

Across Southern Patagonia

On horseback through the Torres de Paine National Park

8. – 20. 2. 2009

Travelogue by Hartmut Porzig





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For a long time I had admired the wild and heroic landscape of southern Patagonia merely on calendars or on pictures offered by my 'webshot' screensaver. It seemed terribly far away (which is true) and appeared to possess a rather hostile climate (which is not exactly true). While planning to travel on horseback in South America I discovered that almost each and every one of the specialized travel agencies offered trail rides during Southern Patagonian summer when Central Europeans are well prepared for taking a chance to escape their more or less unpleasant winter. All of these trails seem to be organized by the same local agency (<http://www.bluegreenadventures.com/default.html>). In principle, therefore, no matter where you book you will always end up with bluegreen. In spite of this I was surprised to discover that the prices, nevertheless, could differ by almost 20%. Hence, it makes sense to compare the various offers. I decided to go with 'In the Saddle', a British agency which also offered a trail across the Andes from Argentina to Chile in northern Patagonia that could be readily combined with the Torres de Paine adventure. This turned out to be the perfect choice. The people at 'In the Saddle' were very helpful and provided the most thorough documentation I ever received for any of my trails.

Organizing the necessary flights proved slightly more complicated because all flights within Chile go through Santiago while all flights within Argentina go through Buenos Aires. Hence, after the Torres de Paine Glacier Ride, rather than taking a short connection from Santiago, I had to cross South America twice in order to reach my second trail base in Northern Patagonia at the border to Chile via Buenos Aires. Therefore, if travelling in South America by plane try to align your destinations such that they can be reached sequentially without crisscrossing the continent with exceedingly expensive local air lines!

The airport in Zurich was snow-covered when I started on the 8th of February 2009. Nevertheless I reached Madrid well in time to catch the flight for Santiago at 1h am. In spite of the late (or early) hour, a full dinner was served that certainly facilitated sleeping on the long way to Chile. We reached Santiago ahead of schedule and coming from cold and snowy Europe were suddenly exposed to a bright and warm summer morning. Chilean entry procedures were very strict, such that even people like me on transfer for another domestic flight had to pick up their luggage and escort it in person through a very careful customs inspection. In particular any non-processed food will be confiscated. Even a package of Corn Flakes gave rise to a lengthy discussion between the customs official and the woman in front of me. Fortunately for people from Switzerland, chocolate is allowed in. After this control one has to pass through the check-in controls of the domestic airline. All this takes quite some time. Hence, it makes no sense to plan for tight connections in Santiago!

In any case, in the early afternoon my plane started for Punta Arenas the southernmost town on the Chilean mainland. The flight offered spectacular views since the Pacific Coast and the Chain of the Andes accompanied us for more than 2000 km. After a stopover in Puerto Montt it was early evening when the plane reached Punta Arenas. Here little was left from the summer in Santiago. The weather felt like a cool April with wind and rain showers. With the information that nobody would pick me up, but with the address of the 'Hostal Terra Sur' and a list of the usual Taxi fares, I mounted a Taxi that already had two other passengers. I thought this a clever move to profit from a reduced fare. Yet when we arrived at the hostel, the driver, although very nice and talkative did not hesitate to charge me a sum that was on the upper limit of my list of fares for individual transportation.

The hostel did not look very impressive from the outside but turned out to be quite spacious and comfortable inside. It was managed by an elderly lady with some borderline knowledge of English. I shared my room with Jean-Claude, a Frenchman and former officer of the French air force, living near Paris, who had arrived earlier. I barely had time to wash my

hands prior to meeting Jorge our guide and the other guests for a first briefing. Jorge looked like a real outdoorsman with a good knowledge of English. There were three other travel companions in addition to Jean-Claude, Rachel, a library expert from France and two young ladies from England, Dru and Wendy, who were travelling together through Patagonia already for some time. Back home they worked for a company assessing environmental impact of construction projects and the like. After quite some discussion it was decided to start the next day at 9h for Puerto Natales where we would meet our cook together with additional equipment and then to proceed to Laguna Verde where our horses were waiting. For dinner Jorge recommended an 'asado' restaurant where they prepared all kinds of the typical grilled meat. The prices were moderate but tended to add up because every single potato was charged separately.



