



Patagonia, November 2004

A Trip Review of *Pure Patagonia*, by Stacey Kwiecinski

In November, 2004, I went to Patagonia with a small group of Journeys clients. It had originally been a trip planned by my predecessor in Latin America sales, but I adapted it and added a few of my own preferences, combining our Patagonia Wildlife Safari with an extension to Torres del Paine

and a few special extras. Patagonia was becoming a popular destination, but no one else in the office had done the trip before, so I knew the experience would be important. The whole region of Patagonia seemed so far away, remote, and different. The pictures looked amazing. I had recently been to Australia and Peru when the plans became finalized, and this would be a very different environment. I guessed Argentina and Chile would be somewhat like Peru in terms of people and culture, but I really had no idea what to expect. This would be my first trip with clients so I hoped that it really would be as good as I imagined.



The trip itself consisted of a few days in each of several different regions. We started with a couple days in Buenos Aires to see the city, kayak the delta, and see a tango show. Then we spent three days around the Valdez Peninsula to see the penguin rookery and elephant seals and another two days in Ushuaia for some great hiking and canoeing in Tierra del Fuego. The next two days were in Calafate where we visited Glaciers National Park, and actually hiked on the Perito Moreno Glacier. A long day's drive then took us across the border from Argentina to Chile for four days at the eco-camp in Torres del Paine, where we enjoyed several of the hiking trails and mountain scenes. Finally we spent

our last day in the city of Santiago before our flight back home. It was great to stay in each hotel or lodge for two nights or more as a base for exploring each area.



November is spring in Patagonia, and everywhere we went, flowers of all kinds were blooming. Bright red fire bushes covered many of the hillsides in Tierra del Fuego, Glaciers and Torres del Paine National Parks, and tiny delicate wildflowers could even be found in the desert-like terrain of the Valdez Peninsula. While we still experienced fairly cool temperatures far in the south and coastal areas, it reminded me of springtime here in Michigan.

Our flights were all on time, and our guides met us promptly on arrival in each new place. Each local guide was an expert in his or her area, and I enjoyed the time to talk to them about their home, their own experiences and their unique part of the world.

One thing about the trip that stands out as I fondly think back is the sense of remoteness, of distance and of solitude. On many of the hikes and in the parks it felt like we were the only people there. I remember the quiet, the lack of sounds of cars, of people and of technology when we hiked in Tierra del Fuego or Torres del Paine. All I could hear were the wind and the water and our own barely audible footsteps. The air was so fresh and crisp, I could go back to any of these places just to walk and breathe the air again.



On the second day of the trip we kayaked in the Parana Delta near Buenos Aires, and I was surprised at how beautiful and peaceful the delta was, even though the city was still in view at times. We paddled for what seemed like an hour without seeing any other people, and only passed a couple of small boats as we went.

I didn't know just how long it would take to get anywhere in Patagonia, but I discovered as soon as we arrived in Trelew. It took nearly two hours to get to Punta Tombo Magellanic Penguin rookery, and much longer to get to our whale watching trip and to Punta Delgado to see the Elephant Seals, but those drives helped instill the sense of distance and a sense of purpose. We wouldn't be driving so far on sometimes unpaved roads if it wasn't worth it!

I remember finally arriving at the rookery, ours was the first vehicle in the parking lot, thanks to our very early start. When we first walked in we only saw a few lone penguins waddling past us where the dry rugged plain meets the rocky Atlantic coastline. Where were they all? Well, this time of year is nesting season, and on further investigation it didn't take long to find nest after nest of penguins sitting atop their one or two precious eggs. We could get amazingly close to the nests. In fact, they hardly seemed to notice that we were there.



Another experience I will never forget was hiking on the Perito Moreno Glacier. This was another long drive to get to Los Glaciers National Park - but again, well worth it. It had started raining some that morning, but as we neared the dock it cleared up a little (a testament to the unpredictable weather in Patagonia) and the boat took us across the lake to view the glacier for the first time. It was massive, and spanned completely from one side of the enormous lake to the other. We got close



enough to hear and see the icebergs calving off the edge, and when we arrived at the far side a short hike brought us right to the glacier's edge. We attached crampons to our shoes, joined a group of about 20 other people and 3 local guides, and with a little instruction, we were all up on the glacier. This was an amazing 3 hours in a world of white peaks, crystal clear pools and deep blue crevasses. We often could see nothing but the glacier around us, or just the peaks of the nearby mountains poking over the peaks of ice.

The reality of my trip in Patagonia was even better than I could have guessed or hoped for, from the amazing meals of Patagonian lamb and beef and Chilean wines, to the ever-surprising and changing scenery. I never would have expected to get so close to a penguin, not to mention a Magellanic Woodpecker, Elephant Seals or guanacos. It was an experience I won't forget, and worth the effort and time to travel between each place.

So where to go next? Well, many Argentinians we talked to praised the Northern provinces of their country. I think if people in Patagonia, such an amazing and beautiful place, recommend that I go there, there must be something to it!