

South America: Argentina, Chile, Uruguay  
December 30, 2007 – January 15, 2008  
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Exchange rate: \$3 Argentine Pesos (\$3Arg) to \$1US

## **December 30, 2007**

### **Just getting there...**

Jason and Jake dropped me at the San Diego Airport with plenty of time to spare. My flight was at a pleasant 11am. The two massive backpacks I'm carrying added up only to 41 pounds, to the amazement of the check in clerk.

The 3 hour flight to Dallas was uneventful. I met Harold and Melanie of San Diego who were out to visit their daughter, son-in-law and grandson in Buenos Aires for a month, and then they'll be heading down to Patagonia for a little sight seeing. Harold and I discussed the merits of getting out and seeing the world while one can, before settling down. That helped burn off half the flight. The retired Navy officer had a pragmatic yet pleasant outlook.

Dallas airport looks more like a Los Angeles freeway interchange than an airstrip and terminal. The courteous info booth guy let me in on the secret free internet terminals in terminal B34. C had all the sudden gotten it in my head to skip Buenos Aires and go over to Easter Island and I had to entertain myself.

### **Crazy ideas**

It would have been possible to cancel my Punta Arenas, Chile to Buenos Aires, Argentina flight on January 11, but I quickly discovered I would be really missing some neat stuff on that terribly isolated island, as well running the risk of a 35 minute connection from Rapa Nui (Easter Island) to Santiago and then on to Buenos Aires. Even though I've been through the terminal in Santiago and knew it was possible to make the walk, I knew it would be a terrible mistake because then I would miss my flight back to the States.

There was an option to overnight in Santiago, head to Buenos Aires in the morning and then catch my evening flight back home. Again, it was quite risky. It was extremely tempting until I started reading that people visit Easter Island for 4-5 days. And, travel there is *slow*. I was only giving myself 2 days on this itinerary. I'd have to save that for another time.

The ticket from Punta Arenas to Santiago to Easter Island back to Santiago and then to Buenos Aires was \$1460 before any cancelation penalty. That little side trip virtually equals the airfare for the current trip. Owch. But, the thought of doing this on a whim gave me the wild-eyed, crazy smile look, but in the end, I ended up waiting on this one.

The 10 ½ hour Dallas to Buenos Aires flight was a bit bumpy, but nothing bad. I had the seat next to me empty, so I stretched out and thrashed around in a vain attempt at slumber. I'd stupidly left my earplugs in my checked bags, so I didn't get any substantial sleep. It's amazing the difference those make. Next trip, barring bad weather or a tough location, I'm going in my little laptop bag because having to check luggage is just plain annoying. If Sir Richard Branson of Virgin Airlines fame can travel with only a toothbrush, I should be able to in with 10 pounds, including my brick of a Nikon camera. Of course, Branson has a few billion dollars to just show up and buy things, but hey, I can come close.

**Monday, January 31, 2007**

### **International Time**

I arrived in Buenos Aires, Argentina at 10:40am local, right on time. I killed myself at the first cambio (money exchange) I came to. They had a 2.75 to 3.1 buy/sell split. That's at least as bad a rip-off as changing money in the U.S. Funny, an hour later, I read the guide book warning that you should never use the first cambio. They're a ripoff. The cambios inside the airport check-in and reception area are much more reasonable. My bags popped out on the other side and getting through immigration and customs was no issue.

I caught the P\$35 (\$12US) Manuel Tienda Leon (with the big lion graphic) for the 1 hour ride from the international airport (EZE – Ezeiza) to the national airport (Aeroparque Jorge Newbury) to catch my continuing flight on to El Calafate, another 3 hours south by jet.

### **Close call**

I have to check on departure tax before getting to the airport gate so I don't have to run back and pay the tax. I've done that dance in Lima, Peru and didn't want to get caught by it again. Fortunately there is no departure tax for El Calafate, so I was golden.

On the 3 hour flight to El Calafate, I'm sure we almost died. As we began the initial decent, the pilot yanked hard back on the yoke and

poured on the power. Several women yelled out for just a moment. Everyone was fully squashed into their seats. We stayed glued in our seats for several moments, then leveled off. Since we didn't receive an explanation, I could only guess that it was either a close call with a mountain or another aircraft. As it was a very clear day, I doubted hitting a mountain was likely. But, with the strong winds there, a severe downdraft could be a reason, too. And I've only been in the country a couple hours. Scary.

Landing in El Calafate was pretty wild due to the strong winds. Nothing like a sideways slip and slide before touching down. There was no shuttle available to the Marco Polo Inn waiting for me, so I just caught the regular shuttle service into town. I told the check in person my hostel, but something must have been lost in translation to the driver. Just like Cairo, I got a complete tour of El Calafate and ended up at the driver's house. Although it would have been nice to visit, I had to get on. So, on to another bus and back into town and up to the Marco Polo Inn where Joann Luu was waiting for me.

### **Reunion**

It's been 3 years since I've seen my former intern from Callaway Golf. Since I saw her last, she had blown out after school and racked up travel experience in her 20's that most people dream of covering in their lives. And now after a string of emails and phone calls, her being 2 months on the road and me 2 days in the air, we met up.

It's always mind boggling to think that 2 people can communicate intermittently and some how meet each other literally half way around the world. I'm easily fascinated.

Since I've never stayed in a hostel before, this was a new experience. The room contained 3 bunk beds and for this night, the room was empty save for Joann and me. Apparently a rarity this time of year. But, I didn't complain as I needed some good sleep. It was likely to this being New Years Eve. I dropped my two massive backpacks, one of which was now Joann's, and we wandered into town.

It's only a 5 minute walk to downtown El Calafate, but the hostel was removed enough from the hustle of the town to be relatively quiet. After touring the town a bit, we returned to the hostel and watched Pablo the cook prepare 2 lambs on traditional Argentine cowboy cross iron spits, held over hot coals outside the building, as one might have done 40 years ago on the Patagonian steppe. It was all quite frontier like yet quite interesting in the manner that it was done.

Cooking over an open fire, in the middle of Patagonia, in a frontier town, in a desert like landscape reminiscent of eastern Washington State, with an Argentine cook with a wry sense of humor made the entire experience. To them, this was just another day. To this visitor, it was unique and interesting.

### **Tasty food and fireworks**

Dinner was served at 10pm, traditional Argentine. Argentines eat incredibly late compared to the rest of the world. Austria eats at 8pm, for comparison. And I thought they were late. It was a fine meal with different pieces of lam served with a heaping bowl of vegetable salad mix. The room was filled with many different languages, laughter and discussion.

Dinner went on for an hour and a half. Joann and I split a small bottle of beer bought from the hostel, as we weren't allowed to consume the beer she had bought outside. The trick was to stealthily refill the small bottle in the kitchen. Joann had the procedure down.

Conversation ebbed and flowed with the tempo and volume of the room. We met Aire, a Dutchman who was going to visit his son working in Ushuaia studying the swamps and bogs. What? Tierra del Fuego is a land of bogs, not fire? It never occurred to me that it was possible to study swamps at the end of the world. But, that's probably why I don't have a PhD – I don't come up with crazy ideas to study swamps at the end of the world. I need some crazier ideas.