Main avenue in
Punta Arenas

As a town Punta Arenas with its checkerboard street pattern is not very impressive. What is remarkable, however, that they have an alley and a central place with beautiful and huge old trees which I did not expect in such a windy and cool place. The Town centre is adorned with a rich choice of monuments for all kinds of events and personalities. One for example honours the Croatian immigrants that for some reason did not find a better place than southernmost Patagonia for their settlement in Latin America. Quite a number of monuments or memorial plates were devoted to the memory of the former native Indian population that succumbed to the onslaught of white immigrants. To me it seemed a rather sublime way of stating that only 'dead Indians are good Indians'. The town also had a curious system for their trash bins. Along the sidewalks garbage was collected into baskets fixed on top of steel columns. Only after we got aware of the numerous feral dogs did we understand the reason for the use of these strange collecting devices.

At 9 am the next morning we mounted a car that should bring us to Puerto Natales, a small town where all the trekking tours through the Torres de Paine National Park usually start. Initially we drove for several hours across a rather flat, tundra-like landscape with occasional groups of low trees or shrubs all decorated with long hanging lichens. In addition to some cattle or sheep we also met a few nandus (a kind of small austrich-like flightless birds) and guanacos. Around midday time we arrived in Puerto Natales where we were picked up by our support car complete with camping equipment, driver and cook (who carried a guitar rather

than cooking pots and sported a beautiful Rasta hairstyle). After a further 2 hours driving we reached the first mountains.



Signpost on the way to Puerto Natales



The pampas of southern Patagonia. The dark spots in the background are cattle.

The land looked beautifully wild and empty except for a few red-roofed haciendas on idyllic places. Finally we reached a hotel-hacienda, right at the entrance of the Paines National Park. We pitched our tents among some wind-beaten trees in the high grass close to the shore of Laguna Verde with a romantic view over the lake and into the wooded mountains. If the sun made one of her rare visits the waters of the lake indeed shone green. The weather changed permanently between clouds, rain and sunshine the only persistent feature being the wind. The cook settled in an old wooden hut a few minutes walk from the tents and prepared a

perfect first dinner. The temperature rapidly dropped in the evening and I was glad to have carried my down sleeping bag all the way from home to the end of the world.



Our camp site at
Laguna Verde

After a stormy and rainy night, a (brief) morning wash in the ice-cold Laguna Verde and a rich breakfast, we met with Victor our head baqueano (Chilean gaucho) guide and the horses. The criollos were relatively small but sturdy and friendly.



View from the
Sierra del Toro
onto Laguna
Verde
(foreground) and
Lago Sarmiento
(background)

They carried us sure footedly through a stunning landscape and old southern beech woods to the top of a neighbouring mountain in the Sierra del Toro. There we had a wide view into the wild country where the free running winding rivers Rio Grey and Rio Serrano, part of the Lago del Toro and the various smaller lakes and marshes did not show any obvious sign of human interference. Only the mountain tips remained shrouded in clouds.



Our two guides Jorge (right) and Victor (left) on the Sierra del Toro

The Torres de Paine could hardly be guessed at behind the wind-driven fogs. The way back lead again through primeval forest with gnarled southern beech trees (both dead and alive) interspersed with a kind of alpine pastures covered with cushions of low growing thorny bushes. Shortly after our return the usual brief showers of rain changed into continuous strong rain which became even more impressive with the accompanying gusty winds. To avoid freezing we gladly spent what remained from the afternoon in the small restaurant that belonged to the hotel-hacienda. Fortunately the camping equipment was more or less adequate such that we remained essentially dry, even though wind and rain continued during the whole night. In short, Patagonia did not receive us very well but our group passed this first test marvellously. Everybody kept his or her good humour nobody complained and the cook tried his best to keep our spirits up.



