

# Greater Patagonian Trail 2016

Hamish Warren, Omar Saif,  
Anne Scholle, & Jocelyne Sze

15 Nov 2016 to 6 Jan 2017

Lago Central, Aysén, Chile



Cerro Castillo, Aysén, Chile

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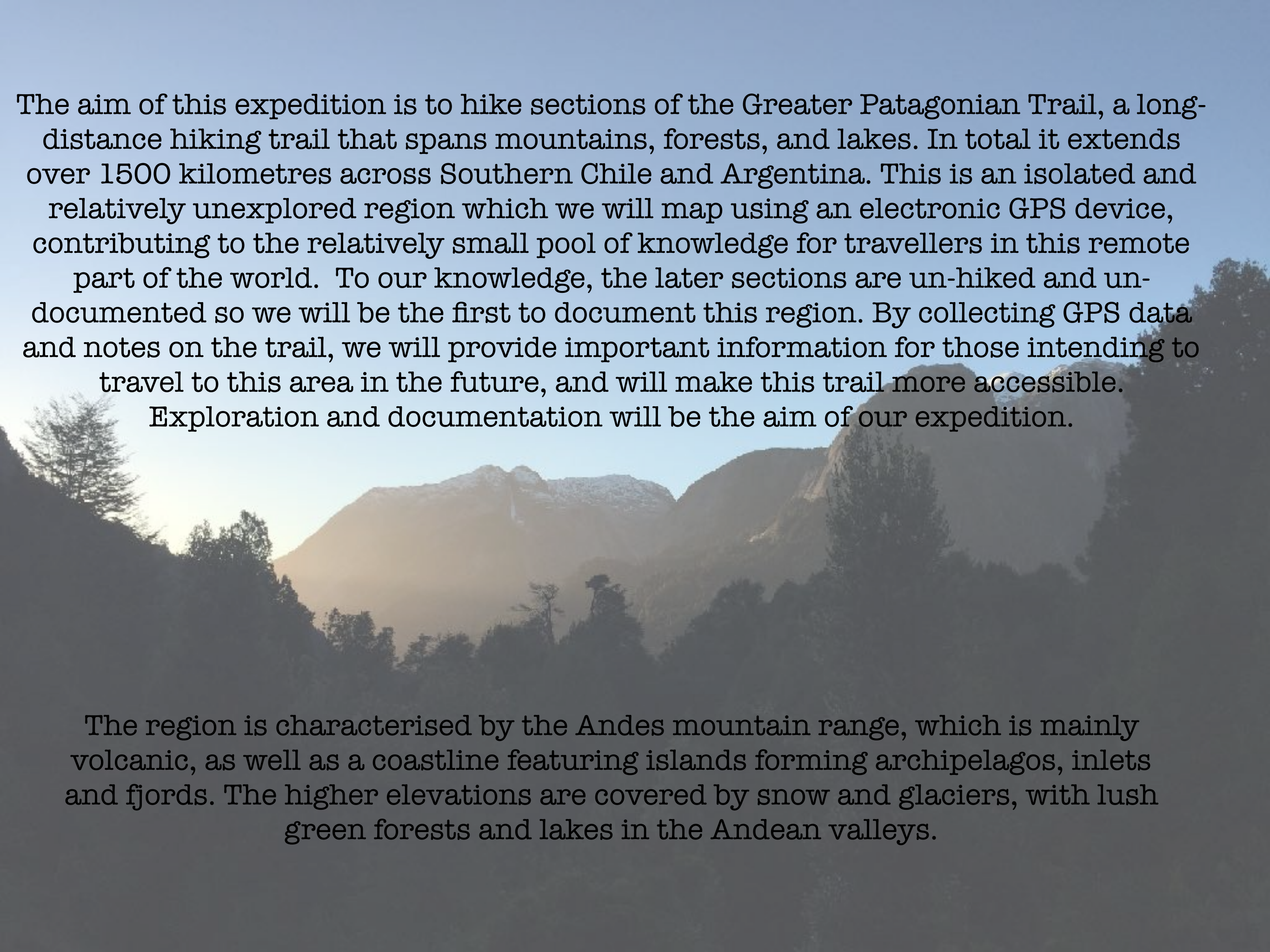
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# INTRODUCTION





The aim of this expedition is to hike sections of the Greater Patagonian Trail, a long-distance hiking trail that spans mountains, forests, and lakes. In total it extends over 1500 kilometres across Southern Chile and Argentina. This is an isolated and relatively unexplored region which we will map using an electronic GPS device, contributing to the relatively small pool of knowledge for travellers in this remote part of the world. To our knowledge, the later sections are un-hiked and undocumented so we will be the first to document this region. By collecting GPS data and notes on the trail, we will provide important information for those intending to travel to this area in the future, and will make this trail more accessible.

Exploration and documentation will be the aim of our expedition.

The region is characterised by the Andes mountain range, which is mainly volcanic, as well as a coastline featuring islands forming archipelagos, inlets and fjords. The higher elevations are covered by snow and glaciers, with lush green forests and lakes in the Andean valleys.

This long distance trail starts from outside the traditional Patagonia boundaries, close to the Chilean city of Curicó, before crossing over the Chile-Argentine border. It runs through the Patagonian Andes and was first created in Nov 2013 by German hiker Jan Dudeck and his Chilean partner Meylin Ubilla. It is currently the longest distance trail in South America, with about 1500 kilometres of trail established. There is the potential for a further 1000 or more kilometre extension that have yet to be explored, and possibly even as far south as Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost tip of South America. Most of the Greater Patagonian Trail is in Chile, crossing over the Chile-Argentine border after 1183 kilometres.

The trail is predominantly made up of hiking and horse trails that traverse remote valleys and mountain passes, created and maintained by local herdsmen and settlers. Some sections of the trail comprise less travelled minor dirt roads, or open terrain without a visible trail. These may be steep and exposed, but do not require technical climbing, nor pass dense vegetation.



The Greater Patagonian Trail

# MEET THE TEAM



Cerro Castillo NP, Aysén, Chile

# HAMISH WARREN

Role: Team Leader

Age: 26

Academic Background: BSc (Hons) Physics, University of Nottingham. MRes (Merit) Ecosystems and Environmental Change, Imperial College London

Relevant Experience: An outdoor enthusiast with extensive experience in long distance hikes all over the world including solo through hiking the 1200km Skikoku trail, Japan, in 2013. Army survival skills training during 6 years in the army cadets.

Level 1 first aid with St Johns' Ambulance. Intermediate rock climber with regular training and member of Imperial College Mountaineering Club. Experience skiing in the Swiss and French alps.



# OMAR SAIF

Role: Field Expert

Age: 27

Academic Background: BA (Hons) Fine Art. MSc (Merit) Conservation Science, Imperial College London.

Relevant Experience: Seven years traditional climbing experience, Single Pitch Award holder, Mountain Leader Training, Wilderness first aid. Extensive mountain thru-hiking and wild camping experience throughout Europe and Middle East. Winter mountaineering and Ice climbing in Europe. Big Wall climbing extensively in Swiss (E3 5C), Italian Alps (VI+) and Wadi Rum in Jordan. White Spider climbing centre competition squad coach.



# ANNE SCHOLLE

Role: Logistics Officer

Age: 30

Academic Background: BA (Magna Cum Laude) Psychology, Dickinson College (2008).  
MSc (Distinction) Conservation Science, Imperial College London.

Relevant experience: Extensive experience travelling and living abroad (Europe, Southeast Asia, South Korea, Australia/New Zealand, Africa), including to remote areas in Thailand and Uganda. Hiking and camping throughout the USA, most notably for 5 months in Alaska. Planned trips to Snowdonia for various groups of students and started the Silwood Ultimate Frisbee society. 14+ years playing Ultimate Frisbee.



Source: Anne Scholle

# JOCELYNE SHIMIN SZE

Role: Navigator

Age: 24

Academic Background: BA (Hons) Natural Sciences, University of Cambridge. MRes (Distinction) in Ecosystems and Environmental Change, Imperial College London.

Relevant Experience: Extensive experience climbing and hiking outdoors (Australia, Hong Kong, Italy, Nepal, Tanzania, Thailand, United Kingdom) and doing field work in remote areas (Ecuador, Malaysia, Peru, the Philippines, South Africa). Notable hikes include Island Peak in Nepal, Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and West Highland Way in Scotland.