Champagne was served with our P\$70 (\$22US) meal and everyone tasted in the New Years. Feliz Nuevo Ano! I hugged and cheek kissed a bunch of people I didn't know. That was all part of the festive atmosphere. As if on cue, we heard the pop-pop-boom of fireworks outside. Everyone grabbed their coats to fend off the chilly wind and we all stood outside, champagne glasses in hand, watching the spectacle of multicolor fireworks ripple across the little pueblo of El Calafate. It was a unique spectacle, watching waves of exploding fireworks cascade across the small valley the town sits in. This was very different from the single-point, concentrated fireworks back home. Here, you never know where the next explosion would appear, giving the event an unscripted, carefree feel to it.

Joann and I retired to our room soon afterward, as we had to rise at 7am to catch our bus over to Perito Moreno glacier. That night, sleep came fitfully at best.

**Tuesday, January 1, 2008**

### **Cold blue ice**

A night of delirious tossing and turning was what I called a night of sleep. I should have been completely unconscious. Apparently, Joann said she didn't fare much better. At least I had the excuse of a 6 hour time difference, a badly congested head and the incredible noise the wind made as it screamed across the hostel. Maybe it was something in the meal? It seemed to sit well enough, but something tripped out the brain and kept it running full tilt. Maybe the excitement of the new place?

The alarm went off, I rolled out of bed and immediately felt like I could clock out for another 8 hours right there. I was tired.

Joann and I rapidly wolfed down the provided corn flake breakfast, with some juice and bread. It was well worth the few extra Pesos to be able to walk out to the common room, eat breakfast and get the day started, fueled up.

We hoofed it into town and caught the bus that Joann had purchased a few days back. As we saw the weather looming over the where we were headed, so we brought our rain gear just in case. I mostly napped on the way to the glacier, an uneventful hour ride along the lake and up into the area mountains.

We arrived at the Perito Moreno Glacier National Park after paying our P\$30 (\$10US) entrance fee, coming in to leaden skies and a slow, cold rain. Joann and I went to the restrooms to gear up for the bad weather. It was well worth bringing the wet weather equipment. We walked over to the first viewing platform above the glacier.

Views of Perito Moreno are spectacular from any of the viewing platforms. There are three decks and hundreds of yards of connecting walkways to view the 160 foot high glacier face. One of the fun characteristics of this particular ice flow is the dramatic and constant calving of ice. There are fewer audible cracks and booms compared to the Child's Glacier outside of Cordova, Alaska, but this glacier visibly calves with far greater frequency.

Just in the few hours we stood in the soaking rain, we saw multiple house size ice falls hit the lake, creating 8 foot waves radiating out into the vast lake. The funny thing about the offered boat tour this

day is that you wouldn't want to have been on the deck to take photos with the incessant rain and blustery wind. And, you can't safely get any closer to the glacier than the free walkways. The ice falls and large waves make it impossible for the tour boat to get any closer. As an added bonus, we took a half our and enjoyed a toasty hot chocolate and scrumptious pastries, again something impossible on the stormy boat tour.

We went out again for another 45 minute viewing prior to catching the bus back to El Calafate. There were a few decent ice falls, enough to justify the misery of the chilly, skin-cutting, wind blown rain. The clouds did open up a bit, making it possible to see much farther back up the glacier. The glacial flow of the azure blue ice was revealed to be impressively massive, justifying the designation of an Argentine national park.

### **Ice cream in a cold place**

Back on the bus, we road in relative silence, likely due to the fatigue from the bad night's sleep. After walking back to the hostel to change out of our wet weather gear, we swapped for bike riding gear to tour the town. We rented a couple mountain bikes and tore off toward the early man cave paintings between the town and the airport. The ride in that direction was amazingly fast due to the stiff 15 mph wind at our backs.

We rode the 6 miles out of town to the turn off for the petroglyphs, only to find the gate closed for New Year Day. That was a bit disappointing. Though, we did explore a side road religious shrine next to the gate, only delaying the inevitable grind into the wind, uphill, back to town. The most entertaining part is the complete lack of a road shoulder. You either rode on the slower gravel or took your chances of being sideswiped by a passing car. Going back to town took much, much longer.

For a consolation prize, Joann guided me down to the lakeside where we wandered, tossed rocks at birds (at least I did) well out of throwing distance, all the while watching a gray storm clouds roll across the lake toward us. They cold, winter-like wind didn't suggest the middle of an Austral summer to me. But, this is wild Patagonia and not cushy San Diego.

We returned the rental bikes after a 3 hour tour and went off to find a popular ice cream shop, found along the town's main drag. Joann ordered a three way split cup between blue glacier, Calafate berry ice

and toffee ice cream. It was a strange mix, but it was fun to try two local specialties in one small cup.

The funny thing about Patagonia is the sky stays bright here until 11pm. That means we walked in dusky light over to La Tablita restaurant, made a reservation for 11:15pm and then went over to the hostel to pound off the other liter of beer Joann bought. As we both hadn't eaten anything substantial since lunch, the beer buzz came easily. I'm still fighting this stress-induced head congestion, so I got some mileage out of the beer much easier than normal.

### **A large, meaty meal**

I chatted a little with our Swiss, New York and San Francisco roommates. It was very college like to be crammed into three bunk beds with 5 other adults. If we all were able to get conversations rolling, it would have been more fun, but we were so absorbed with prepping for the night and the next day that not a lot of long conversation went on.

The 11:30pm dinner at La Tablita was a gourmet experience. We had the huge sampler plate of sirloin, tenderloin, lamb chops and some other unnamed hunks of meat. All the pieces were served on a platter with glowing red coals beneath, keeping the meat hot for our entire 1.5 hour meal. While Joann cruised through a glass of chardonnay, I knocked down two glasses of Argentine Malbec. We finished at 12:30am.

### **Wednesday, January 2, 2008**

Had a much better night of sleep than last, though I had to get up at the crack of dawn. I quickly shoveled down a bowl of cereal before running out of the hostel. Joann isn't much of a breakfast person, so she was able to spend that time doing other things. We had to hoof it pretty quick to the El Calafate bus terminal. We got there, tossed our backpacks in the cargo bay and in mere moments were off to Puerto Natales, Chile.

The border crossing into Chile is rather annoying because you have to completely off-load your baggage, go through immigration and customs. There, you have to dispose of your agricultural and non-pre packaged animal products. Apparently this process has kept hoof and mouth disease at bay. We accidentally left sandwiches and oranges on the bus and when we returned, and even they were taken care of. The Chileans don't leave much unturned.

### **Travel stress equals a cold**

Much of Patagonia looks like eastern Washington State, like a scrub desert created by a mountain rain shadow. In this particular case, the Andes create this desert. There wasn't any traditional desert sand found here, but you don't see a single tree for as far as you can see. And, along the roads through Patagonia, you can see a long, long way. There were a few sheep, but this place is really the empty frontier. The towns around Patagonia have primarily developed for tourism, so most places are new in the South American perspective. But certainly not new in the traditional Western sense.

We rolled into Puerto Natales, Chile, in the afternoon and went over to the Erratic Rock Hostel to find a place to sleep. Their main facility was full, but they have a secondary building named "The Crash Pad" where we holed up. It was nice because we had our own room, single beds and the entire upstairs floor was deserted this night.

