

Don't Cry For Me Patagonia

You need to survive the winds of Patagonia to make it to Tierra del Fuego, considered as the end of the world. We did it with pleasure as this was our ultimate destination before our trip back home...

Words by Akis Temperidis Photos by Vula Netu and Akis Temperidis



Colonia del Sacramento, a former Portuguese colony in Uruguay, is a beautiful little town with a post-WWII feel...



Because of low temperatures and strong winds this was our new dinner concept in Patagonia. A Malbec red wine was always included.



Passing through ground zero of February's devastating earthquake in Concepcion, Chile.

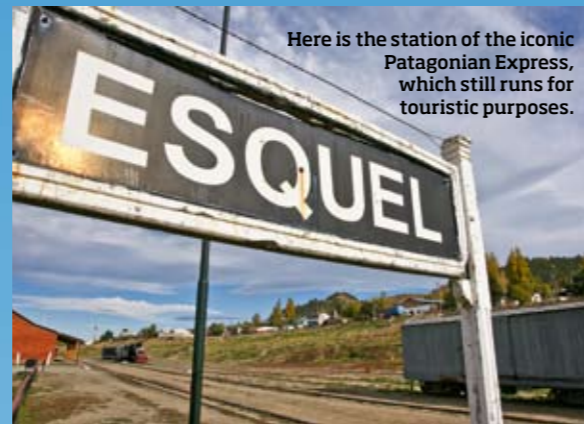
Patagonia is as isolated as the Australian Outback but in far more harsh climatic conditions.

Entering Chile from Bolivia is similar to entering Australia from Indonesia. It's a total return to the developed world in other words. Northern Chile is a desert country. Atacama extends for hundreds of kilometers along the Pacific and is considered the driest place on earth. In parts, rainfall is absent for years. Under its arid soil huge copper mines are

hidden. They are the powerhouse of the Chilean economy.

Driving on the Panamericana highway is a straightforward and dull process. The road is well paved and signed but petrol stations are not frequent. All major towns on the road, like Iquique, Antofagasta and Copiapo, are within 500km of each other. These copper towns have nothing to show apart from some fancy malls. Outback drivers would feel at home in Chile as there is nothing of real interest on the road, apart from some of the most powerful telescopes in the world. Atacama's clear sky is the ultimate observation desk for astronomers. If you want to taste the desert at full, you just need to visit San Pedro de Atacama, an oasis village hidden in a lunar landscape 100km from Antofagasta. The village itself is purposely dusty but stylish. You can find excellent pizzerias, sushi restaurants and art galleries on the main pedestrian road. Accommodation offered suits all tastes, from alternative backpackers to posh Americans.

“ This is an extraterrestrial landscape where, according to well known conspiracy theories, the Americans had filmed the landing of Apollo 11 on the moon. ”



Here is the station of the iconic Patagonian Express, which still runs for touristic purposes.

We spent four days there and visited the natural beauties around the village, like the valley of the moon. This is an extraterrestrial landscape, where, according to well-known conspiracy theories, the Americans had filmed the landing of the Apollo 11 on the moon. Whether you believe these theories or not (personally I don't...), Valle de la Luna is a very special place, especially at sunset.

As we were driving towards Santiago, we could see the landscape getting greener and huge vineyards replacing the mines. This is the reason Chilean wine is so good and bloody cheap. There are two nice towns worth a visit in Central Chile, La Serena and Valparaiso. The second one was mentioned in the *Motorcycle Diaries* of Che Guevara. It is a vital port with a colonial feel and unique architecture. You can still use 19th century steam motored elevators to climb to different 'barrios'

Pucon in Central Chile, is a manicured resort village next to Villarica Volcano which is still smoking...



Patagonia is gaucho (cowboy) country.



Due to low temperatures we were always looking for camping like this in South America.



Road signs are often ripped off by Patagonian winds.



The World Off Road Pt 8

We did about 1500km on the infamous Ruta 40 from Bariloche to El Calafate.



The iconic Perito Moreno glacier still defies global warming but for how long?

was moved by several centimeters. Concepcion was moved 3.5m to the west. We were told by locals that they felt as if it was the end of the world.

(neighborhoods) that were built on the hills overlooking the Pacific. Valparaiso is a town that makes you want to stay forever...

Santiago is a huge but clean capital with an entrepreneurial atmosphere. There is nothing interesting there apart from the 'cafés con piernas', the original coffee shops that resemble night clubs, where high heeled blondes serve you a café cortado (coffee with milk). So, we drove further south after we changed (under warranty) the fuel pump of our TDV6 engine.

We could enter Argentina from Santiago but we wanted to visit the area south of the capital that was devastated by last February's 8.8 grade earthquake.