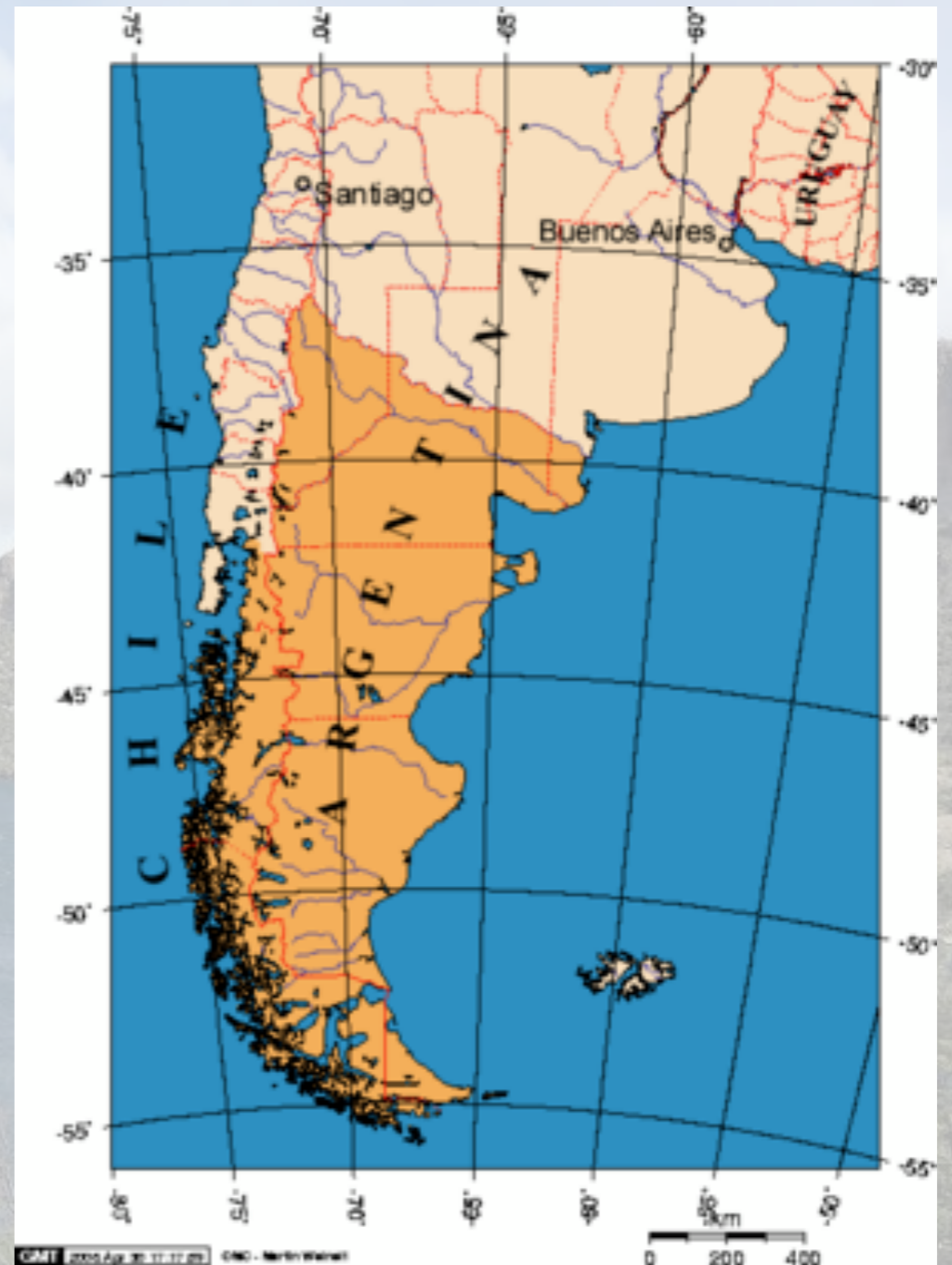
# COUNTRY PROFILE



Lago Central, XI Region, Chile

Patagonia refers to the southern region of South America, covering both Chile and Argentina. Most of Patagonia is within Argentina, and the northern limit of Argentina extends further north than Chile.

We started our hike from outside the most accepted boundary of Patagonia, in a town called Coñaripe in Chile, and finished in a popular tourist town called El Chaltén in Argentina. Most of our hike was in Chile.