This hostelling travel student-like lifestyle is quite different than my usual travel mode of inexpensive motels and hotels. This approach has the advantage of being cheaper and you get the chance to meet others doing exactly what you are, though with other goals in mind. You aren't forced to be sociable, but the opportunity exists. The downside is not having your own private bath a place to shut out the world for a little bit. I feel slightly out of sorts about it, but it may be the head cold, sinus mess I've been entertaining since 3 days prior to leaving the States.

I didn't take it easy enough during Christmas and prior to traveling and now I'm paying the price. When I toured East Europe, resting several days prior to departing kept me cold-free. My little uncontrolled experiment verified my thinking – stress eats you alive. I really hate that. I'm going to have to completely chill a week before any major trip, especially to tough places, because this getting a cold this way has gotten on my nerves. Either that or I have to purchase an upgraded immune system.

### **That crazy look**

We purchased our bus tickets to Torres del Paine National Park for the next morning. We were ready for transport. After the extraordinarily useful information session done by Jeremiah at Erratic Rock Hostel, we had all of our backpacking questions answered. The overriding conclusion I came to was that 5 days was absolutely luxurious travel for this trek. It was only a few hours between refugios, a dorm hotel,

and camps, so the rest of the time would be spent eating, resting and locally exploring. I got the crazy, wild-eyed smile again...

"Hey Joann, how many hours do you think you can hike in a day?"

She replied, "At least 8 hours."

"Good", I chuckled.

After looking at the maps, distances and average times, I bet we could crack the classic W trek out in 3 days. This aggressive approach had several advantages. We had to carry less food and fuel, we were less likely to be out in really bad weather and it would free up the 2 days necessary to travel to Ushuaia, the end of the world. After Joann related her experience on the Inca Trail in Peru and around Cero Fitz Roy, I felt very confident we could knock this backpack out in 2 nights. And still catch the sunrise on the three famous towers.

### **Ready to roll**

We then had our work cut out for us. First was to secure our bus tickets to Ushuaia, as the office at Pachero Travel closed early in the day, so we didn't want to miss out and be stuck in Puerto Natales with nothing to do for a couple days. Then, we took off shopping for food at the local grocery store. We stocked up on crackers, salami and spreadable cheese for lunch. Oatmeal and powdered milk would be our breakfast and the freeze dried dinners I hauled half way around the world were to be supper.

We spent the next couple hours changing our gear configuration, spreading things out, so we could leave as much as possible at Erratic Rock. No reason to backpack with books and other meaningless things in the outdoors. This reconfiguration took much longer than I'd hoped, so Joann went downstairs and cooked up a hearty meal of rice and tuna to save time and money while I got everything together.

I made sure to triple-check everything. I didn't want to get to our first camp and realize I'd left the stove 50 miles away. Freeze dried food isn't pleasant to eat cold. This arrangement worked well because we were able to get to bed by 10pm. Breakfast was served at Erratic Rock at 630am and our bus was at 7am. It was tight. We cleaned up, dropped our storage bags and bedded down for the night in the chilly.

**Thursday, January 3, 2008**

We cracked dawn, got out of room and over to Erratic Rock Hostel for breakfast, made by the co-owner Bill. He's quite a character because he's an all-American type – all business. Not as stiff and programmatic as the Germans, but definitely all about getting it done. I wondered aloud how the business approach worked in the world of flighty backpacker student travelers. He was honest and said sometimes the combination didn't work, but as he had the advantage of being the owner, so he made and enforced the rules.

### **Board last**

The bus for the park showed up and we were off. There are several bus companies with hotel and hostel relationships. It's best to just take the bus that's associated with your hostel, otherwise you might not end up in the right place.

The ride out to the park is 2+ hours, so we had snacks and water at the ready. The ride is broken up by the standard tourist food and just collection shops. Just enough time to hit the toilet, grab a snack and hop back on the bus.

We saw the guanaco, a Chilean llama and the rhea ostrich as we drove toward the park. I had visions of a photo with a guanaco with the Torres del Paine in the background. But, without a telephoto lens and the bus to stop in the right place, that shot wasn't to happen, at least in the place where we stopped. We did stop once or twice to see the animals, but no where to get what I wanted. It was fun just to see the animals wandering around. Though it was tempting to carry the telephoto for such shots, carrying a heavy lens on a long backpack with limited use was not interesting.

We were dropped at Lago Nordeskold to catch the ferry, a catamaran across the glacial lake, to begin the famous 'W' trek. The 'W' is an abbreviated version of the full Patagonia circuit. The catamaran ride even included hot chocolate as an added bonus. It's best if you can board the boat as late as possible. This way, your backpack doesn't end up on the bottom of a very large pile and you have the luxury of enjoying the drinks without waiting in line. And, you get off the boat first.

We spent an hour messing around at the refugio, prior to hiking up to the viewing point of Glacier Gray. Joann had wanted to do some glacier trekking, but the climbers at Erratic Rock Hostel said that there was only one reputable business that had been around for 10 years and had had shut down last year. Joann had her heart set on

chopping at some blue ice, but it wasn't to be this trip. There was a report that a new guide company was in town, but going without a climber recommended by the locals is a risky proposition at best, as you trust your life to their skills. That makes me take a mental note that the first order of business is to get to know the locals, should I guide in the future. It makes business easier.

The hike is 1.5 hours up to the Glacier Gray viewpoint. The trail is up the whole way, but the terrain is undulating and lush. There are a few marshes to pass and plenty of birds and flowers to look at. Later on in the hike, icebergs appear on the lake, floating in the Caribbean green waters like misshapen pearls, congregating against the windward shores.

The midpoint lookout over Glacier Gray is a perfectly situated promontory which allows a high, expansive view of the glacier. The weather has held up quite well, but the wind here is explosive. There's enough gust force to make it impractical to stand and look at the glacier for more than a moment or two. It's easier to hide behind well placed rocks to observe the icy giant. You hunker down and take photographs, bracing yourself against the fast and biting wind. Even in full daylight, it's difficult to take sharp shots due to being knocked around.

Then, we retreat a bit to an old, gnarled tree to have lunch. This little location has been well built and visited. You can see the 3 foot wind swells buffet the tiny ferry taking people across the lake to observe the glacier face. Even from this high distance, you can see that the ride is rough. Cold katabatic winds roar down the glacier and rip across the lake. This is just a taste of what Antarctica must be like. From the photos and descriptions of the glacier, it has neither retreated nor advanced in any appreciable way, according to the visitors center. Again, like Glacier Perrito Moreno, this flies in the face of claims that all glaciers across the globe are retreating.

We enjoyed our spreadable cheese, crackers and salami lunch. I'd been hungry for the last half hour, so I make sure wolf down the available food. A couple walked past us, getting knocked around and stumbling pretty well, so I had a good idea what we looked like doing the same.

The walk back to the refugio was eventful and fast. We were protected from winds in the forest most of way, exposed to blustery gusts only once or twice. After experiencing the full force of the

winds, you appreciate the shelter the forest provides for the hike. We were in the roaring forties and headed from the screaming 50's. Now I understand what people have always talked about after doing the first leg of the 'W'.

