

in the land known as Patagonia

story and photos by Brian Luke Seaward

Patagonia's alchemy of cerulean waters, snowcapped peaks, and azure skies offers up nothing less than pure gold

Golden sunrise at Torres Del Paine National Park

Some people select vacation destinations by spinning a globe on its axis and placing a finger on the surface with the hope that it lands on some exotic location. I only have two criteria for my trips away from home: mountains and water. In fact, at any nexus where mountains meet water is where my heart, like Maria von Trapp's, sings.

In my travels for the treasure at the end of each rainbow, I have found the alchemy of cerulean waters, snowcapped peaks, and azure skies is nothing less than pure gold. For this reason, the region known as Patagonia in Southern Chile has beckoned me for years, perhaps decades. Patagonia, the line of clothing so abundant in Colorado's high country, only mocked my ambitions to discover this illusive territory for myself. Authentic living may begin with vicarious travel, but it should never end there. This winter (their summer) all factors came into alignment. With a newly issued passport in hand, I was on my way.

Truth be told, I had every good intention of learning Spanish before I bought my plane ticket to Santiago, Chile, but in shouldering several responsibilities prior to the trip, I failed to make time to increase my vocabulary beyond "hola" and "adios, amigo." No matter. Chileans are no strangers to the English language; given the chance, they welcome the opportunity to teach you a few words of Spanish. My flight from Santiago to Punta Arenas, the southern most city in Chile, offered me a chance to increase my

vocabulary as a young boy sitting next to me was eager to teach me his native tongue in exchange for a few American expressions.

"*Como se llama?*" he asked, repeating the phrase with several pantomimes until he made sure I understood. Once we exchanged names, we progressed to locations and food, all in about the time we flew over Chile's renowned lake region. Looking out the window, I made a note to myself that this area merited serious attention on a return trip.

Punta Arenas is considered the gateway to Chile's most prominent national park, Torres Del Paine (Towers of Blue) as well as the planet's most remote continent, Antarctica. Cristobel, my guide, greeted me at the airport, threw my bags in the trunk of his car, and proceeded to drive me to the delightful and renowned José Noguera, a mansion once owned by an 18th-century Portuguese explorer, and now the city's classiest hotel. With a smile as bright as the sun, he inquired if this was my first trip to the area.

"*Si,*" I answered, adding yet another word to my vocabulary. In all my travels, I have found that any attempt to speak the native language is the most authentic gesture of kindness you can make. Just a few words in the native tongue will open doors of hospitality that one might otherwise miss.

"If you look to your left for a moment," Cristobel noted in his flawless English, "you will see the island of Tierra del Fuego, what many consider to be the bottom

of the continent. The word *fuego* means fire, but there are no active volcanoes on this island. The first explorer, Ferdinand Magellan, spotted campfires along the shore before he landed, giving it its name."

"Where does the name 'Patagonia' come from?" I inquired.

"Before the first Spanish explorers ever saw the natives of Tierra del Fuego, they saw their footprints on the beach. Very large footprints. 'Patagonia' is a derivation from the expression 'Big Feet.' I guess it stuck."

As the car pulled up to the hotel, Cristobal reminded me that my ride to the national park would arrive at 8:00 the next morning.

"If you are not too tired from your flight now, you might consider visiting the Otway Sound Penguin Colony. It's about an hour's drive from here, but well worth the trip. I can arrange the whole thing, if you'd like."

Sure enough, he did. Within an hour's time I was walking along a boardwalk parallel to the Straights of Magellan in the company of hundreds of happy penguins protecting their nests from the elements, in this case, harsh winds often topping 100 miles per hour on any given day.



March of the Penguins and *Happy Feet* have made this bird a poster child for global warming, something Chileans are acutely aware of. I learned that, outside of Greenland and the continent of Antarctica, Chile contains the world's third greatest supply of freshwater, neatly tucked away in countless glaciers of the Andes. Yet these glaciers are melting at a rapid rate. On more than one occasion I was reminded to apply sun block, as the hole in the ozone is at its strongest over the bottom of the world.

Back at the Hotel José Nogueira in time for dinner, I decided to explore the heart of Punta Arenas and came across several fine eating establishments including Restaurant Brocolino, La Luna, O'Sole Mio, and my favorite, Sabore, all with tempting menus. Authentic living includes authentic eating, and Chilean cuisine is renowned for its fresh fish, not to be outdone by lamb

and free-range beef.

The summer sun sets late in Punta Arenas. I had hoped to catch a glimpse of the Southern Hemisphere's most recognizable constellation, the Southern Cross, that first night, but the sandman knows both hemispheres equally well; I was fast asleep before the cross came over the horizon. A phone call the next morning awakened me to a new day in the Southern Hemisphere.

On to the Explora

Before you ever set foot in the **Explora Hotel**, located in the most picturesque spot of Torres del Paine National Park, you are greeted by one of their staff members who has driven more than half a day to pick you up. In one of the most coordinated efforts planned by any hotel on the planet, guests are retrieved from their respective locations in Punta Arenas as well as other locations in a 300-mile radius and driven six hours by van (with a stop for lunch) to one of the most pristine places on the planet. Lively conversations among passengers only whetted my appetite for travel as we shared stories of our collective worldly sojourns.

Members in my van had just returned from a cruise to Antarctica and I was all ears.