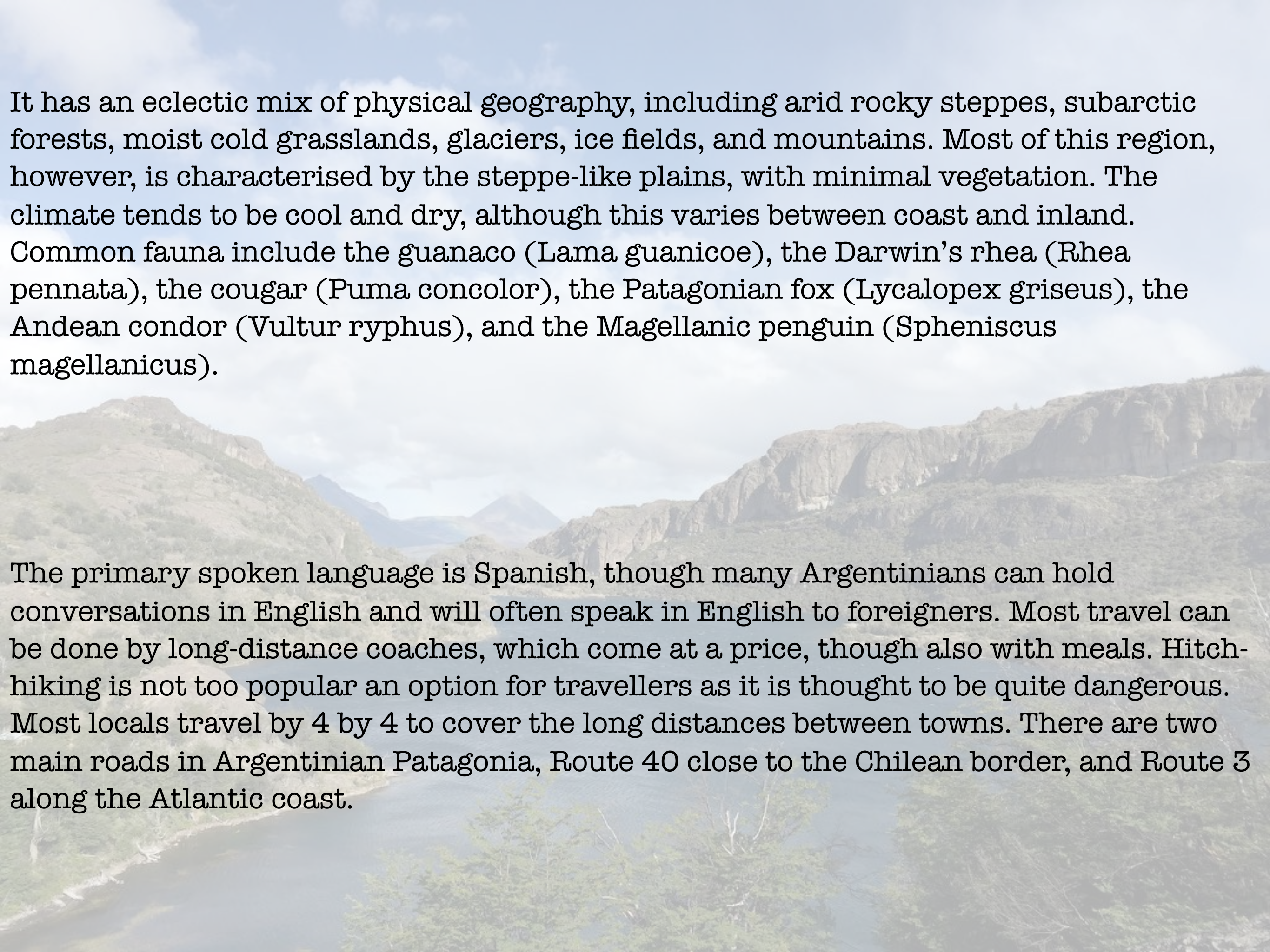


The most accepted extent of Patagonia (in dark orange) Source: Wikipedia

# Argentina

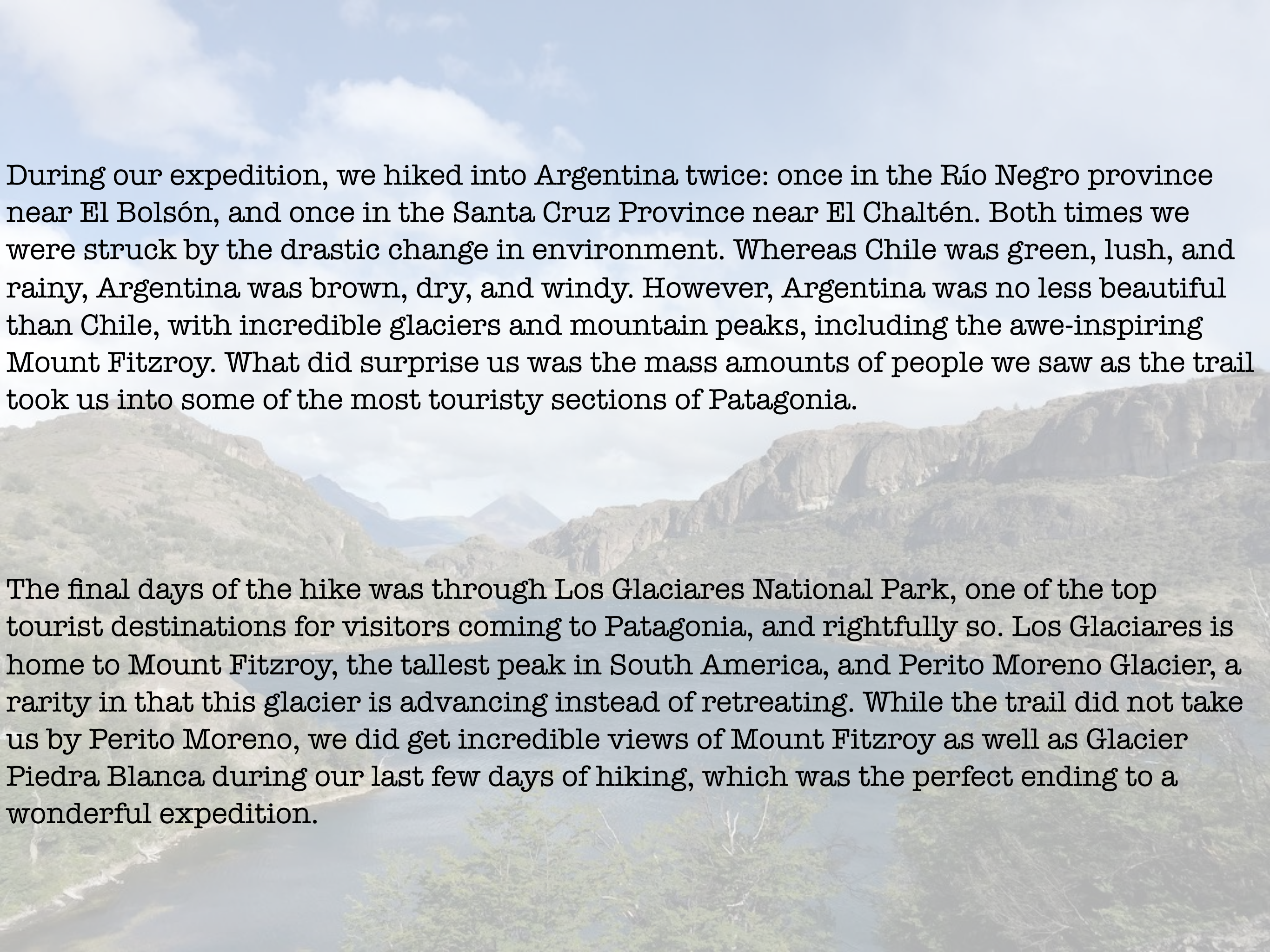
Argentina, officially the Argentine Republic, is the 2nd largest country in South America, and the 8th largest in the world. It has 23 provinces and an autonomous city, Buenos Aires. Patagonia is one of the 7 geographical regions in Argentina, a large plateau occupying most of the south, and covers five provinces: Neuquén, Río Negro, Chubut, Santa Cruz, and Tierra del Fuego. Southern Argentina is sparsely populated, with an average of 3.62 people/km<sup>2</sup> in the five provinces found in Patagonia. Two of the most important economic activities in this region include livestock (most notably sheep), and tourism. (Wikipedia)

1 GBP = 20 Argentine Pesos (ARS)



It has an eclectic mix of physical geography, including arid rocky steppes, subarctic forests, moist cold grasslands, glaciers, ice fields, and mountains. Most of this region, however, is characterised by the steppe-like plains, with minimal vegetation. The climate tends to be cool and dry, although this varies between coast and inland. Common fauna include the guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*), the Darwin's rhea (*Rhea pennata*), the cougar (*Puma concolor*), the Patagonian fox (*Lycalopex griseus*), the Andean condor (*Vultur ryphus*), and the Magellanic penguin (*Spheniscus magellanicus*).

The primary spoken language is Spanish, though many Argentines can hold conversations in English and will often speak in English to foreigners. Most travel can be done by long-distance coaches, which come at a price, though also with meals. Hitchhiking is not too popular an option for travellers as it is thought to be quite dangerous. Most locals travel by 4 by 4 to cover the long distances between towns. There are two main roads in Argentinian Patagonia, Route 40 close to the Chilean border, and Route 3 along the Atlantic coast.



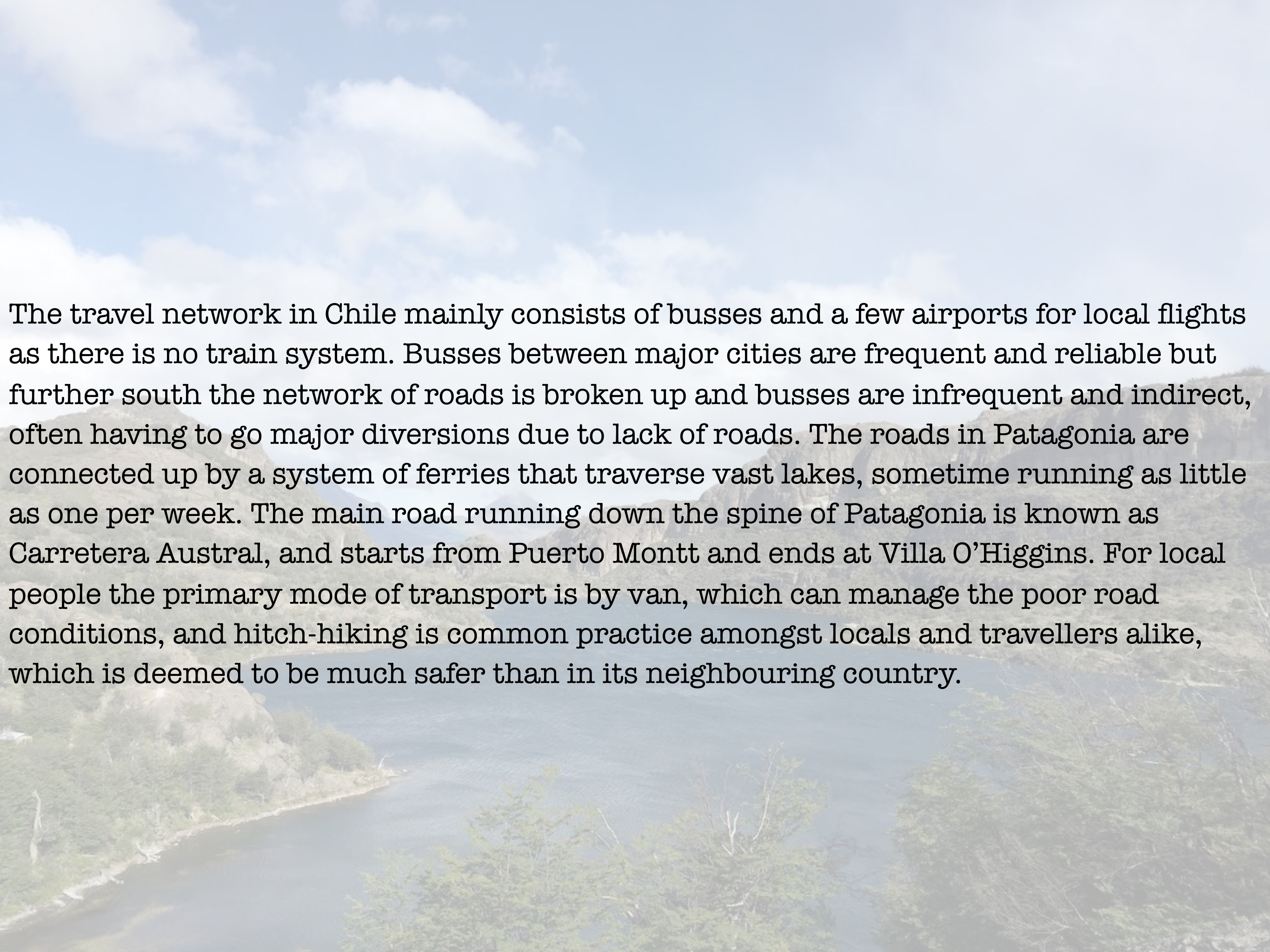
During our expedition, we hiked into Argentina twice: once in the Río Negro province near El Bolsón, and once in the Santa Cruz Province near El Chaltén. Both times we were struck by the drastic change in environment. Whereas Chile was green, lush, and rainy, Argentina was brown, dry, and windy. However, Argentina was no less beautiful than Chile, with incredible glaciers and mountain peaks, including the awe-inspiring Mount Fitzroy. What did surprise us was the mass amounts of people we saw as the trail took us into some of the most touristy sections of Patagonia.