### **Camp Italiano**

We spent plenty of time at the refugio adding to our food stock supplies before heading off on the second leg of the 'W' trek. The 2.5 hour walk from the Lake Refugio to Camp Italiano was a pleasant stroll. Though the average trail was a slow incline upward, the overall content of the trail was easy. Based on matching the average travel times described on the park map, this was to be an easy day.

By now I'd started doing some decent shooting and was good and warmed up for the rest of the trip. I know that the 16GB of memory cards was more than adequate, but only carrying one spare battery was another matter. Though I kept chimping to a minimum, my Nikon D200 seems to chew through batteries quickly. So, a spare battery is an absolute necessity on a 3 day trip.

There was a little bit of spitting rain, but nothing to justify the triple bagged backpack I was carrying, nor the reports of horrible weather in the past few days. Thank goodness. From what everyone has told us, it can get really, really bad here. Even the t-shirts at the lake refugio joke about the bad wind and weather here.

Camp Italiano is at the center of the 'W' trek, perfectly placed in a large stand of canopy broad leaf trees, the tops being 30' or higher. The lower sections of the trees have no foliage at all, due to the dense growth at the canopy top. This is all academic compared to the most important aspect of this location – protection from the wind. These trees are strikingly flexible, with a broad root base. Any other tree would not survive this location.

Camp was made with Joann's tent that I hauled across the world and we fired up the first two freeze dried dinners. Both the pasta primavera and hearty beef stew were remarkably good, as good as any basic restaurant might serve. These packages of dust and chunks have come a long way. At least, they were as good as anything you might find in the middle of wind swept Patagonia.

### **View of Valley Francais**

Joann and I didn't get to sleep until 11pm. That's not a problem here, since it is light well past 10pm. The light here is very similar to Alaska

in the summer, with 18 hours of usable light, making it possible to squeeze more out of a trip. It's strange to get used to, but it's sure handy.

### **Friday, January 4, 2008**

We woke up at 6am so we could make the run up to see Valley Francais. The plan was to pack all of our gear, including the tent, while it was still dry. That way, if it did rain, our packs would be wet but the contents would be dry.

Looking back as I write this 3 days later, it would have been better had we cranked up the speed of our camp tear-down, that we might have made it farther up into Valley Francias. Though, after speaking with Albert, the Canadian we kept running into, the clouds that closed in on the valley obscured the best views of the valley, so I didn't feel so bad. Some say the valley is a jewel of the trip, but a wall of clouds just isn't that interesting.

I figured that the first backpacking day would be nice and slow, but the second day was to be really long. Not getting all the way into Valley Francais was the balance of making it from Camp Italiano to Camp Britanico, arriving very late and not getting to sleep until midnight, covering the most difficult parts of the trail at night. Then, we had to wake at 4am the next day to catch the Towers at sunrise. A 3 day itinerary doesn't allow for as much loafing around, but cutting 2 days out of it allowed for other ventures.

The walk up Valley Francais was steep, but pleasant without a pack. Joann still kept up her racehorse pace. I call it the Chinese walking speed, because I saw that pace in China and it's just faster than I normally do. Then again, she had been on the Inca Trail a few weeks before and I still had the lingering effects of normal international cold. That's my excuse, at least. In fact, I've been really impressed with Joann's speed – so with that and the combination of the junk in my lungs, it's been an entertaining challenge.

Today the weather has been more or less cooperative, with small spats of rain, but nothing to justify taking the time to don rain gear.

As we had been plowing up and down mountains, I had stripped down to my short sleeve, button down collared shirt and travel slacks, walking at an even, slow pace to avoid sweating. In the grand scheme of things, if I had been moving any faster, I would have broken out

into a sweat and roasted myself. I walked in sunny San Diego day clothing. In stark contrast, the rest of the people were dressed like they were ready to assault a raging blizzard, wearing heavy shell jackets, rain pants and keeping hands in pockets. I did receive some funny looks, only wearing a thin, synthetic unbuttoned shirt.

We achieved the lookout point to Valley Francais about 15 minutes earlier than the suggested map time, so we forged farther into the forest in hopes of achieving a closer look at the valley. This effort yielded little other than a walk in a dense forest. I spoke with a guy coming back from the valley about the travel times. He said it was worth going up to the valley to tempt a look, but not at the expense of arriving very late at Camp Torres, as that was the toughest leg of the trip, in the dark.

The hill we needed to achieve was still another half hour away in thickening clouds. Arriving in the dark, getting four hours of sleep and possibly in bad weather was not attractive. Joann wanted to push for the valley, but in retrospect, I think what we ended up with was best. I wasn't all that bummed about missing the full valley cirque, as I'd seen them before, but Joann seemed more disappointed to have missed it. From the postcards we saw later, the view farther up the trail was not terribly different from the view we had, so I was ultimately okay about it.

The walk back down didn't seem nearly as long to me, but Joann said the trip back down seemed extra long. It's all a matter of perspective in this one, where I had dude horse syndrome and she felt she had missed something. And yet we walked the same trail at the same time. It's funny how two people can nearly occupy the same place in time and space, and yet have a vastly different perception and experience.

### **Middle Lake Refugio**

We lucked out with no rain so far. We hung our trees in the trees in case rain came so we didn't have mud covered bags, only wet. Hoisting up our loads, we headed down out of Camp Italiano and to the very long section of this trek.

The trail turned along the lake and began making its way east toward Lake Refugio 2. This section of the trail led up higher in altitude for a ways, then back down, toward the refugio. We had some constant light rain. It was annoying, but it kept me cool enough that I didn't bother putting on a jacket.

The Lake Refugio 2 was not particularly remarkable and only afforded us to trim out our supplies. So, we hit the necessary and got back on the trail.

I estimated that the passage to the short cut turn off would take 3.5 hours. This shortcut was supposed to cut off a good hour of trail time, something we would end up needing. We closed many wide, flowing creeks, allowing us to fill up our water bottles often, wash our feet and hang out for a few before pressing on. This is the only place in the world I've run into that you can drink the free-flowing water without chemical purification. From what Jeremiah at Erratic Rock Hostel said, the water in Patagonia is as good as it gets. People even regularly drink from the tap here. Jeremiah even demonstrated this fact in the kitchen sink on the morning we were to leave for the trek. I took the risk of following the hostel guide's advice and drank the creek water straight.

There were enough streams, creeks and waterfalls that I was able to subsist off of a beat up little ½ liter bottle brought all the way from the States. It was easy enough to get it through the airports, emptying it prior to arrival at the airport. Handy trick. This little bottle saved me weight and time, making drinking a snap. This experience was far better than in the California Sierras where it's generally best to purify. If I'm entertaining giardia in February, I'll know where it came from. Drinking straight, unfiltered and untreated water added real pleasure to the trek.

Walking along the rocky beach of Lago Nordeskold was a wild experience. The wind was strong enough to blow water hundreds of feet up into the air, getting everything wet without a rain cloud over us. More than once, we were forced to the ground to wait out gale force gusts. Joann was blown into a tree branch and konked her head. No visible damage, other than the insult of having it happen. Joann said that had the air been warmer, she would have taken a dip in the lake. Personally, the lake water was a bit cool to the touch for me.