Resting on the way to Rio Grey

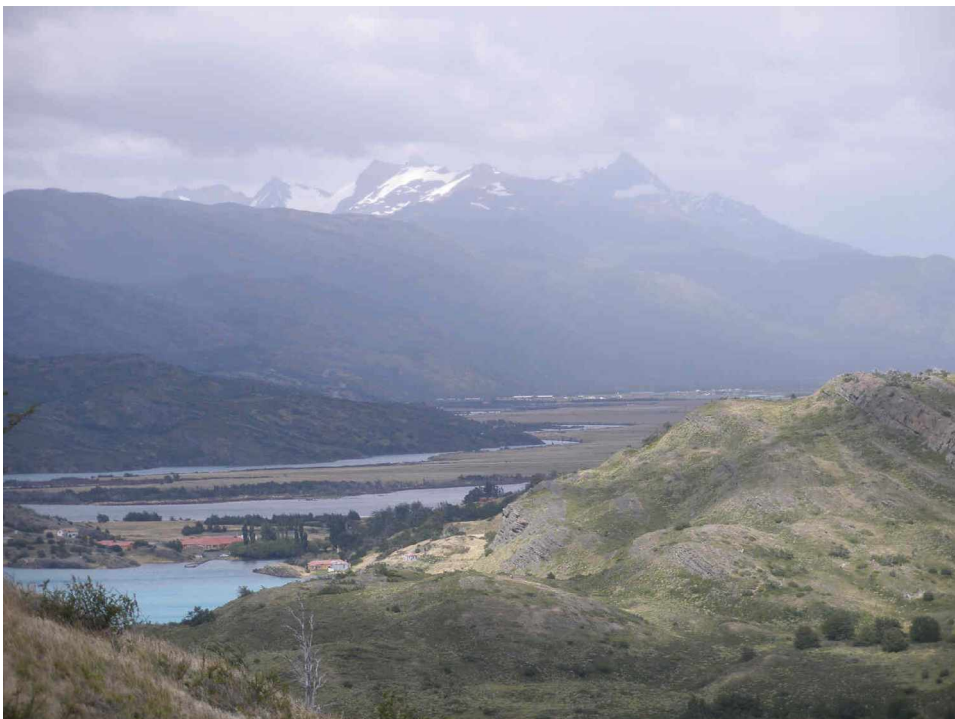
The next morning the rain had not yet stopped and we mounted completely wet horses for a nice and varied ride on a narrow path up a valley with small lakes and Southern Beech woods.

I was surprised that the cool and windy climate nevertheless favoured the growth of these trees. Many of them seemed quite old even though they did not reach great height. They possessed short thick stems and branched out early, thus appearing stout and voluminous. While we were moving the sun managed to come out a little and when we reached a lookout point on the ridge at the end of the valley, we had a marvellous view into a broad valley with the Rio Paine, Rio Grey and the road leading to the Park administration buildings. We had to descend into this valley via a very steep and slippery path covered with a deep layer of loose fine gravel. The horses mastered these difficulties quietly and without any problems. I suspected that they were much less concerned than their riders.



At the end of a steep path down to the park information centre

Down in the valley we reached the small house of a baqueano where we had a lunch break in a wonderfully warm room while our support team was busy to fix a flat tyre on the car carrying our luggage.



View onto the Posada Rio Serrano with the visitor's centre

In the visitors centre a number of presentation boards and texts displayed information concerning flora and fauna of the national park such as the description of the eating habits of the puma. Yet, the puma on these diagrams was the only one we ever saw.



On the way to the Rio Gray camp site with cloudy Torres in the background and Dru and Rachel in the foreground

Back on the horses we crossed a huge grass-covered plain that extended along the shore of the Rio Grey with ample space for trotting and cantering. At the end of the plain and behind a small rocky ridge we arrived at an idyllic camping site where we pitched our tents among old dead trees and living shrubs close to the river bank. Although the site sported a beautifully carved welcome sign, its facilities only consisted of a small shed that provided our cook with a dry working space and an extremely dirty toilet.



Our tents on the bank of Rio Grey

However, the ice-cold and fast-running Rio Grey offered a rather romantic washing place. While we were busy arranging everything, the sun came out and rapidly created something like summer temperatures transiently transforming Patagonia into a traveller's paradise. During the late afternoon more and more backpackers arrived such that the table in the cooking shed got quite crowded at dinner time when the usual evening rain started again.