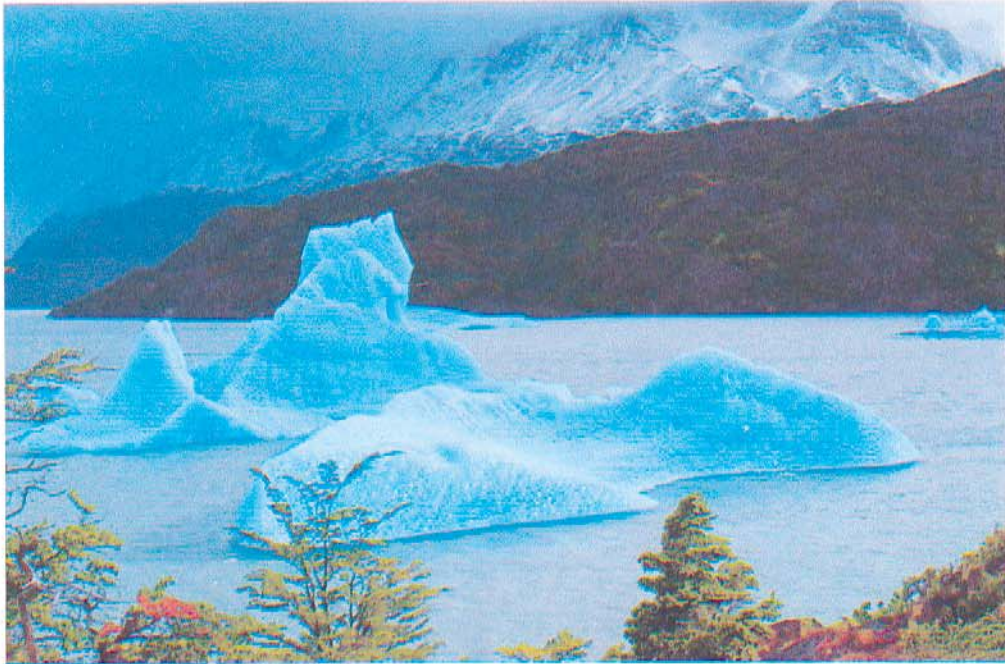
Once outside the city limits of Punta Arenas you cannot help but be reminded that you have entered a different world, one with an ensemble of fauna unlike anywhere else on the planet: flamingos, condors, llamas (called guanacos), rheas (an ostrich-like bird), deer, pumas (we didn't see any, but rest assured, they are there), and birds of prey including hawks, owls, falcons, and eagles – species that can only be found in the land known as Patagonia.

Raindrops welcomed us into the park, but mountain weather can change in a moment. By the time we reached the Explora Hotel, blue skies were punctuated with white, billowy clouds. Rosario, the general manager of the hotel, greeted us by name in the lobby. Within minutes we were shown our respective rooms, each with a stunning view of turquoise waters at the base of a mountain range known as the Torres del Paine Massif.

While not overly impressive on the outside (the structure knows better than to compete with the landscape), inside, the Explora Hotel is nothing less than pure elegance. Wood floors, plush sofas, and fireplaces establish the ambiance; large glass windows facing north beg you to look outside as if to remind you of the reason you are there. The spectacular mountain range, the Massif (with horns) was formed well after the Andes, of which it is a part, by the violent collision of two tectonic plates, projecting massive granite and burnt lava rock thousands of feet into the air.

The hotel staff (which outnumbered the guests) wastes no time in getting everyone acclimated to the surroundings. In what seemed like minutes of arrival,

guests broke into groups of four to six and migrated in various directions on well-coordinated hikes led by seasoned guides. My group's guide revealed to us a blueberry bush that promises to all who eat its fruit that they will return one day to Patagonia. She handed me a blueberry and smiled. I placed it on my tongue, savoring its sweet taste and power of suggestion. If the blueberries didn't work its magic, the



Blue icebergs from the Grey Glacier in Torres Del Paine National Park

hot stone massage in the resort's spa cast a similar spell.

Before dinner the first night, the events coordinator, Paul, delighted hotel guests with a PowerPoint orientation session of the park and hotel, mixing one part information with two parts humor in what had to be the staff's most unforgettable Chilean/English accent.

While hotel guests can certainly sit all day in the lounge and gawk at the view, the best way to see the park is to hike or ride horseback through it. (Horseback riding in the company of gauchos includes a barbecue not to be missed.) And hike we did, to the mouths of the Grey glacier, the French Valley, the base of the monolithic towers themselves, gushing waterfalls, or to the breathtaking turquoise lakes that bespeckle the entire park. Guests are booked for multiples of four days, with most guests returning to Punta Arenas or other points of interest on the fifth day. The ride back to Punta Arenas was a quiet one as each tourist, spellbound by the land's beauty, reflected on one of his or her most memorable life experiences.

"Hasta la proxima, Patagonia." Until the next time. In a land unspoiled by urban sprawl and capitalism, I realized that Patagonia is one of the best-kept travel secrets in the tourism industry. I trust you can also keep this secret? AL

Hotels:

Punta Arenas: www.hotelnogueira.com
Torres Del Paine National Park: www.explora.com/patagonia_theplace.php
www.chile-hotels.com/explora.htm

To Get There:

Delta Airlines leaves Atlanta. American Airlines leaves Miami and Dallas.

Brian Luke Seaward is an avid world traveler and award-winning photographer. He is the author of the best-selling books *Stand Like Mountain*, *Flow Like Water*; *The Art of Calm*; and *Stressed Is Desserts Spelled Backward*. When not traveling the world, he resides in Boulder, Colorado. He can be reached at www.brianlukeseaward.net