### **Camp Britanico**

When the small lake where we were to take our shortcut came into view, we didn't see the cut-off trail but kept forging on. We slightly lost the trail in the bushes, then reconnected. All of the sudden, the bushes closed in again, as the shortcut trail was described. Then the trail completely disappeared into marshy grass. Joann checked her compass and sure enough, we had hit the short-cut trail. Somehow

we had completely missed the main trail cut-off. Had we been heading toward the final refugio, we would have been toast. But, in this rare case, we were saved a good extra hour of walking. Just once, I lucked out.

The wind had died down since leaving the lake, so we were quite warm in the afternoon. There were a few big creek crossings where Joann passed her pack to me, after I did the cat-dance rock-hop.

The next few hours led us through a pastoral, daisy-filled landscape. As we turned up the final leg of the 'W' trek at 8pm, Joann put it into high gear and ground up the steepest part of the trail, faster than the stated average, to hit Camp Torres in daylight.

The trail builders in this section ran out of original ideas and put up fixed knotted ropes to ascend and descend certain sections of trail, while other sections of trail reached very steep 1,500'/mile inclinations. For reference, 1,000'/mile is very steep and 2,000'/mile makes you consider scrambling with your hands.

Arriving at Camp Torres at 930pm, Joann set up the tent while I got water boiling. Hearty beef soup and lasagna was our tasty freeze-dried fare. We geared up for tomorrow, so we could get a quick move-on early.

### **Early risers at Torres del Paine**

There were a few bugs in the wet camp, but the light wind through camp took care of most of them. I surmised that had there been no wind, this campground might have been quite miserable for how wet the location was. Even so, we had a few flying beasts enter the tent. Joann efficiently dispatched them in short order.

### **Saturday, January 5, 2008**

4:15am. It's light outside, so we got up and hit the trail to the top. We left at 4:45am, making the first pass to the tower view in half an hour. We were able to follow the orange dot marked rocks all the way up. Doing this paid off because it kept us on an easier (?) 2,000'/mile trail instead of stumbling through a massive boulder field until the very last moment. Joann languished a bit – her fast trail speed finally bled off and I didn't feel like a slug, prodded on by the continually brightening sky.

There were 20 or so people up on the pass, waiting for the sun to strike the 3 Torres del Paine. It was completely worth it to haul up our 9 oz sleeping pads. It made sitting in the dark, below freezing, on that frozen, hard, heat-sucking and uneven rock completely tolerable. It made the experience all that much better, as I've frozen my backside off many times doing the same without a comfy Z-rest.

The sunrise was pretty, but the lighting effect may be better in February, when the sun was likely to hit all three towers with alpine glow instead of full light. This is all speculation and picking, as the view was darned impressive. We spent a fair time exploring the rocks, making photos and having a grand old time after many people left. I was able to make a time lapse, much to my satisfaction.

On a tightening schedule, we tore back down to camp, packed up and hauled out. We both marched on, snacking instead of eating a full breakfast meal for want of speed. We wanted to catch the earlier bus.

We ended up arriving a full hour before the shuttle, so we took a well deserved rest break in the grass, bathed in warm sunlight, with a row of backpackers doing the same. A gentle breeze plied at my bare feet, drying them out and making me comfortable.

### **Planning the bonus trip**

Back in Puerto Natales, Joann tried to make reservations in Ushuaia to no avail, so we headed out to dinner. Joann had cordillo and I had Chilean salmon. Both were good, but not awesome. But, after living off of food bars of cardboard and freeze dried dinners, it was just a bit better. The shower cleaning the grime of three days was even better, though.

### **Sunday, January 6, 2008**

I wolfed down another Erratic Rock breakfast. If you stay there and get up early enough, the place serves up a mean meal to start the day. It's highly recommended. I met up with Joann and we caught our bus bound for Ushuaia, travelling over the Patagonian Steppe. We ended up randomly changing busses in the literal middle of nowhere, absolutely flat to the horizon, under lead gray skies. I've been in a lot of nowhere and this place was definitely thata.

It was a full 13 hour bus ride to Ushuaia. Woo hoo! I watched National Treasure and Nacho Libre, played on the bus to pass the time. We ended up having lunch at a small place on the Chilean side

of the Argentine frontier (border). Then, we had a ferry ride across the Strait of Magellan. Normally, it would take 2 hours just to find the right conditions to make the crossing, but we lucked out and had perfect weather just as we arrived. The water looked gorgeous, if a bit cold. However, the stories I've heard made the Strait just a bit more sinister, hiding in a cloak of good weather and fair breezes. The northern part of Tierra del Fuego is almost as flat as the Patagonian Steppe, a flat, featureless landscape.

### **The car ride**

The Strait of Magellan at the ferry crossing isn't wide at all, maybe 20 minutes by boat. On the Tierra del Fuego side, there was a huge fenced off area marking out an old mine field. Guess things weren't so smooth in recent history. I mentioned to Joann that I was tempted to throw rocks into the field just to see what happened. Joann laughed, shook her head and her look said, "Boys..." Really, I'm 34 going on 12.

About 100km (62 miles) out of Ushuaia, the landscape became interesting. Mountains and glacier covered slopes rose out of nowhere. All of the rock here is a deep black and red, looking like basalt. This very dark look takes away almost all the depth of the mountains, giving them a 2-dimensional feel.

Ushuaia was unexpectedly large. The city has stoplights, a cargo and cruise terminal and who knows what else. This is quite unlike the rest of the cities and towns I've been in the past week. Nothing like them, at all.

Joann and I met Juan Carlos, one of the guys who meets people right off the bus. Naturally, he was pushing his hotel. It was 150\$ (48US) a night for a two bed room with private toilet. This wasn't a hostel price, but as Joann had struck out on every place she could find in the Lonely Planet – South America on a Shoestring Budget, Juan Carlos's offer solved a big problem. Joann was worried that he was like guys in Southeast Asia who would lure you far away from the city, only to rob you. Though unlikely, it was possible. I kept my camera free and in my hands. It's a nice machine, but 3 pounds of magnesium is an unexpected tool when things get rough.

I'd say Joann was being paranoid, but this is Argentina with a sordid history. In the end, there were absolutely no problems and we had a room by 9pm. Since we had spent quite a bit on a room, we rolled the budget approach to food and bought some empanadas (meat filled

tortillas) and cooked up some rice with tuna on my camp stove in the room. It was a very "fresh off the boat" approach, as Joann called it.

### **Did you cry?**

After looking at all there was to do here, I decided that it would be a waste to return to Punta Arenas in Chile to catch a flight through Santiago and back to Buenos Aires. I looked up and found several flights from Ushuaia back to Buenos Aires, some with 2 stops. But, they were cheap and available. It took me a good 45 minutes to figure out how to cancel my flight through Expedia. The booking lady was really helpful and helped my luck. Lan Chile charge nothing for cancelling and refunding the entire flight price, minus Expedia's \$5US booking charge. Then, to top it off, I found a flight back to Buenos Aires from Ushuaia that was actually cheaper than going back on an 8 hour bus ride to a pointless town. Nothing like gaining two days on the trip for a 45 minute phone card call (\$3US) and \$5. I'm golden!