View up Rio Grey

After another night with permanent rain and storm the weather calmed somewhat down in the morning. The horses had spent their night at a hacienda in the neighbourhood of the park visitor centre and arrived only at half past 10 to carry us to Lago Grey, a tourist highlight and the source of Rio Grey. Basically, the Lake Grey is the Chilean analogue of the Lago Argentina on the Argentinean side of the border. Both are glacier lakes fed by huge Patagonian glaciers.



Lago Grey with Icebergs

We first rode back through the pampas to cross the Rio Grey via the road bridge close to the park administration and went up the river along its opposite bank through partially rocky partially marshy terrain with many occasions for lively cantering. Around midday time we reached the fancy and rather expensive hotel (Hostal Lago Grey, 300 \$/night in a single room) at the south end of the lake. The people of the hotel also run a boat service to carry tourists along the whole length of the lake up to the enormous glaciers that feed it at its northern end. Since the water in southernmost part of the lake is too shallow to allow navigating with a big boat, we had first to take a short bus ride followed by a march of 20 min until we arrived at the landing site. A strong wind was blowing agitating the turbid green waters of the lake and shifting the small bluish icebergs southward that had calved from the glacier. The boat had not yet returned from its previous course and we had to wait quite some time. Moreover the boat could only be reached with a motorized dinghy that had to oscillate several times first to unload the 60 people from the earlier cruise and than to carry another 60 people onboard. It was already close to 4 pm when we finally started.



Getting close to the glacier that feeds into Lago Grey



In front of the Glacier

The boat ride to the glacier at the north end covers almost 15 km in the middle of a really breathtaking landscape. The east and west shores of the lake are both formed by steep mountains faces. The Torres de Paine massif to the east remained shrouded in clouds. However, when we approached the glacier at the north end the sun came out and changed the colour of the ice into a brilliant deep blue that was reflected in the sparkling green waves of the lake. Right when we reached the terminal ice wall that dwarfed our ship, a 'pisco sour' the national drink of Chile was served to celebrate the occasion.

We did not return before 7 o'clock pm and I wondered how we would manage to return in the dark. The problem was solved by cantering almost the whole distance back to the campsite. We needed less than an hour for the return while in the morning we had spent close to three hours to reach the lake. By the end of this tour de force our brave horses were soaked with sweat but they did not seem completely exhausted.



Our brave cook preparing meals at the Rio Grey camp site

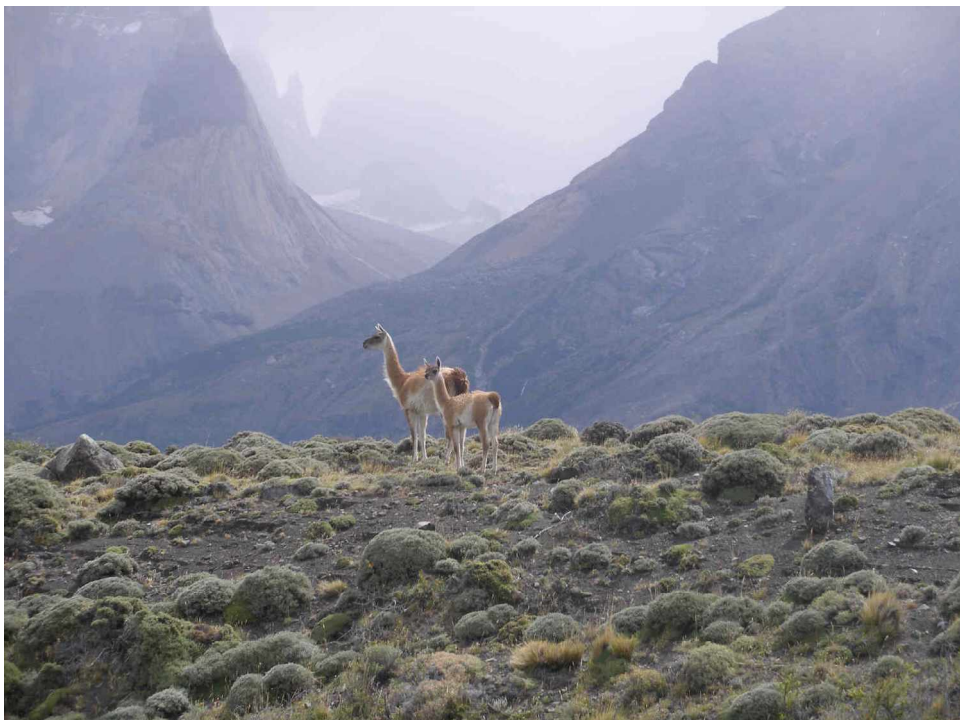
After another night with massive rain but fortunately with less wind than usual, the Rio Grey had swollen appreciably but did not yet reach our tents. But since the water from the wet ground had started to penetrate through the bottom of our tent, we were happy to pack everything together and to leave. This was not as easy as it sounds because the camping site could not be reached by the support car. Therefore we first carried all our luggage and equipment for more than a km over a rocky path to load it on the waiting car. After a short drive we then met the horses and baqueanos at the estancia, a support base of Bluegreen Adventures, where they had been sheltered overnight. We also met two new members of our party, Mary-Ann and Al, a young English couple both experienced in many sports except for horse riding. Yet, they were quite tough and did not complain in spite of the fact that they probably suffered during the long rides in the next couple of days.