The final days of the hike was through Los Glaciares National Park, one of the top tourist destinations for visitors coming to Patagonia, and rightfully so. Los Glaciares is home to Mount Fitzroy, the tallest peak in South America, and Perito Moreno Glacier, a rarity in that this glacier is advancing instead of retreating. While the trail did not take us by Perito Moreno, we did get incredible views of Mount Fitzroy as well as Glacier Piedra Blanca during our last few days of hiking, which was the perfect ending to a wonderful expedition.

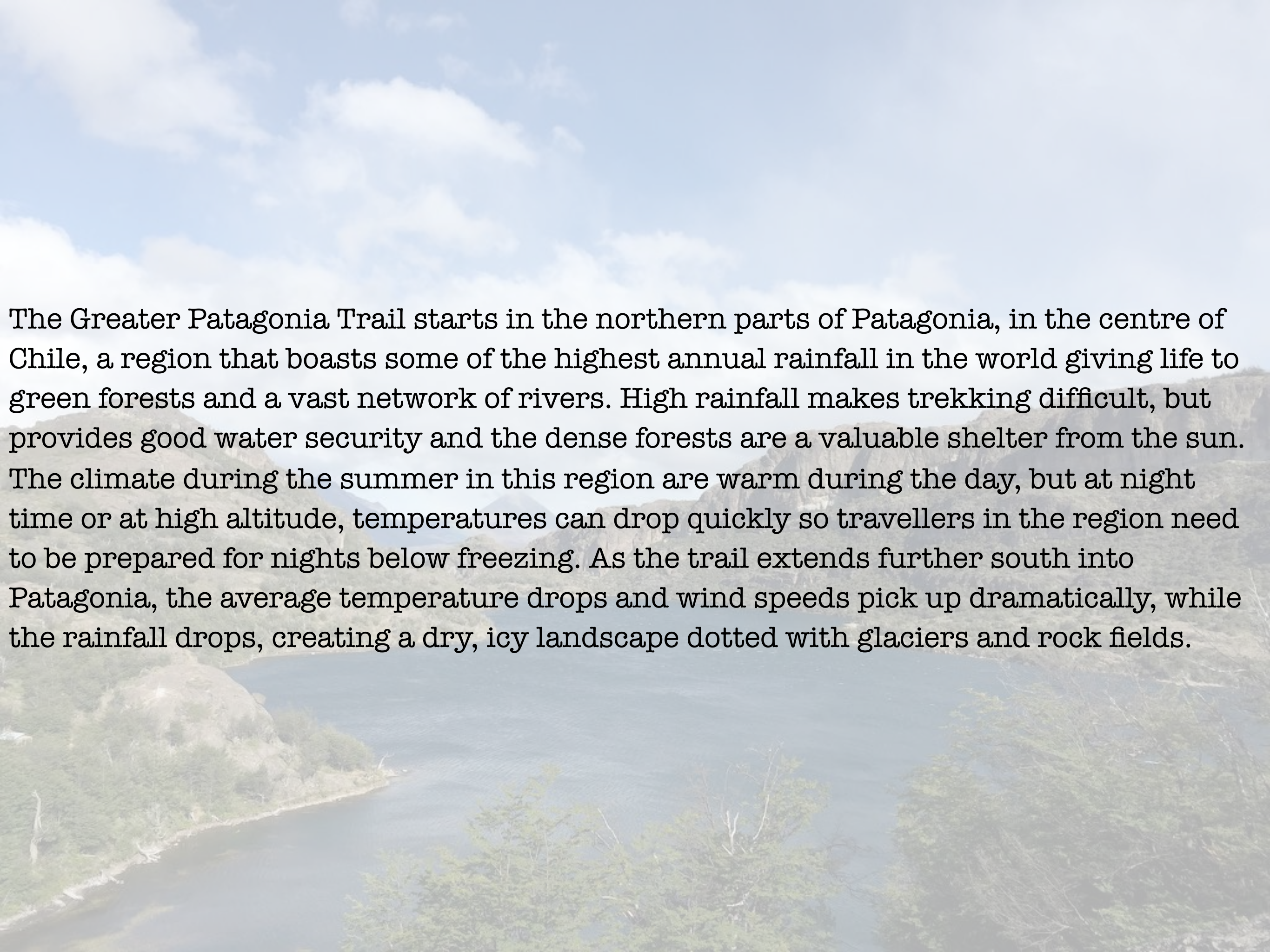
# Chile

The Republic of Chile is the long narrow strip of land between the Andes mountain range and the Pacific Ocean at the southern end of South America. The country's 18 million people live mainly in the three biggest cities in the north, including its capital Santiago, Concepcion and Valparaiso. Being so long, Chile's climate varies dramatically along its length, from the dry, arid Atacama Dessert in the north, the wet rich forests of middle Chile, to the barren icy landscapes of southern Patagonia. The primary language spoken throughout Chile is Spanish, although Chilean Spanish is known to be far removed from the original, with thousands of words unique to Chile (many native Mapuche in origin) and an accent unlike any other South American country. In the far south, regional dialects make communication difficult with local people.

1 GBP = 850 Chilean Pesos (CLP)

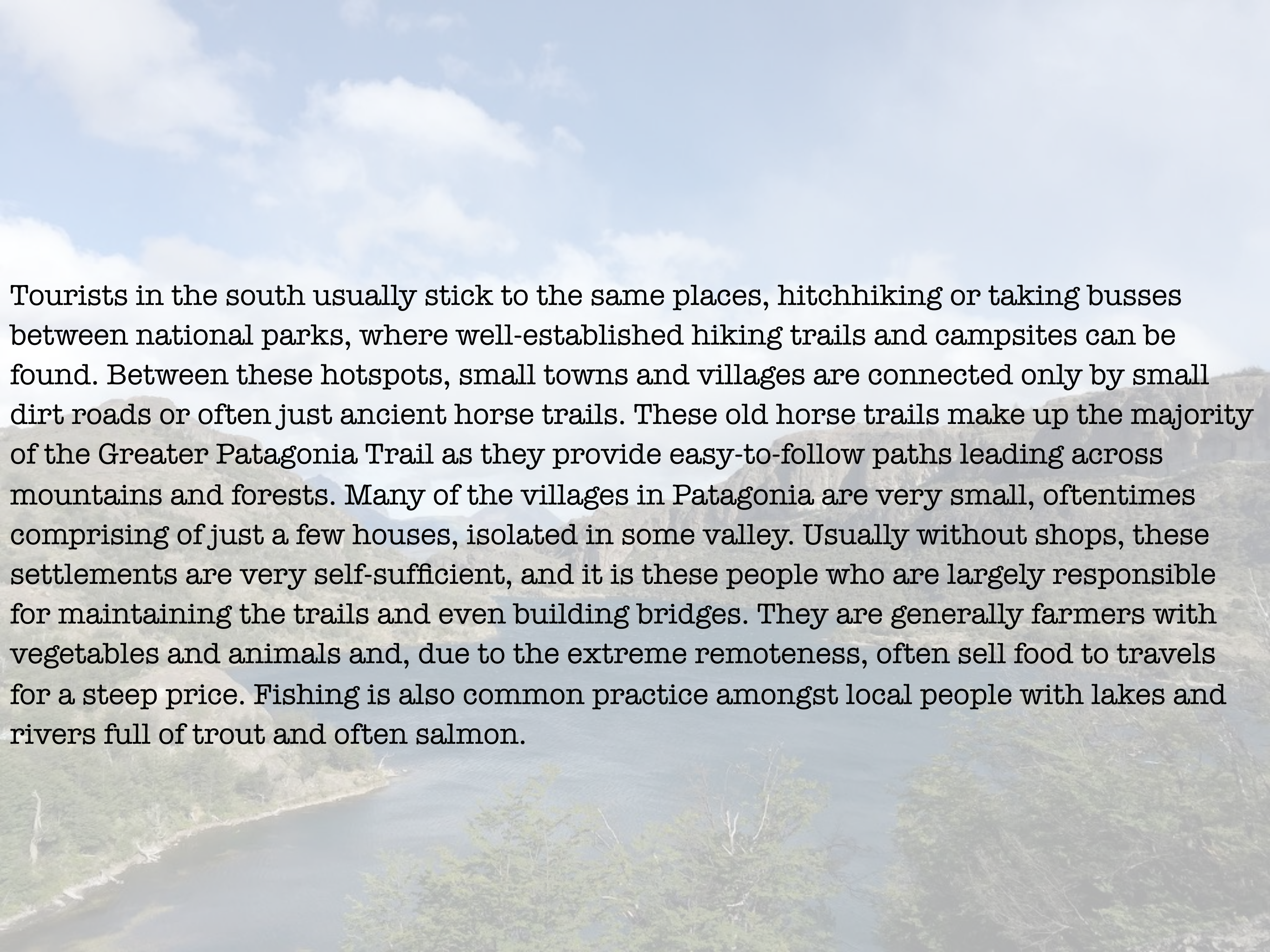
The background of the page is a scenic landscape featuring a large, calm body of water, likely a fjord or lake, surrounded by steep, forested mountains. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The text is overlaid on this background.