### **Monday, January 7, 2008**

Today was errand day. We had to change money, hit the ATM, make trip reservations, find a new hostel for our return from Parque National Tierra del Fuego, purchase bus tickets for Joann to ride to Punta Madrine, purchase tour tickets for hanging with penguins, purchase food and general supplies. When traveling this long, you have to have restocking and maintenance days built in.

We had an expensive seafood lunch at Freddy's, a place recommended by Lonely Planet. Again, I've found LP's food recommendations to be off, given the price you pay. This price charged \$245Arg (\$79US) for a king crab dinner for two. Owch. Eating right in the middle of tourist central is rough.

We caught a quick taxi up to Glacier Martial and we did the 1.5 hour hike up to it. The view of Ushuaia and the Beagle Channel beyond the city was incredible and well worth the steep hike. Joann asked me if "I've ever been to a place so beautiful, it made you cry?" No, sorry, I'm a guy. And even if I did, I'm not permitted to admit that fact. But hey, the view was impressive and the cold wind does make you tear up...

We ended up meeting Gordon from Minnesota. He was going on a deep south Antarctica cruise for \$9,000US. The boat sails as far south as possible until the ice prevents further travel. Now that's a cool way to go. You get to stop 3-4 times for various day trips and you can

sleep on the continent which now sees 34,000 tourists a year. Way cool.

Arriving back in town from the glacier, we toured the local neighborhoods, as Joann wanted to check on a \$4US cheaper hostel. The place was on the city edge and the time and expense getting there and back was not worth it. We had pizza and beer for dinner, then Joann got to enjoy her last night in a queen sized bed after sleeping in dorm room bunks for months. I enjoyed my undersized single, figuring it was still more comfortable than sleeping on the ground.

## **Tuesday, January 8, 2008**

We packed and left our big yellow pension hotel, Rocios Hospedaje located on the corner of Premier Argentino and Intendente M. Pablo. Juan Carlos served a traditional Argentine tea, bread, jam, tasty Argentine caramel (not as sweet) and juice. Joann tuned in her ipod to light Spanish metal music and we rode our bus over to the national park.

The park entrance fee is \$30Arg (\$10US). We rode in to the main refugio and unloaded our gear there. After a little debate, we settled on the free campgrounds 2 miles away. Joann was unable to talk one of the drivers into giving us a lift over there. It was worth the try.

Just as Joann had the tent set up and our gear inside, the sky opened up and gave us our first rain. It wasn't heavy, but it was constant. We geared up for our afternoon hike and waiting out the passing cloudburst. After a half hour, the rain subsided and we went on our way.

The hike up to Cerro Guanaco, the highest peak in the area, was tough. The first half mile along the lake is a simple flat warmup, but the trail then turns into the woods and uphill. The first 45 minutes were pretty steep but not killer. The total distance up is 2.5 miles, but the sign suggests giving yourself 4 hours. Wow...

## **End of the Earth**

Once reaching the initial crest, we then hit the beginning of the mud bogs and mire we had heard about in El Calafate. I was gingerly making my way around a deep mud pit when we ran into some Germans making their way back. One guy was pretty funny, saying "The mud, it is unavoidable", immediately slogging shin deep through the slop. Though I couldn't argue with the speed and efficiency of his

approach, I didn't want to get muddy. Also, the suggestion that something was unavoidable became a personal challenge. I now had no choice but to avoid the mud.

Once we passed the mud bogs of misery, Joann and I hit honest Tierra del Fuego mire, a quarter mile of soaking wet peat bogs. The ground wasn't all that muddy, but the ground sank a half foot every step you made, no matter where you stepped. This provides you with not so comfortably cold and soggy boots. Then, light grapple and ice started falling from the sky. We finally made it past the mire and hit the really steep part of the trail, fortunately on dry rock.

### **Off trail**

Had the trail been any steeper, we would have needed to use our hands. Imagine standing on a slope, facing upwards, with your calves flexed as far as they could with your feet flat on the ground, as though you were doing a serious stretch of your lower legs. That's how steep the slope is. That steep.

The view from the top was incredible. Land's End was visible from this vantage point, as was Ushuaia and the surrounding mountains. Invisible and far out from Land's End was Cape Horn, a rock in the middle of the roughest water in the world - the literal end of South America. The roughness of the landscape reminded me of the Canadian Rockies. Joann had some Argentines we met snap a couple shots her and I, then it was time to head back down in 8pm sunlight.

On the way back down, light snow started, lazily tumbling along in the late afternoon light, moved about by a skin burning breeze. I let Joann borrow my windproof hat and gloves because she looked like she was really hurting. Since I was still cranking on the trail, I generated enough heat to keep my jacket open. The conditions were just rough enough for me to have a gentle, crazy laugh the whole way down to the bog. I loved the craziness about it. Joann said she hated my crazy laugh. I guess I can understand.

As I had my mud bog challenge laid out before me, I took a different, literally higher route. I waded over the shrubs and floated on the bushes. I couldn't see any trail, but I knew it was ahead. Heck, it's 9pm, you've gone off trail, it's cold, you're wet and you've just taken an unmarked approach. Now we're talking crazy. It was easy to bypass the "unavoidable" mud bog this way. If you can call crashing through 6 foot tall impenetrable brush easier, that is.

We made it back to our campsite at 11pm, still bathed in sunset light. While cooking, Joann and I enjoyed a delightfully colored Tierra del Fuego sunset as the clouds momentarily parted.

### **Wednesday, January 9, 2008**

Joann learned that lighting fires with wet wood is not as easy as one might believe. And she had several ounces of white gas to work with. Haha! Eventually, she did get a flame going, so we photographed the proof that it worked. I hate smelling like a campfire, so I generally kept my distance but enjoyed the process.

### **Fauna**

It's been fun watching the southern geese, rabbits and raptors run around while writing this journal. Warm sun and puffy clouds greeted me, with a cool friendly breeze to dry my feet and boots, as both were still wet from the previous day's mud and mire bogging.

We hung out at camp for a while longer, then packed up and walked the 2 miles to the refugio and debated what to do next. After a wrangling session to choose the right option, we blew off the Coast Walk through the national park and opted to check out the Black Lake and huge beaver dam. The Laguna Negra is a peat bog in the process of developing. The lake really does look black from afar. This has to do with the lack of oxygen in the water, preventing green stuff from growing.

Beavers were introduced into the area for fur production, but the beaver's fur quality changed for the worse when they had spent some time down here. This rendered their fur worthless commercially. Naturally, the beaver ranchers released the beavers into the wild and these beasts wreaked havoc. Oops. There are no natural predators down here and the beaver's propensity for flooding areas has devastated the area. I'm guessing the rabbits we've seen in the area are of the same stock problem. They're cute, but destructive.

We made it back in time to catch the bus back to Ushuaia after a two mile hike through the park. Joann and I hoofed it to Refugio de Machileros (Hostel for Backpackers). The place is a bit different than other hostels, but we were able to get beds in a six person room and all was well. We cleaned up and headed out to town.