We rode in a wide arch around the south face of the Torres through a varied landscape on a small path over steep hills, across lovely valleys and along the shore of the Lago Sarmiento named after Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa a 16th century Spanish explorer. He lived for more than 20 years in Peru excelling not only as a navigator and soldier but also as a historian, astronomer and scientist.



A small lake and
the Torres on the
way to Lago
Sarmiento

There was quite some excitement when we first met some guanacos with their calves that posed picturesquely on rocks against the background of the Torres. However the further we penetrated into the park the more numerous became the guanacos until we barely cared to take further photographs. In addition we spotted a southern fox, some hares and even condors far above in the skies. Although the tops of the Torres remained mostly in the clouds, this granite massif that rises to almost 3000 m out of a plain not more than 300 m above sea level provides a stunning view in whatever disguise it presents itself. Under more stable weather conditions it would be a rock climber's paradise. I knew of some people from Switzerland who spent three weeks in this area, actually their entire holidays, without ever succeeding in finding the required slot of three days in a row without rain and storm.



Guanacos in
fitting landscape

Victor our guide rode a very nice dun horse which developed quite some pace even while walking such that most of us could follow only by keeping our animals in a constant short trot. That helped me not to freeze in the permanent gusty winds that tried to blow us off the horses. After almost eight hours in the saddle we finally arrived at the Lago Azul with a beautifully situated and comfortable camping site that even provided hot showers for the first time in 5 days! On a hill above the lake with an incredible view over the water and into the distant Torres we had a well equipped pavilion at our disposal where the meals were served and a nice fireplace gave off some welcome heat. As a special treat after our long ride we were offered an incredible sunset behind the cloud-free Torres. It was the first visible sunset after many days with rain starting usually close to 6 pm.



Evening view
over Lago Azul
into the Torres
massif

It was in vain that we hoped for a clear morning after this beautiful evening view. During the night the rain returned, but this time without the wind. Since we would stay another night at this lovely place, we did not care too much. The horses would have half a day off and only in the afternoon we would mount for a visit to a waterfall of the Rio Paine.



On the way to Rio Paine
cascades

At about half past 12 we started with wet but not unwilling horses in a westerly direction along the length of the Laguna Azul through hilly landscape covered with grass, small cushion-like thorny shrubs and many groups of dead or burned trees. Four years ago, in 2005, a huge wildfire had destroyed 160 km² of the woods in this south-western corner of the Paines National Park. It had been initiated due to the thoughtlessness of a Czech backpacker who started a cooking fire in his gas stove that could not be contained due to strong winds and the easy combustibility of the dry pampas grass. Fortunately he had the guts to present himself to the authorities. Hence the origin of this catastrophe is well documented. Some of the trees sprout new leaves out of their roots but in this climate it will take many years until perhaps a fraction of the original vegetation recovers. Additionally some replanting has started, actually with the support of the Czech Republic.