The travel network in Chile mainly consists of busses and a few airports for local flights as there is no train system. Busses between major cities are frequent and reliable but further south the network of roads is broken up and busses are infrequent and indirect, often having to go major diversions due to lack of roads. The roads in Patagonia are connected up by a system of ferries that traverse vast lakes, sometime running as little as one per week. The main road running down the spine of Patagonia is known as Carretera Austral, and starts from Puerto Montt and ends at Villa O'Higgins. For local people the primary mode of transport is by van, which can manage the poor road conditions, and hitch-hiking is common practice amongst locals and travellers alike, which is deemed to be much safer than in its neighbouring country.



The Greater Patagonia Trail starts in the northern parts of Patagonia, in the centre of Chile, a region that boasts some of the highest annual rainfall in the world giving life to green forests and a vast network of rivers. High rainfall makes trekking difficult, but provides good water security and the dense forests are a valuable shelter from the sun. The climate during the summer in this region are warm during the day, but at night time or at high altitude, temperatures can drop quickly so travellers in the region need to be prepared for nights below freezing. As the trail extends further south into Patagonia, the average temperature drops and wind speeds pick up dramatically, while the rainfall drops, creating a dry, icy landscape dotted with glaciers and rock fields.



A scenic landscape featuring a wide river in the foreground, surrounded by lush green vegetation. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

Tourists in the south usually stick to the same places, hitchhiking or taking busses between national parks, where well-established hiking trails and campsites can be found. Between these hotspots, small towns and villages are connected only by small dirt roads or often just ancient horse trails. These old horse trails make up the majority of the Greater Patagonia Trail as they provide easy-to-follow paths leading across mountains and forests. Many of the villages in Patagonia are very small, oftentimes comprising of just a few houses, isolated in some valley. Usually without shops, these settlements are very self-sufficient, and it is these people who are largely responsible for maintaining the trails and even building bridges. They are generally farmers with vegetables and animals and, due to the extreme remoteness, often sell food to travelers for a steep price. Fishing is also common practice amongst local people with lakes and rivers full of trout and often salmon.

# EQUIPMENT LIST



## Personal equipment (clothing/equipment/personal effects)

We left it to individual members to pack their personal equipment, resulting in a range of weights (5kg to 9kg). This was the minimum we required each to pack, and it was sufficient for our expedition.

3 pairs of socks	1 fleece jacket	dry bags
2 pairs of underwear	1 down jacket	mug/bowl/utensil
1 pair of shorts	1 waterproof jacket	at least 3l worth of capacity for carrying water
2 shirts	cap/woolen hat/buff	sleeping mat
1 pair of trousers	toothbrush/personal toiletries	sleeping bag
Thermal top/bottom		hiking poles (optional)

Insulated sleeping mats and down sleeping bags were some of the most important equipment we had with us, for the nights were cold. We opted not to bring inflatable mats as those are liable to puncture and were not convenient for use around campfires. However, we each brought our own sleeping mats and bags, and here is a quick review of how they performed.

Doite sleeping roll mat	Bought brand new right before the trip, and disintegrated fairly quickly, within a few weeks of starting the trail. It was almost completely flat by the end of the trip.
Karrimor folding sleeping mat	Already in use for about a year, and while it did disintegrate a fair bit and got torn, it still provided some insulation from the ground.
Therm-a-rest RidgeRest	Already in use for a few years, and held up during the expedition. It also dried fairly quickly after getting wet.
Therm-a-rest Z Lite Sol	Bought brand new and did well during the expedition, providing probably the most insulation from the cold ground.
REI Co-op Flash	Comfort: -2C (+ silk liner to -6C). Was not almost sufficient for the freezing temperatures in the South!
Mountain Hardware Ratio 15	Comfort: -9C. Was sufficient and held up well.
Mountain Equipment Classic	Comfort: -15C. Was sufficient and held up well.
Alpkit PipeDream	Comfort: -6C. Was sufficient and held up well.

## Team equipment (Hiking/camping/electronics)



MSR Alpine 2 Pot Set	2 microUSB, 2 iPhone USB chargers & 2 USB plug adaptors
2 MSR Hubba Hubba NX 2-person tents	Satellite phone
Platypus GravityWorks Water Filter 4L	Garmin GPS device
spare tent zips/pegs	DeLorme inReach Explorer
Gear Aid Tenacious Tape Repair Tape	GoalZero Nomad 7 Solar Panel

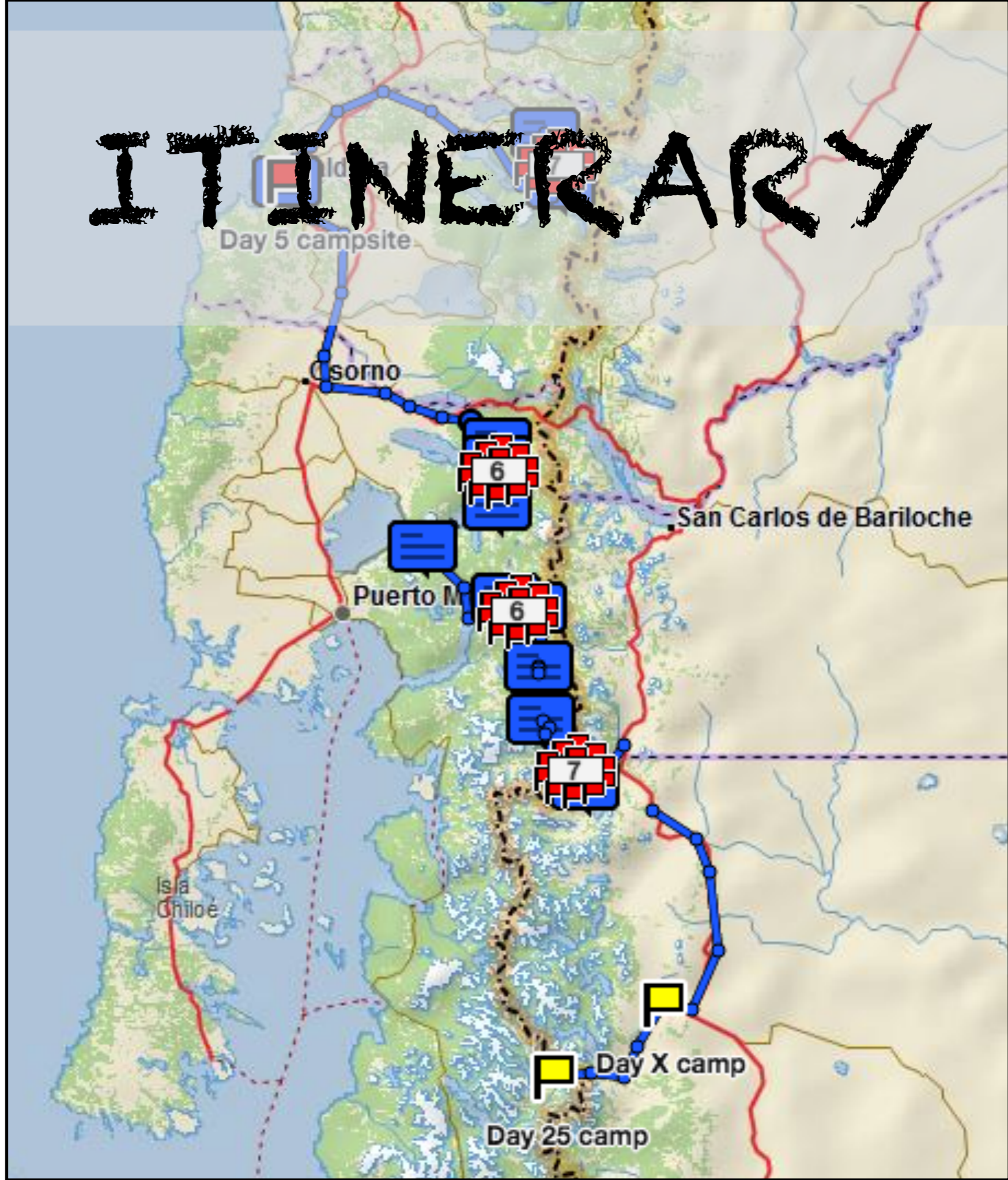


GoalZero Nomad 7 Solar Panel  
 → Vital for keeping our DeLorme inReach Explorer and phones charged, though it was not much use in the cloudier South

Platypus GravityWorks Water Filter  
 → Didn't really need it, the water everywhere was really clean!