Around Concepcion we saw that people were still living in tents despite the efforts of the Chilean government to provide shelter for everyone. On February 27th 2010, the fifth most powerful earthquake ever measured hit the Pacific Coast of Chile. More than 700 people were killed and about 200,000 left homeless from the cataclysmic event. The whole continent

Perito Moreno lies in Los Glaciares National Park, 70km west of El Calafate.

Patagonia Express

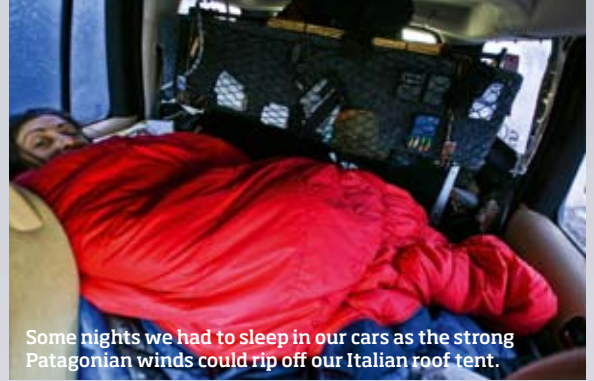
Chile is an extremely stretched country, about 4300km long north to south. It is a narrow strip of land located between the Andes range and the Pacific. You can enter Argentina from different high altitude passes on the Andes. We chose to drive from Temuco to Pucon and from there to enter Argentina from a twisty gravel road under the live Villarica volcano that smokes menacingly during the day. It was freezing when we arrived in Junin de los Andes, a village known as the 'trout capital' of Argentina. Junin, San Martin de los Andes, Villa de Agostura and Bariloche are surrounded by lakes. This is considered the 'Switzerland of South America', a beautiful region full of snow-capped mountains, crystal clear lakes and delicious chocolate bars. Our trip through Patagonia started from there.

South of Bariloche, the landscape changes dramatically. It gets more arid and isolated. Initially we couldn't understand why this flat area remains unexploited. Travelling from Esquel





Driving through Torres del Paine National Park by night.



Some nights we had to sleep in our cars as the strong Patagonian winds could rip off our Italian roof tent.

“ Patagonia is a land not a country. It is divided by the Andes and shared between Chile to the west and Argentina to the east. ”

to El Calafate through the roughest section of Ruta 40, we understood why. Who could live in a windy place like this? Patagonian winds are so fierce that no plants, insects, animals or human beings can survive. It is like a huge aerodynamic tunnel, with constant winds blowing at speed of 200km/h! The climatic phenomenon is created by the cold winds of Antarctica contrasting with the hot currents of the tropics. For two days we could not open a door or a window. Small stones from passing cars were catapulted like bullets towards the windshield and one nearly penetrated it. At the end of the trip, the right side of the car – the one facing the west – looked like it was shot by a machine gun and our precious roof tent was almost ripped off! Winds eased at Calafate, a nice resort village which is the base for exploring the famous Perito Moreno glacier. We visited the huge glacier that moves steadily from Chile to Argentino Lake and felt its ecological

We were on our own at Torres del Paine during winter. By summer, thousands of travelers from all over the world visit the park on a daily basis.

significance. Perito Moreno is a natural thermometer and one of the ultimate reminders that in the past, all Patagonia was covered by ice. If it melts, our planet will be really sick. That's why we all have to do something long before it does so...

To The End Of The World

You have to study the map to understand the complicated geography of Southern America. Patagonia is a land, not a country. It is divided by the Andes and shared between Chile – to the west of the range – and Argentina – to the east. If you want to reach the end of mainland America, you have to head further south from Calafate. You have to cross the border to Chile and arrive in Puerto Natales first. This is a remote port connected with the Pacific Ocean by a sea route through the fiords. You can't drive here from anywhere else in Chile. You have to take a weekly ferry from Puerto Mont - 1100km to the north - or drive through Argentinean Patagonia, like we did. Puerto Natales feels like the end of the world. It has a Nordic feeling actually, and seems like a port in Scandinavia or Iceland.





This is not the end of the Southern Hemisphere though. You have to cross the Magellan Strait by ferry and step on Tierra del Fuego, the archipelago of islands that comprises the southern end of America and the world. The main island is called Tierra del Fuego as well. One third of it belongs to Argentina, so we had to cross the border one more time, after a dusty drive through the endless steppe. The landscape changed again further to the south. The desert transformed to alpine landscape before we arrived to Ushuaia, the most remote town in the world. The natural harbor is well protected from the ultimate Andes summits. On the other side lies the Chilean Navarino island, which is sparsely inhabited. Further to the south there is just one continent, Antarctica. Ushuaia is the closest town to the southern pole and the perfect place to organize a trip there. We would like so but the vessels are stalled during winter and this is an expensive trip in anyway. You need at least 4500USD for a week's trip to Antarctica.