### **Unlikely food**

Picture going to the end of the earth. Then picture a Chinese buffet. Not as impossible as you might think. And your travel companion can speak with the city's 8 Chinese inhabitants in Mandarin. What other entertainment could one possibly want? The meal was great and we had a fine selection of good. Thus far, the food in Ushuaia has been okay at best. So what might be a generic Chinese buffet back home tasted far better.

### **Thursday, January 10, 2008**

We enjoyed a classic \$5Arg breakfast of OJ and pastries, then walked around town doing errands. As one person suggested, the city cemetery was different and worth seeing. It was an above ground, visible casket viewable mausoleum. The character of the place was strange, but engaging. After a little wandering around among the departed, we hit it over to the tour booths by the cruise ship terminal to catch our walking tour with the penguins.

We took the late afternoon option to save some time and not pay for a canned lunch. The local grocery store was a much cheaper option for meat, cheese, crackers and bananas than what the \$50Arg lunch cost. And we could eat at any time, at our leisure. Also, this allowed us the chance to take a few tourist snaps at the Ushuaia Fin del Mundo sign.

### **Funny birds with sharp beaks**

Our tour was fully booked and other tours were fully booked out to 2 full days. Good thing we bought our tickets early. The bus ride took us out two hours to a ranch on the Harbor, where we boarded a hefty little vessel. It looked like it could take quite a pounding, where no one was on deck.

Half way to the penguin rookery, the boat stopped at a huge bait ball where terns, penguins, skuas and albatross were having a feast. It was fascinating to see all these Antarctic birds I've read about in full action.

The boat captain placed our group expertly on the shore and we were instantly in the middle of a flock of Magellanic and Gentoo penguins. The Gentoo are transplants from the Falkland and Georgia islands, as they have been pushed out by competing fishing boats. There are 50 breeding Gentoo pairs and their numbers are increasing. Gentoo penguins are larger and more colorful than their 1000's of Magellanic counterparts.

Our guide advised us to be quiet and walk slowly to limit disturbing the penguins. After advising us of the basic island rules, we headed off to the rookery to see what the importance of this location was all about. The Magellanic can live up to 20 years, mate for life and lay 2 eggs per hatching season. As we walked along the grasslands toward the rookery, we saw that penguins were all over the place. There was even a nesting pair under the stairs that lead up to the higher grasslands. Our guide told us to walk on the far side of a 3' wide staircase to avoid stomping over the penguins and their chicks. It is unimaginably funny to look down and see penguins staring at you through the space in the stairs.

There was a little rain to keep things interesting while walking through tall grasses along a narrow, wood-railed pathway. One Magellanic penguin half-blocked the path, forcing everyone to barely skirt around him. While standing next to that penguin, I saw that looks I've seen from other animals before. I wondered...

Standing in the people corral, our small group looked over the acres of penguins, molting chicks and an amazing cacophony of penguins calling out. An occasional skua would cackle, looking for its next penguin chick lunch. The noise was strange and otherworldly. The guide began leading us back to the beach.

Our little blockade Magellanic penguin still held his ground, blocking the pathway. This time, I stood next to him for quite a bit. Just as I expected, he pecked and bit me. I was actually bitten by a funny looking, territorial little penguin. It felt like a sharp pinch, but it was more funny and shocking than really painful. I got exactly what I expected and deserved and got a good laugh out of it.

Our basic guided tour was over, so we were then allowed to walk among the penguins on the beach at our discretion. One photographer wielded an 80-400 D2Xs and all sorts of gear, but shot the penguins from a human height. Instead, I opted to get down and dirty with the penguins, getting below their eye level by crawling on my belly, like a soldier under barbed wire.

I could have reached out and tapped any of the penguins waddling around me. I discovered that penguins have about a 3' fear radius, meaning if you get closer than 3', they'll start to scoot away. This was fine with me, as I was able to hold my camera out just a bit, getting to the closest focus point possible. Really, I played paparazzi, stuffing

the camera in the penguins' faces. They seemed fairly curious about looking down on a human, so they didn't bug out about it.

It must have looked strange to the others in the tour group, seeing a guy in rain gear crawling around face to face with penguins. But, it served my purpose to get below penguin eye level. The only drawback to crawling around with penguins was getting a healthy coating of penguin poo all over my nylon shell jacket and pants. It's all coated nylon, so the residue will wash off and I'll have a good story. I'd have liked to have a few different lenses to work with, but the risk of getting a glob of penguin poo inside my camera negated any advantage. As we left, late evening sun broke out at 8pm and bathed the penguins in perfect light. It would have been nice to have that light, but sometimes it just doesn't work out that way. We headed back to the boat and rode across the Beagle Channel to the ranch.

### **Beaver**

Joann and I munched on our snacks and got to see a destructive North American beaver swimming around his lodge back on the way to Ushuaia. Though the beaver is cute, the \$60Arg per pelt bounty isn't enough to motivate people to stomp through the taiga, controlling these destructive beasts. Without any natural predators, they destroy and drown trees by diverting water and making dams.

Back in Ushuaia, we hit up the last open stores to stock Joann up for her 32 hour trip up the southeastern coast of Argentina. We cleaned up, packed and headed out for a nice dinner of steak chorizo for her and lamb with blue cheese for me. This was the first meal we agreed was worth the money paid in Ushuaia.

### **Friday, January 11, 2008**

Joann was up at 5am and I bid her goodbye. She hoofed it into the morning light, over to the bus terminal while I lazily slumbered a few more hours. The corner pastry shop was a good breakfast on a cool, clear and breezy morning. I spoke with Mitch, the Canadian, about his risky 2.5 hour connection in Buenos Aires that normally takes a minimum of 3 hours for the connection. Risky, but it's fun.

### **Changing latitude**

Ushuaia's tourist junk prices are outrageously high. \$22-\$30 US for an adult t-shirt. Owch. That was the price in all places. I checked. I just bought my 2 nephews shirts. Argentina really isn't a good deal as it was when I visited 5 years ago.

Good thing I got to the airport 2 hours early. The check in line spanned the entire terminal. Whoa. But, it all worked out and I'm my way to Buenos Aires via El Calafate.

Changing planes in El Calafate, I ran into Canadian Mitch again. His flight out was delayed, so he only has 2 hours in Buenos Aires to land, get his bags, catch a taxi, make the 40 minute trek across the city and get through check in. It's not looking good for him to make it, especially with going to an international flight. As it was, I was late for my plane in El Calafate as soon as I landed. Good thing this is Argentina where things are late. In theory, my bags were checked through. In fact, I had to come through security in the tiny airport, but in the end it all seemed to work. And I'm on a quiet MD-80 riding to Buenos Aires.

My bags were literally the last off the plane, but they made it. Good thing I didn't have a connecting flight... I took the quick \$15Arg ride over to the Sheraton Libertador. I decided to be lazy and pay for the taxi rather than working the bus system.

### **Getting around**

After cleaning up and doing sink-washed laundry, I walked a few blocks down to the concierge-suggested steak house La Chacra. It was a place served by the old guys. From looking at the crew here, I could tell the food was to be good. Finally, I enjoyed a real hard core Argentine pampas grass fed beef that was as good as I remember from 5 years ago in Cordoba. It only took 2 weeks to find it, and now it's 3 times as expensive as when I paid in 2001, but it was worth ever cent. The evening was finished with some sort of lemon ice cream, a traditional Buenos Aires desert.

