

Current Issue

Adventure Add-On

Eco-camp in Patagonia

by Mary Bergin

Wily Winds: A Patagonia eco-camp showcases nature's purity and power.



My world has turned into a cocoon of fibers — fleece, wool, a feather quilt — and it nudges me into gentle slumber. I drift while watching a pure, starry galaxy fill my tent's rooftop window. Conditions appear brisk, but calm. The landscape seems stark, yet stunning. Good sleeping weather, I decide.

So it is a jolt when the surreal howling — like a train whistle, only more demonic — arrives in the wee hours with thrashes and slaps to the sides of my roost. It is annoying in

sound, alarming in persistence, unnerving in its potency.

Untying the tent flaps would be ludicrous, so there will be no confrontation with this beast. I am amazed and befuddled; I consider groping for earplugs. Then the rude interruption disappears almost as abruptly as it arrived.

At breakfast, our guide merely shrugs. It was the wind. Nothing extraordinary, he says. Maybe 35 mph, tops. Gusts of four times that speed have been recorded.

This is Patagonia, at the bottom of Chile and Argentina, near the end of the world. The wind is in charge, and we all will learn this long before our stay ends. "Nature is outside, knocking at the door," our eco-camp guides tell us.

We are reminded of the wind's power again and again during the next three days. Gales will unbalance hikers as we round a bend, reach a summit, board a rubber dinghy and slosh closer to stunning, icy-blue glaciers. Currents seem to surge from nowhere to whip our cheeks, kick sand into our eyes, challenge our equilibrium and rock us toward motion sickness.

The wind invigorates, shocks and enthralls, although most appearances

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seem brief during this visit. When the wind sleeps or whispers, what remains is exquisite beauty and — to borrow a phrase from Philipians — a peace that passes all understanding.

Our base is an eco-camp set inside the 450,000-acre Torres del Paine National Park, which since 1978 has been a UNESCO world biosphere reserve. It is considered one of the most uncontaminated places on the planet, lush with waterfalls, glaciers, lakes and mountainous terrain.

The occasional gaucho hovers along hilly ridges, checking the whereabouts of sheep that wander onto park property. Rheas strut leisurely along miles of uninterrupted, uncluttered acreage. Herds of wild guanaco — similar to the alpaca, but with softer fur — roam, scuffle and butt heads to determine dominance. The main predator of all is the puma, which seems to make itself scarce until hungry.

Andean condors, with their 10-foot wingspans, and buzzard eagles soar and swoop, in search of a convenient lunch. The daintier black-necked swan and spectacled duck prefer to hunt in water.

“It is just the appetizer,” guide Armando Iglesias tells us, as we stand in awe at the end of our first short hike, to Salto Grande waterfall. He used to work as a gaucho with his father; they cared for 4,800 sheep and 20 cattle on 5,000 acres of Patagonia’s Tierra del Fuego. The rule of thumb is one grazing animal per acre, to avoid ruining the nutrient-challenged land.

All of our guides are government-certified, which is proof of knowledge about the park and its terrain, inhabitants, moods — plus how to prevent, confront and survive life-threatening predicaments.

Guide Cristian Silva talks about carrying on his back a hiker who broke an ankle during a 12-mile roundtrip trek to the foot of Paine Towers, the park’s most common hike. It is a full-day adventure, following many hills and valleys before attempting a rock scramble to the trail’s summit.

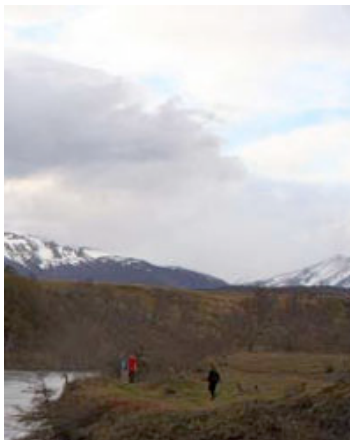
Participation requires physical fitness, and those who succeed can consider the five-day “W” hike that involves camping and carrying more gear. There are easy hikes, too, at least by Patagonia standards: I know of few who would use poles during a 5-mile hike termed “easy” in the U.S. Midwest, where I live, then end the day negotiating a steep scree of loose sand and sedimentary rubble.

In December, when the northern United States struggles with windchill and snowfall, it is full-throttle summer in Patagonia, a tremendously remote and idyllic part of the world. Even though Torres del Paine is open all year, it is best to visit the park from October to April — the southern hemisphere’s spring to summer.

Prepare for all moods of weather, but come with an open mind. There is a lot that I wouldn’t have believed about Patagonia until seeing and feeling it.

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