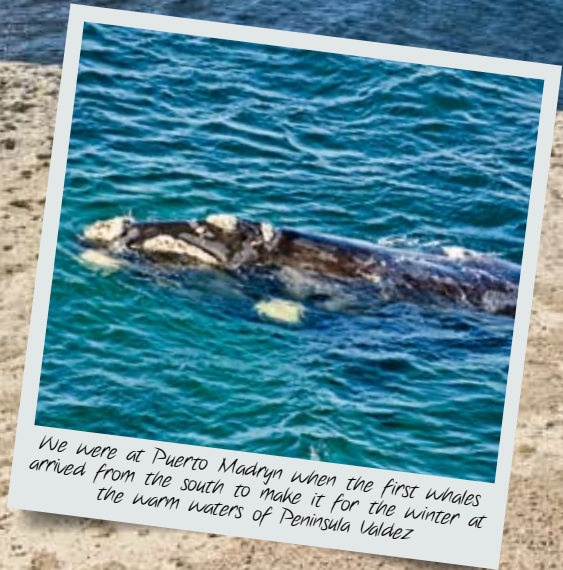
“ The landscape changed again further to the south. The desert transformed to alpine landscape before Ushuaia. ”

From here, you can explore the best national park in South America, Torres del Paine, a massif of granite mountains formed over millions of years thanks to internal volcanic erosions. Even if explained scientifically, the view of the horn like, twin-coloured tops seem to be a spectacular miracle. At the base of the Torres, there are pristine lakes, on the shores of which you can encounter herds of guanacos – a camelid species, like wild llamas. This is the ultimate place for trekking in South America.

From Puerto Natales, we drove through Chilean territory to the southernmost town of mainland America, Punta Arenas.

So, we just relaxed some days in this town that is like any other in Argentina, apart from its extreme geography. Ushuaia has everything! A lively market, loads of restaurants and a fancy casino. We visited the nearby Tierra del Fuego Park, the former prison (for which the town was created) and flew over the harbour in a Cessna. It was an achievement to be there, especially if you have driven all the way from Quebec. From the 45th parallel to the north to the 55th parallel to the south, this is what we did in the last few months. From now on, every kilometre would get us closer to Europe and to the end of our trip. That was the reason we were hesitant to leave Ushuaia...

Whale watching at Peninsula Valdez, Argentina.



We were at Puerto Madryn when the first whales arrived from the south to make it for the winter at the warm waters of Peninsula Valdez

On May 25th Argentina celebrated the 200 years of its independence. We followed the grandiose celebrations at the Obelisk in Buenos Aires among millions of locals.



Uruguayans adore vintage cars.

In search of cargo vessel

Our trip from Ushuaia to Buenos Aires was fast and easy but also uneventful. We drove the Eastern Ruta 3, along the Atlantic Ocean and it proved to be the duller road we had ever taken. Patagonia is an ugly place without the views of the snow-capped Andes range. There are few towns on the endless road and all of them lack any history as they were built to support the oil refineries of Patagonia. The wind was omnipresent especially around the 50th parallel. So, we drove and drove and drove for 600 to 800km every day.

In Buenos Aires, we started searching for a cargo vessel to ship our car. We did the same at nearby Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, which lies on the other side of the river plate. We kept searching till we arrived in Rio de Janeiro. On the way, we crossed all of Uruguay, entered Argentina, from there to Paraguay – the poorest country in the region

270 different falls on Iguazu River - natural border between Argentina and Brazil - comprise of supposedly the most astonishing natural attraction on earth. Iguazu falls were seen for the first time by a westerner - Spanish conqueror de Vaca - in 1541.



Yerba mate is a national addiction in Argentina and Uruguay. Many people go around holding the essential thermos, where they steep the dry leaves for personal use.

– and then to Brazil. After we visited the majestic Iguazu Falls, we took the long, busy motorway to Sao Paulo and Rio. It was hard to make it in the Brazilian traffic. We didn't like the industrial atmosphere of the huge country. We loved Rio of course, especially the southern beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema. Finally we found a vessel that could take the three of us to the other side of the Atlantic. We had to drive back to Buenos Aires for that. From there we found the most affordable way to get back

home which was also the hardest way home... On July 26th, we got onboard a Grimaldi cargo vessel and crossed the Atlantic. On August 9th we will arrive in Dakar, the westernmost tip of Africa. From there we will then follow the very same route we took in 2007 through the Sahara Desert. Finally, from Morocco we will enter Europe. This is a dream-like finale for our three and a half month long epic trip, which means that you will read at least one more story from us... 📖



See where Akis and Vula are now on www.theworldoffroad.com