### **Saturday, January 12, 2008**

This staying out past midnight business is a killer. As dinner here doesn't start until 9-10pm, and the meal takes 2-3 hours, it's tough to avoid hitting the Cinderella hour. Breakfast buffet at the hotel was good and it solved the problem of finding energetic food to make it through the day. Plenty of American and Argentine food to chose from.

I finally figured out what part of the city I was staying in: Micro-central, the city core. From here, I looked the tours up in Lonely Planet and looked at their suggested city walk. I made it for the main

square, where I was pestered by this annoying guy who was looking for "donations" for some charity. His green vest and his 3 buddies weren't exactly what I'd say were charitable. The one really annoying guy wanted to challenge me to a boxing match because I wouldn't pay attention to him. "Donate or fight" seemed to be this guy's motto. I laughed and walked away. Argentine machismo was certainly alive and well.

### **Arguing**

I made the first 3<sup>rd</sup> of the tour when I thought about getting ferry tickets over to Colonia, Uruguay. It took me 2 hours from getting into the ticket area, purchasing a risky ticket over to a different country via water and having an international flight back to the US the same day. But, my expensive hotel would pick up its worth because I could safely leave my bags there to pick up when I returned from Uruguay.

The cheaper tickets were sold out, so I went with whatever I could get. It was strange because you paid for tickets at a cashier booth, separate from where you actually got your tickets. As always, there were arguing couples spending 15 minutes figuring out what they wanted to do. After waiting in line for half an hour. Ugh. I got my \$240Arg (\$80US) tickets. As it was, I almost didn't get a return ticket because the boat was full, forcing me to take first class. Really, this needed to be booked three days ago to give me more options.

The day was getting on, so I did more of the walking tour and hit it back to the hotel to catch my \$250Arg (\$82US) tango show and dinner shuttle at 830pm. The bus was late, so I was going to take a taxi and hope I was at the right place, but my ride showed up at the last moment. It was a good thing I took the shuttle bus because the taxi was told to go to the wrong place, so I would have missed everything and have paid for it.

I chatted with Tim, an architect from Seattle, visiting his daughter and son-in-law at the university here. I had the absolute best seat I could have, front row, stage corner, with no one blocking me. The dancers always seemed to end up at this corner. This show might not be traditional, but it sure was entertaining and that just how I like it. Off to sleep at 1am.

### **Sunday, January 13, 2008**

Another bold breakfast at the hotel and I'm off to finish the city walking tour. This was the big marching day, spending 8 hours hiking around Micro-central and Congresso. I resumed yesterday's

exploration. I came to Florida Street, a pedestrian only path, saw the Siga la Vaca, the new and fancy Galeria. The glass ceiling of this shopping mall is cathedral like, far more interesting than the malls at home.

From there, I wandered past the stadium and ran into a film crew shooting a commercial. The two shoots I saw were of a crane lifting a car into the air and dropping it on the blocked off streets. Many of the streets and shops were empty, as no one hangs out on the district on Sunday. Though not as exciting as full streets, it much easier to watch for thieves and pickpockets, since there was no reason for any person to stand close to me.

Casa Rosa, in the Mayo Square, and the most important Buenos cathedral were pleasant to look at in contrast to the banners against the Dirty War, but no protestors. Look up the Argentine Dirty War some time. Right about this time, my fruit based breakfast caught up with me and it was time to make it over to the hotel for a break.

### **Later on...**

The famous café on [street] was very good, again run by a bunch of old guys. Though Lonely Planet described them as cranky, I found they were quite nice, even if gruff looking. It was good to catch up on Buenos Aires' tumultuous recent history. From there, I completed the Congresso Lonely Planet suggested street walk and I was done. It was 15 city blocks to hotel in the hottest part of the day. I noticed that there were high cirrus and cirro-stratus clouds crossing the sky. I wonder if a storm is massing on the horizon.

I spent an hour splashing around in the hotel pool, doing some laps to justify spending the money on this expensive hotel.

Off over to Siga La Vaca in trendy Palermo, a steak buffet. I tried assado, what I think was kidney, Rinion and pollo al limon. Argentine beets taste really earthy, with rich dirt. Still good, though. The tattoo craze has hit here with women and girls here, just like the States. Most of the women sport tattoos in dark, ugly sailor blue. Several have neck tattoos like gang members. Really, it wasn't an attractive complementary decoration at all. I also noticed few people wearing wedding bands here. Not sure about that.

A had a wine bottle to myself, so I had to pace. My Spanish is about as good as a child who has eaten too much lead. Dessert was Profiteroles. It's a light cake, slightly sweet, covered with chocolate

sauce, warm on the outside and a cold center. Just like me. This place offers women large zip ties so they can connect their purses to their chairs so they don't have to worry as much. Great idea. It was a 2.5 hour solo dinner. Ugh. Caught a taxi to the hotel and it was time to sleep.

### **Monday, January 14, 2008**

7am alarm came a bit early for this long day.

### **Three countries in one day**

Got everything ready and dropped all the bags at the front desk, paid for the room and got down to the Buquebus ferry terminal to Colonia, Uruguay. Had to take first class due to the ticket shortages. There were no real differences, maybe the seats were a little bigger and you sat on the upper deck.

### **Colonia, Uruguay**

Colonia, Uruguay is a cute little town. Its old town section is a UNESCO heritage site. I'm doing fairly well on accidentally stumbling into those locations all around the world.

I arrived at 11am and was done with the place by 3pm, with a long lunch and lounging in the park. I made sure to be extra careful with the camera since people here seemed to take a little more interest in me. Didn't want to doze off and wake up with less gear than I arrived with. Did visit a little art gallery off the main tourist area. It was difficult to see how this little place stayed in business, but they did. The curator girl seemed nice enough and answered all my questions about the art and artists.

The real old school cobblestones are near the portcullis entrance to old town is little more than hard edge rocks, at one time filled with sand. Since most of the sand has washed away, walking on these rocks was treacherous. Good thing I had boots with me. The traditional bread loaf shaped cobblestones are far easier to walk on, and less likely to twist out your ankle.

That was it. This was likely my shortest visit to any country ever.

The ride back to Buenos Aires was rough and choppy. Ugh. There was no air conditioning on this ferry and it was 31 deg C (88 deg F) outside. I ended up walking back to the hotel since traffic was moving

slow enough that taking a taxi was pointless. The 1/3 mile distance was easy to cover.

I caught a \$60Arg (\$20US) to the airport. Thank goodness my flight wasn't yesterday because protests at the airport shut it down. I would have been stuck with no place to go. Many people were more than 6 hours late for their flights, if at all. Immigration and customs were shut down due to the marauding crowds. I watched some of the television footage, with people throwing things at the counter agents at Aerolineas Argentinas. Argentina likes to pretend it is a first world country, but it's not.

I spoke with a woman going from Buenos Aires to Oklahoma to study. What a downer. Almost anywhere could have been better than that. But, it's a different place to go and she'll get a taste of something.

The long flight to Dallas was uneventful and I caught an earlier connection to San Diego, then got a ride home. All in all a good, it was an adventurous trip.

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