone just stood in awe of the moment!

Crossing into Argentina

Today we drove across the park looking for more pumas and photo opportunities, to the Argentine border crossing. First, however, we had an appointment with a pair of Magellanic Woodpeckers that finally materialized at the hotel and provided some close-up pics. Later in the morning, we attempted to cross at the remote Cerro Castillo outpost, but soon realized that the seven kilometres of no-man's land between immigration kiosks was not conducive to switching between Chilean and Argentine vehicle providers, as planned. Neither of them had the correct papers on hand, but thankfully a relatively short wait during lunch allowed another van with the proper documents to act as a mule and get us between the border crossings. Despite this unfortunate glitch we still made it to El Calafate just as darkness fell, but tired after a day on the road. We enjoyed some pizza at a restaurant that was, of course, dedicated to Diego Maradona.

Perito Moreno Glacier and El Chaltén



Perito Moreno Glacier

This morning we had a bit of a sleep-in before our long-awaited visit to the Perito Moreno Glacier, a massive flow of ice that spills from the Southern Patagonia Icecap into Lago Argentina. On the commute we finally connected with some Black-chested Buzzard Eagles perched on a roadside tree. At the glacier, we spent a good four hours on the boardwalks and promenades overlooking the spectacle. We ended up doing a fair bit of hiking, not to mention photographing all types of ice formations. After the glacier, we had enough time to basically continue past El Calafate onward to the small town of El Chaltén. On our final approach we lucked out with a sunset photo session starring lenticular clouds lit up over Cerro Fitzroy, otherwise known as El Chaltén.



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Sunset in the grass



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El Chalten at sunset



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The next morning was the first of two sunrise sessions on the shrub-steppe in front of El Chaltén. The first was the better of the two. During the rest of the day we traveled along the road to Lago Desierto, stopping a few times along the way including at a gorgeous waterfall. This stop allowed some nice moments with another pair of Magellanic Woodpeckers. We finished both evenings in El Chaltén with excellent meals at two separate, quaint establishments. Our other day in El Chaltén was basically spent getting back to El Calafate, and when we did it hallmarked the end to the stretch of nice weather we'd been experiencing since Torres del Paine. Wild cloud formations loomed overhead but the conditions still allowed for a pleasant hour-and-a-half walkabout in a regional wetland known as Laguna Nimez. Highlights included Chilean Flamingo, Cinereous Harrier and South American Gray Fox.



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Laguna Nimez



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Laguna Nimez

Dinner on our final night was excellent and may have been accompanied by one or two bottles of fine wine. This was the perfect way to recap the trip and we all discussed what we thought were our favourite images and moments. On the next morning we departed on three separate flights from the very convenient El Calafate airport, off to our respective next destinations (Iguazu Falls, Peninsula Valdez, Santiago, Buenos Aires, home, etc!).



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