We had 1 tent, the satellite phone and the GPS device on loan from Imperial Exploration Board. The DeLorme inReach Explorer was our vital GPS communication device to send texts to our family to let them know we were safe every night.

# ITINERARY



We realised at Puerto Aysén that our planned itinerary (distance and days) were actually meant for the pack-rafting version of the trail. Hence the planned and actual itineraries differ greatly. **Lesson learnt: double and triple check your itinerary before starting!** We all assumed that other people knew what was going on and that we would mostly just be following the GPS maps and see how things go day by day.

	PLANNED	ACTUAL
Day 1	Coñaripe (Section 11)	Coñaripe to Pellaifa (Section 11)
Day 2	Liquiñe	Liquiñe
Day 3	Lago Pirihueico (Section 12)	Lago Verde
Day 4	Rio Pillanleufu	Puerto Fuy
Day 5	Rio Pillanleufu	Took bus diversion to Valdivia
Day 6	Rio Pillanleufu	Took bus to Puyehue (Aguas Caliente) and started hike (Section 14)
Day 7	Puerto Maihue (Section 13)	Hotel Antillanca
Day 8	Rio Melipue	Lago Rupanco (Section 15)
Day 9	Nilahue river	Laguna Chica
Day 10	Volcan Puyehue	Lago Todos los Santos
Day 11	Ruta 215, Conaf Anticura (Section 14)	Took boat to Petrohué then bus to Cochamó
Day 12	Hotel Antillanca	Cochamó to La Junta (Section 16)
Day 13	Lago Rupanco (Section 15)	Rio Cochamó

Day 14	Rio Techado	El Arco
Day 15	Ralún	Lago Vidal Gomez
Day 16	Cochamó (Section 16)	past Paso El Leon
Day 17	Rio Cochamo	Llanada Grande
Day 18	El Arco	Segundo Corral
Day 19	Lago Vidal Gomez	Rest day in Segundo Corral
Day 20	Rio Manso	Border crossing Paso Rio Puelo (Chile-Argentina)
Day 21	El Manso	Lago Puelo, then bus to El Bolsón (Argentina)
Day 22	Llanada Grande	Rest day in El Bolsón
Day 23	Lago de las Rocas/Segundo Corral	Rest day in El Bolsón
Day 24	Lago Puelo (Section 17)	Esquel
Day 25	Lago Puelo	Futulaféu
Day 26	Arroyo del Tyco	Coyhaique (Section 24)



Day 27	Lago Cholila	Rest day in Coyhaique
Day 28	Lago Rivadavia	Rio Simpson
Day 29	Villa Rivadavia (Section 18)	Elizalde (Section 25?)
Day 30	Lago Menéndez/Lago Verde	Lago Paloma
Day 31	Lago Futulaufquen	Attempted mountain pass
Day 32	Villa Futulaufquen (Section 19)	Lago Paloma (backtrack)
Day 33	Rio Desaguadero	Villa Cerro Castillo
Day 34	Aldea Escolar	Rest day in Villa Cerro Castillo
Day 35	Rio Frio	Day hike to Laguna Cerro Castillo
Day 36	Palena (Section 20)	Lago Tamango/Central
Day 37	Rio Azul	Rio Claro
Day 38	Lago Palena	Puerto Ibañez
Day 39	Rio de los Nevados	Christmas Eve at Puerto Ibañez

Day 40	Lago Verde	Christmas day at Puerto Ibañez
Day 41	Villa Tapera (Section 21)	Villa Cerro Castillo
Day 42	Villa Amengual (Section 22)	Took bus to Puerto Tranquilo
Day 43	Rio Maniguales (Section 24)	Took bus to Cochrane
Day 44	Rio Nireguao	Rest day in Cochrane
Day 45	Cerro Mano Negra	Puente Barrancoso
Day 46	Coyhaique	Took bus to Villa O'Higgins
Day 47	Rio Simpson (Section 25)	New Year's Day at Villa O'Higgins
Day 48	Lago la Paloma	Rest day in Villa O'Higgins
Day 49	Estero del Bosque (Section 26)	Lago del Desierto
Day 50	Villa Cerro Castillo	Walked along Lago del Desierto
Day 51	Rio Ibañez (Section 27)	Poincenot campsite, El Chaltén
Day 52	Puerto Ingeniero Ibañez	Finished in El Chaltén

# EXPEDITION DIARY



Lago Vidal Gomez, Los Lagos, Chile

# Coñaripe to Puerto Fuy

We met in Chile's capital, Santiago, the day before embarking on our expedition and, occupying the entire terrace in the hostel, we spread out everything we had over the floor for one final gear check. We made a few last minute decisions to leave some unnecessary weight behind and with that we were ready. It was a night bus to Coñaripe, a small town in the Los Ríos region of Chile, our scheduled start point, leaving us ready to hike the next morning. Arriving in the morning with a cold breeze biting our faces, we scanned the terrain which we would soon traverse. Surrounded by mountains and a huge perfectly conical snow topped volcano (Volcán Villarica is the main local tourist attraction), a collective smile grew on our faces and widened further as we realised there were hot springs 'nearby'. We got ourselves a quick breakfast from the panadería (bakery) and met a very friendly lady, a Jehovah's Witness from Colombia, who told us about visiting Volcán Villarica and some local hot springs that were 'just 4 km away, past a big bridge'. After acquiring a machete, we headed for these hot springs. And ended up walking 16km along the dusty gravel road, before finally arriving at a hot spring resort, which cost CLP10,000 for entry. That was our first primer on what to expect when we ask locals about how far a location is... We decided to set up camp at Lake Pellaifa, and passed a smaller hot spring 'Termas Pellaifa' which was just CLP3000 per entry.



Volcán Villarica

Day 1

So we spent our first evening soaking in the thermally heated pools (they had one freezing, one luke warm, and one hot water pool). We definitely needed it, having started the hike with some pretty fast and long walking along dusty roads, instead of easing into it. There were a few other travellers in the pool, three Germans on a cycle tour and an American guy doing a work/travel in South America. We later met those Germans again, in Coyhaique. While at Coñaripe, we had also made friends with a little Jack Russell who came along with us the whole way, even to the hot springs. Jackie, as we named her, didn't even get distracted by other people at the hot springs and followed us back to our campsite.

Then it was time for our first dinner, still very much amateurs at the art of campfire cooking, we managed to get a nice fire going by the side of a beautiful mountain lake, and with our new stainless steel pots we made rice, veggies and meat, a real feast. Our plan was to make a fire each night, to cook dinner and also make bread for the next day. Improvising, with no experience making bread on a campfire, we rolled out some dough made of flour, water, and salt, and fried flatbreads in the lid of the pot. These remarkable little chapattis became a staple for the rest of the trip! Perfectly satisfied with a good first day's progress we slept like babies. Inspection of the map the next morning revealed that the chase for a hot spring had taken us off trail. The real trail would start at the next town, a few more days walking on the same road, sharing it with trucks and more dust.



Jackie followed us all the way from Coñaripe to Pellaifa (~16km)!

Day 1

After a quick breakfast of a chapati each topped with a fifth of an avocado, we started back on our hike. Realising that we would have to walk another 20km along the road, we opted to take a bus (CLP2000) to the next town of Liquiñe so as to not aggravate Hamish's knee, which had suffered the day before. In fact the real reason for this impromptu ride was to leave Jackie the dog behind without it following us further. We had a vote on what to do regarding this, and it was decided to make a leave on a bus as not to need to shout or scare Jackie away. We thought that Jackie would become injured with the hardships to come.

After getting into Liquiñe and having a another chapati each, we were on the trail at last. The first section of the trail took us on an incredibly steep incline, still getting used to the heavy loads on our backs this was the first true challenge. But despite the exertion, it felt amazing to be off the road and truly on the trail, like four ants wondering in the vast expanse of mountains and lakes that is northern Patagonia. It was just 6km of relentless uphill before we were truly spent and

decided to call it a day. We had been lost twice already, firstly taking a wrong turn and finding ourselves in a dead end before noticing our error, and shortly after finding the path closed and having to traverse around a farm. We were discovering that this trail wasn't going to be straightforward. We made camp in a beautiful sunny clearing and started a nice fire. Dinner number two consisted of rice with peanuts, a winning combination that would become a regular meal for us.



Our first encounter with llamas (and sheep, who were much less curious)!