Cascada Rio Paine

Many guanacos crossed our path or better, looked down on us from elevated spots and if there were no guanacos we could at least observe their characteristic resting places. To lie down they use to create flat hollows free of vegetation while the individual members of the flock all deposit their droppings on the same central place in the resting area. After about two hours we arrived at the ‘Cascada Rio Paine’ an impressive but not very high waterfall. Close to this place was a parking lot where quite a number of passing tourist cars stopped to look for maximally three minutes onto the cascade and left again. Anyway, this is not a country for motorized tourism. Not only is the number of roads exceedingly small (and the few hotels exceedingly expensive) but many of the most beautiful spots are accessible only for hikers and sometimes also for people on horseback. The rain that had accompanied us up to here fortunately stopped for the rest of the afternoon. Some of the lower peaks came out of the fog covered with fresh snow.

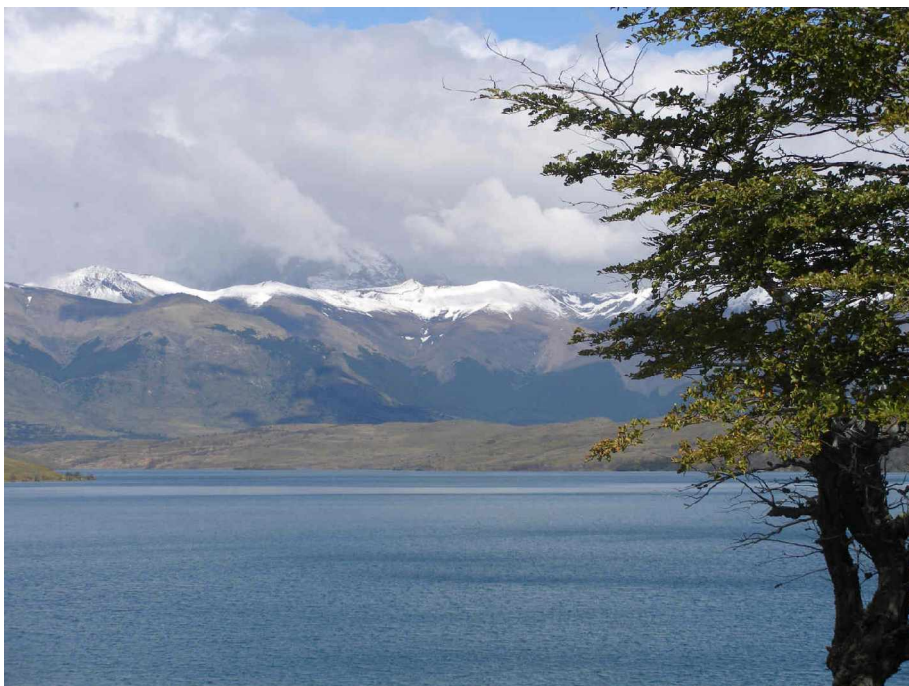
On the following morning we began a three day expedition with packing horses around the north-eastern and northern face of the Torres massif. This part of the National Park is probably its most pristine area. Very few hikers take the path to Lago Paine and Lago Dickson because of the long distances and the swampy areas and because of the lack of infrastructure. Tents and all supplies for several days have to be carried through the wilderness. There are neither roads nor refuges in case of emergencies. A good part of the morning was spent by re-arranging our luggage. All personal belongings beyond a basic stock

of 10 kg stayed behind in the support car. Everybody received a waterproof bag with a fixed volume that could be filled with whatever he or she felt essential. The bags were then distributed among three pack horses which also carried the camping and kitchen equipment. They went together with Rodrigo, our very popular cook, and one of the baqueanos over a less difficult route to the only authorized camp site in this area close to Lago Paine, while the riding party should reach the same place via a path across the mountains.



Packing Horses

We first followed a nice valley that was used as pasture for the cattle of a lonely estancia before we entered the protected nature reserve area of the park. It soon became quite mountainous, requiring climbing up steep hillsides and coming down precipitous descents without much traces of a path.