Day 2

The day started slowly with the trail often disappearing, leading us through primary forests with huge trees. Half way through the day we came across a cabin by a beautiful crystal lake, where we found a lone builder working. Here we had our first ultra-cold Patagonia wild swimming experience and it was wonderful. Refreshed and clean we hiked on for a few more km until coming to a river and an opening, the perfect campsite. Our nightly rituals of cooking, cleaning and baking required quite some water, making it essential that we always camped near a clean water source, (thankfully all the water in Patagonia is deliciously clean so any lake or river would suffice) and some open flat land to sleep. Not knowing if we would find another good campsite, we often played it safe and stopped a little earlier than planned, especially in the early stages when we were less confident. Here we met the local builder once again and had a pleasant (not so reassuring) chat about his encounter with local pumas. Like the previous day we had just covered 6km but we were feeling it all over our bodies and were happy to take it slowly hoping our bodies would eventually become accustomed.



L: One of the huge, old Nothofagus trees that are characteristic of the endangered Chilean Valdivian forest.

R: the lake we had a quick dip in

Day 3

Having just walked about 6-7km per day the last two days, we doubled our distance covered on the 4th day and got to Puerto Fuy.

Along the way though, we came across a bridge that was broken by a huge tree that had fallen right across the middle. We took the opportunity to have a bit of fun, chasing each other and trying not to fall into the river.

After this we were faced by with the first serious downhill section, and all of us worried about our knees we moved with caution. We walked twice what we walked yesterday on a trail that relentlessly climbed and fell with steep gradients, found a tarantula, and got separated and lost when Hamish and Omar failed to notice they had gone the wrong way for half an hour. But it was a wonderful hike, with the second half of the day traversing the bank of a great lake.

Arriving in Puerto Fuy, we were treated by a truck selling fresh strawberries, a shop with wine and crisps (to Jocelyne´s delight) and a stall with churrasco (local sliced beef) sandwiches. Here we enjoyed an evening by the lake without need for a fire, and a little wine to celebrate the end of the first section.



Source: Anne Scholle



T: A huge tree fell across the bridge and created a natural playground

B: Camping by the shore of Lago Pirihueico

Day 4



## Puerto Fuy to Puyehue

We heard that the next section was particularly gnarly, with lots of potentially dangerous river crossings, and so decided to skip it. This group decision came about from a combination of us wanting to enjoy the hike, the realisation that the trail terrain and procuring food was tougher than expected, and our desire to reach the heart of Patagonia. This diversion would require us to bus to the coastal cities and down the main highway then back across to get back to the trail, skipping one section.

We ended up taking a bus to Panguipulli (CLP2500), then to the coastal city of Valdivia (CLP3300), where we found some nondescript bit of land under a bridge on the pacific estuary to camp for the night. The next day, we took the bus to the town Orsono (CLP3500), then to Aguas Calientes, Puyehue in the Los Lagos region (CLP2200) and started back into the wilderness.

Day 5-6

## Puyehue (Aguas Calientes) to Cochamó

Getting off the bus, we found ourselves on a small walking trail in the National Park, in a valley with mountains on both sides. This was our first experience of awful muddy conditions that are typical of some of the trails. A day of walking left us with feet soaked and stinky, and we were glad to come across a small river to wash off as we climbed slowly up one bank and spend the night not far from the top. From our campsite we experienced the first of many awe inspiring sunsets whilst going through our daily rituals, keeping the fire small as we were in very dry woodland.

After a good rest we headed out in the morning for the summit. We broke through the tree line and found ourselves in a truly lunar landscape of black scorched scree and endless false peaks, a totally different world from the lush forests below. Passing various multi-coloured poles, we soon realised that we were hiking through what in winter would be a bustling ski resort.

The view from the top revealed the vast stretch of the Andes mountain range, snowy peaks and dark valleys dotted with lakes, as well as what looked like a ski lodge. Never knowing when would be our next source of food and not wanting to pass up an opportunity, we headed down to investigate. We were greeted with a nearly deserted but still open resort where we ate to our hearts' content, washed our socks in the toilet and made the most of our first encounter with wifi to let our families know that we were safe. With a tinge of regret, we left the lodge and continued to traverse the lunar landscape, and eventually found ourselves heading down into a valley and once again in a forest. We then spent almost 2 hours forcing our way through a thick bamboo forest. With a visibility of less than a meter, we fought with the bamboo, suffering countless hits to the face, arms and legs. Eventually emerging and feeling truly beaten up, we were suddenly walking along a river in a huge valley where we soon found a nice spot to spend the night.

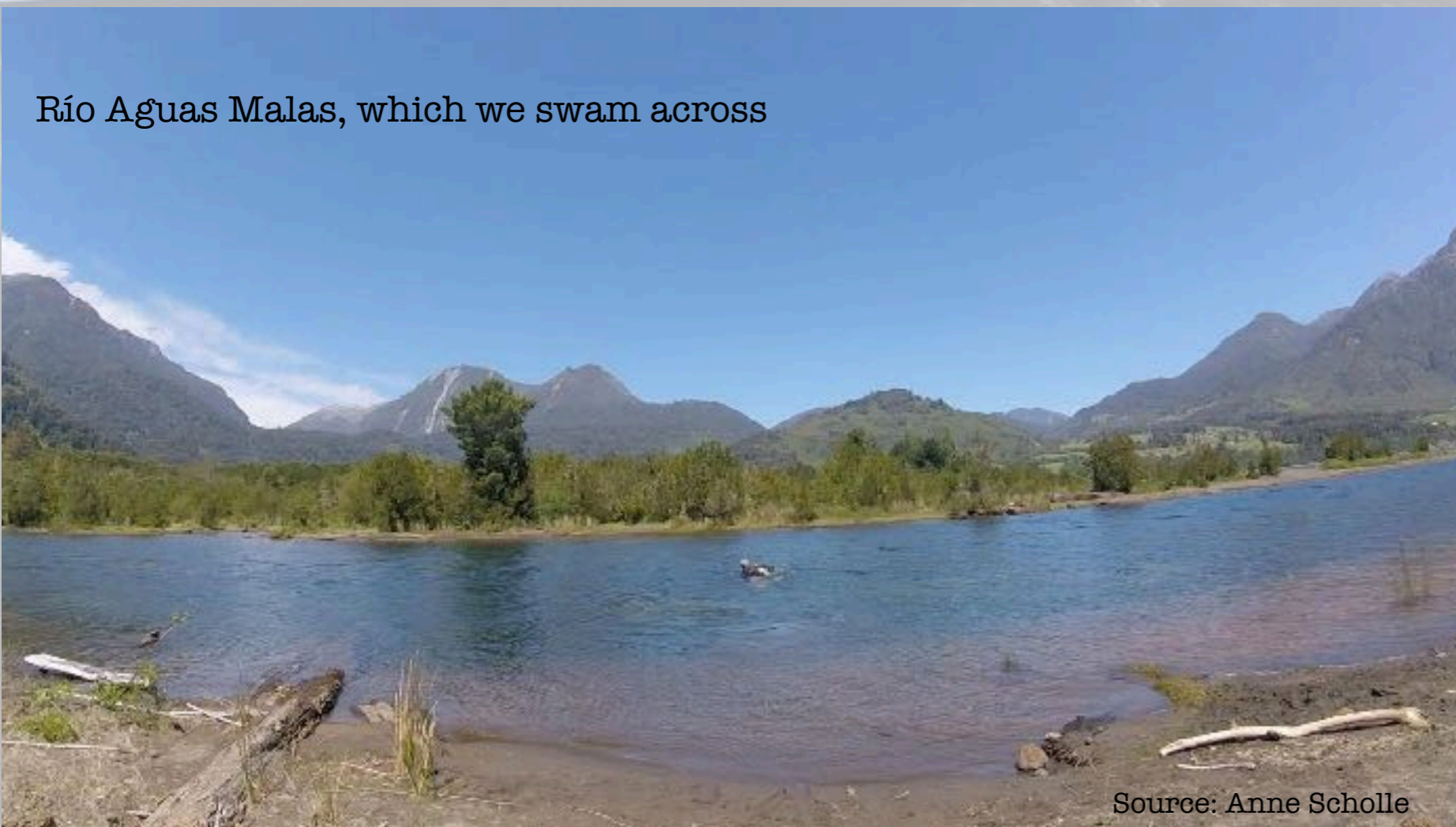
Day 6-7

The highlight of the next day was encountering our first true obstacle, the River Aguas Malas by Lake Rupanco, and the only true river crossing we did the whole hike. What was meant to be a small river to wade across at knee height turned out to be a river 15 meters wide coming directly from the glacier melts. Arriving at the bank about noon, Jocelyne was hungry and started preparing our usual lunch feast of a chapatti and a bit of avocado. The guys, excited at the prospect of a challenge and seeing a boat on the other side of the bank, swam over and tried to scout out the possibilities, before swimming back with a huge log. After a quick snack, we readied our bags for the river crossing, making sure all important items were in dry bags. The water was quite cold, and despite the hot temperatures, Hamish, who went back a third time to fetch the remaining gear, may have had a mild bout of hyperthermia. We then spent the next hour or so drying off in the sun.