Fresh snow on the mountains around Laguna Azul

In terms of wild life, the main attraction were said to be groups of wild horses supposedly roaming this wild country. The animals originated from long abandoned estancias but now

survive on their own since many years. From a rocky hilltop without trees to block the view, we indeed located a rather large herd on a distant clearing in the woody valley in front of us. Jean-Claude and Rachel with their big zooming cameras even managed to take pictures. However our two baqueanos were not content with watching the horses from afar. They knew that one of the two ways out of the basin where the animals grazed right now led over a ridge not very far from our present position. So we moved on while our guides noisily approached the horses blocking the alternative exit of the valley. The flight distance was surprisingly long and the animals started moving as soon as they heard the whistling of the baqueanos. A few minutes later an impressive number of beautiful horses in all colours and sizes galloped at full speed past our observation point and quickly vanished in the woods.



In the wild horse country

Indeed, they were so fast that we barely had time to take a photograph. Thereafter we descended into the beautifully pristine valley of the Lago Paine. Close to the eastern end of the lake we met Rodrigo already busy in his cooking tent. It was pitched on the campsite which was simply a grassy spot on a small elevation above the lake bordered on one side by a steep ravine with a creek that discharged into the lake and on the other by the face of a mountain chain the summits of which remaining in the clouds. The horses had a nice pasture between the campsite and the lake. They were running free except for one that was tethered to keep the others from moving to far astray. After pitching our tents in the pitiless rain we spent the rest of the evening huddled together talking and eating in the ‘mess tent’ which was just big enough for a table and eight chairs. It was my birthday but I was convinced that nobody could possibly know about it. Therefore I was highly surprised and somewhat embarrassed when shortly after dinner our cook and all the baqueanos appeared with two beautifully prepared birthday cakes for a desert. Since everybody was so cheerful, I could not help but to enjoy gratefully this gesture of friendship.

Our destination on the next day was the Lago Dickson and its glacier situated close to the Argentinean border. The lake had been named by the Swedish arctic explorer Otto Nordenskjöld, nephew of the famous explorer Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, in honour of his sponsor the Baron Dickson, during his Patagonia mineralogical expedition in 1895/96. In a way it is surprising that at the end of the 19th century such big lakes did not yet have official names and were free to be named by some European explorer. The very first thorough

description of this area seems to have been given by Lady Florence Dixie in her 1880 book 'Across Patagonia'.



Rainbow over Camp Site at Lago Paine

The path along Lago Paine and through the partly rocky partly marshy valley that linked the two lakes led through virgin woods and stretches of pampas with beautiful views to the north face of the torres massif. It was again raining most of the time and quite chilly. Nevertheless it is perhaps unfair to dwell so much on the rainy weather. During most of the days there were also periods of sunshine which all of a sudden brought warmth and beautiful illumination of the surroundings with some rainbows as an additional bonus. It took almost 3 hours to reach a rocky overlook above Lake Dickson and the glacier that's feeds into it. Without the bright sun that had embellished the ice at Lago Grey, the ice of the glacier failed to produce this magic blue light, but still looked impressive with clouds and fog hanging over it.



Lago Dickson and its glacier in the fog

Close to this point we met three friendly soldiers from the Chilean frontier police who occupied a small container-like hut at what might well be the most isolated spot on the Chilean border to Argentina. Apparently, they usually had to stay there for a four week shift before they could return to ‘civilization’ for another four weeks. Due to the bad weather which prohibited helicopter flights, they had already finished their fifth week and their supplies started to run out. They were very apologetic about not being able to offer us a hot coffee but invited us, nevertheless, into their hut to warm up during lunch and to dry our wet stuff. While we were chatting with the soldiers the rain had stopped and we mounted our horses when the first shy rays of the sun touched Lago Dickson.



Sun at the shore of Lago Paine on the way back from Lago Dickson also shining on Rachel and Jean-Claude

On the way back in bright sunshine it got really warm and we had to peel off bit by bit the various layers of warm clothing. Halfway back to Lago Paine we already observed in the sky two helicopters that moved in the direction of the lone police station where three brave soldiers were looking forward to the end of their shift and to the return to their families. Back at the campsite even the water level of the creek close to our tents that we used for the morning toilet had significantly decreased.



Special Chilean baqueano saddle

The next day not only brought the return to Laguna Azul but was also the last full riding day of our trip. Remarkably, it was also the first day that brought bright sunshine already during morning hours. After an interesting demonstration of Patagonian tack and saddle traditions by one of the young baqueanos and a lengthy attempt to stow our entire luggage on the pack horses, we finally started around midday time.



On the way back to Laguna Azul

A beautiful view onto the cloudless Torres de Paine accompanied us almost during the whole march to Laguna Azul. We followed a completely different path than the one we had taken three days ago. The unusually nice weather made the idea of leaving this incredible country particularly difficult but it also helped to keep our spirits up when one of the pack horses lost its load in the middle of a steep rocky ascent. We did not stop for long at the Laguna but moved onward through a wild, cañon-like valley of an untamed river.



A last view back to the Torres in the sun

After a rather spectacular river crossing we climbed up onto a treeless plateau covered with low thorny shrubs and pampas grass until we ended up at an abandoned estancia close to a little creek and surrounded by some fruit trees.



Close to the last camp site on the abandoned estancia

While we pitched the tents a whole sheep was prepared for the typical ‘asado’ feast. An asado has only a very distant relationship to an ordinary barbecue. The skinned animal is fixed to cross-shaped metal frame that can be thrust into the bottom and keeps the meat in a vertical position close to a large fire. Consequently, the meat is roasting much more slowly than if positioned on top of the fire and it took quite a number of logs to keep the fire going. Almost three hours passed before it was thoroughly roasted from both sides. Nevertheless, this technique resulted in a beautifully soft and juicy joint without any taste of smoke.



Preparing the asado

Although condors are rare even here in southern Patagonia, it did not take very long until at least five of them circled majestically in the sky above the fragrant meat. The main building of the estancia was still more or less intact and equipped with a large table, some makeshift chairs and an old iron stove. Hence, we had quite a comfortable eating in spite of the cold evening temperatures. After we finished eating the asado fire was still kept alive by Victor and the other baqueanos. When we assembled around it Rodrigo, the cook, who, by the way, spends his spare time studying music at the University of Santiago, took his guitar and flute embarking on a concert with Chilean songs supported by Jorge, the guide from bluegreen adventures, who also turned out to be an expert guitar player. Quite a spirited atmosphere for the last evening in the wilds of Patagonia!



Luxury toilet on the abandoned farm

The night was cold and incredibly starry. The small water whole on the horse's pasture that provided the only possibility for something like a morning toilet had ice on its margins and the water seemed rather turbid. However, the little creek bordering the estancia on the opposite side did not seem any more attractive because a dead guanaco had found its last resting place in the middle of the water somewhat up the valley.



Saying Good-bye to our brave horses

The support vehicle had found its way to the estancia and was ready to take our entire luggage. Also the riders were offered a lift into the valley while Victor would have to bring all the animals down to the stables. Yet, most of us felt it would be much more fun to join Victor on horseback for the last leg of this unforgettable trail. It proved not so easy to keep the group of riderless horses from going astray. But we used the opportunity for galloping a last time really fast across the pampas. But then it was definitely time to say good-bye to our brave horses and to the always good humoured Victor who had cared for us very competently even though he did not speak a single word of English or French. Only Rachel and I could address him in a very limited version of Spanish.



Magellanes
penguins on the
Pacific Shore
between Puerto
Natales and
Punta Arenas

Before long, we were off in the car for Puerto Natales and then to Punta Arenas. As a last highlight we visited the colony of approximately 10'000 Magellanes Penguins on the coast perhaps a hundred km north of Punta Arenas. These birds are much smaller than the arctic penguins and, surprisingly build their nests in burrows on land close to the coast line, sometimes sharing their nesting sites with rabbits. The adults use to spend most of their day fishing in the ocean only returning in the evening. Therefore only relatively small groups of birds, mostly youngsters or breeding couples can be observed during the day. An observational route with interspersed watch towers crosses the area and keeps tourists and animals in respectful distance. Since the day was cloudy and windy only relatively few other visitors took the 30 km detour from the main road to visit this spot. In the early evening we were back in the Hostal Terra Sur in Punta Arenas for the last night in Southern Patagonia. I was looking forward to the next night that I would spend in Buenos Aires from where the newspaper in the Hostal reported a heat wave with temperatures above 40° C!

The End

*The second part of this Patagonian adventure will follow under the title
'Across the Andes from Argentina to Chili'*