After a short walk along the expansive Lago Rupanco, we came across a couple selling some basic items in a little shack, and the guy told us there was great fishing in one of the lakes we will be passing through, and that he once caught a salmon that was about 80cm long, which got us really excited about our fishing prospects. Continuing on, we came across a friendly family who invited us

to spend the night there. We spent a special night here, having bought some eggs and a bottle of wine from the family and used their outdoor asado (grill) to make an epic supper, accompanied by a stunning sunset and followed by a peaceful night's sleep.

Río Aguas Malas, which we swam across



Source: Anne Scholle

Day 8

The following day we continued on the trail which lead us up into the mountains once again. We followed steep trail up and down before finding a hidden Laguna, a little lake with lots of reeds about, that we thought might be the one the guy had mentioned earlier. By now Omar and Hamish were suffering from a lack of food on our diet of two chapatis and rice everyday. Armed with the advice of the friendly villagers and a line and hook that we bought in the last town, and motivated by genuine lack of protein, we decided that here would be the perfect place to give fishing a shot. With zero experience and not even a fishing rod, we spent hours tossing the hook and bait (a small silver piece of metal in the vague shape of a fish) into the lake before dragging it out and picking off all the mud and seaweed. A few hours later, we had perfected our technique and after a couple of near misses, we caught our first small trout, what a feeling! This day happened to be Thanksgiving as well, we made a fish curry with that little fish, and ended the night in high spirits.



L: Omar & Hamish overjoyed at having caught a fish

R: Our Thanksgiving dinner with fish curry!

Day 9

Source: Anne Scholle

The trail lead us on, over a few passes towards Lago Todos los Santos. We stopped by a few local settlers to ask if they sold bread/honey/food (they didn't, despite signs advertising otherwise) who told us that by walking along the shore for a bit we could get to a hotel and a cafe. We were in high anticipation for some proper food and coffee and a resupply at the other side, and quickened our steps. However, upon reaching the shore in the evening, we discovered that not only was there no hotel or cafe there, there was also just no one, and no scheduled ferry that departed from that shore or any sign of a ferry ever being there.

It turns out that one had to call to arrange transport from this remote bay and we had not had prior information about this, being a very untraveled part of the trail. It was starting to rain heavily by this time, and we decided to just set up camp and start cooking while we figured out an escape plan. There was that feel of being stranded on a deserted island, the knowledge that we might be able to



find some civilisation about 5 days' walk from whence we came didn't help when we were running very low on food. Going forward looked like it might take us a week to traverse the undulating shore towards a named location, which was not ideal either.

One of the many rivers we crossed on our way to Lago Todos los Santos

Day 10

As we were preparing dinner (more chapatis as the dehydrated mash potatoes were insufficient to fill all of us apart from Anne up), we heard a distant hum across the lake, nearly imperceptible to our hearing. Suddenly the guys sprinted to the shore without a word. Rushing down to the beach we shouted and jumped as we spotted a small motor boat crossing the small bay we were in. The boat eventually came around in a wide arc and the boatman looked bemused at our presence on the desolate shore. We then explained our situation to him, and he eventually agreed to take us across the lake the next morning for a reasonable fee.

The motorboat ride to Petrohúe (CLP10,000 each; a diversion from the GPT, but the only arrangement we could get) was freezing cold and took over an hour. We have no idea how the local lady thought it was possible to get there by walking along the shore (granted our Spanish understanding was limited but not bad enough to be an order of magnitude out), but we did manage to find the hotel and cafe she talked about. After an expensive but pretty awesome lunch in the hotel (Petrohúe lodge), we got back on trail, taking the bus to Ensenda (CLP1000) then Cochamó (CLP1500). We then had decently priced dinner at La Ollita, the staff of whom probably noticed our hunger and gave us a second serving of free bread.



Crossing Lago Todos los Santos



Day 10-11

## Cochamó to Segundo Corral

We made friends with an American climber, Nick, at La Ollita the night before, and met him again having breakfast at the same place. Cheekily, we asked for a ride, to save us walking along the road, since we were all heading towards La Junta, where the climbing action is. The road doesn't go all the way to La Junta though, and we had to hike 13km to La Junta itself, taking about 2-3 hours. Considering it's lack of accessibility (and lack of shops/food-procuring potential), it's surprising that La Junta/Cochamó still attracts as many climbers as it does, though climbers are hardly deterred by a long access hike. The rocks there are world-class, and if access was made easier, it would easily see lots more people, though apparently as it is now, in high season (mid Dec to mid Feb) the few campsites that are there are still packed with tents. With no option of wild camping, we stayed at one of the campsites for CLP4000 each.

Despite not having any climbing gear on us, being close to crags and not even touching the rock would be sacrilege, so we borrowed some gear from Nick the next day, and did a climb at La Luna, a beautiful crag, framed by ancient woodland and colossal peaks.

The astounding mountains around La Junta, Cochamó



Day 12-13

Not wanting to stay another night at an expensive campsite (we're all running out of money by this point), we decided to pack up and move on in the afternoon. The trail from henceforth was very muddy, with lots of alternative paths of varying dryness, and ditches which horses use. Trying to keep our feet from getting wet was a constant challenge; on one occasion, Omar and Hamish made a leap across a flooded ditch, which Jocelyne thought she might be able to accomplish if she threw her bag across first. Which obviously did not happen, as it merely landed with a splash below (accompanied by a shrill scream from Jocelyne). We were thankful that Jocelyne was in fact ok and the bag didn't land on our GPS communicator (InReach Explorer). This point in fact reminded us of the fragility of our equipment and that the consequences of them being damaged were acutely more

serious once in the wild. The day came to completion with two more river crossings and a quiet night at camp.

We met another German hiker also doing the GPT the next day, but he was starting from the south and heading northwards. We had a good time chatting and exchanging information on what lay ahead for both our parties, and we got the idea of perhaps supplementing our diet with some granola for breakfast and pasta at night from him.



L: Found out that bamboo is a great for fires

R: Slightly desolate landscape we found ourselves in after emerging from the forest, a clearing of fallen trees

Day 13-14



Most of the day was spent walking along Lago Vidal Gomez. Everyone was in high spirits after a particularly good breakfast that included leftover rice from yesterday's dinner, and 'chowbows' – a name we made up for chapatis that had rice mixed into the dough. The German guy told us he had a really good asado (barbecue, usually lamb, typical of the Patagonian region) in one of the settler's houses on the further side of the lake, and we were hopeful as we approached. Along the way, we passed another settler who advertised that they were selling food, and for once that was true. For a can of beer, a jar of marmalade, some buns and boiled eggs, we paid CLP12,000. Food ain't cheap around here. As we arrived at the other end of the lake, we found the settlers whom the German had dined with, but to our dismay they had run out of meat and were not able to provide an asado. We carried on to find a campsite, and for the first and only time in the whole trip, Anne and Jocelyne got the fire going while the guys went off to scout for other asado possibilities. That they found, but the settler wanted us to camp on his land as well, and so they politely refused and bought 4 eggs for CLP2000 instead. That's about £2.35 for 4 eggs, undoubtedly the priciest eggs we've ever had.



The next day was filled with lots of uphill and downhill, with a little break in a valley before finishing with a particularly horrible uphill. We were feeling rather tired out from the lack of food by this point, and motivation was quite low all around.

Lago Vidal Gomez

Day 15-16

By this point, we were once again running low on food and needed to stock up. According to our maps, there was a little place called El Manso where we should be able to get more supplies. Arriving at the first building we saw, Anne was overjoyed to find that despite it being a tiny minishop, it stocked snickers, and everyone was glad to have some cheese. We then tried to get to El Manso, and found out to our amusement that all there is to it is another mini market about 4km from the other. From there though, we decided to speed up our progress by hitching rides to Llanada Grande, then to Segundo Corral which was on the Chilean-Argentinian border. Two guys on a fishing trip picked us up, and after spending a while fishing along Río Manso, they dropped us off outside one of the two supermarkets in Llanada Grande. That evening, we had one of our nicest dinners of really good sausages (not the hotdogs which are cheaply and commonly sold everywhere in Chile as part of their national cuisine, the Completo) with pasta and some wine.

We spent most of the next day loitering outside the other, bigger and more popular supermarket in Llanada Grande, hoping for a hitch to Segundo Corral. Unfortunately, as the (asphalt) road ends slightly before the village, no one heads that way and we eventually took the bus (CLP3000) to where the road ends, and walked into the village. We tried our best to find the supermarket there, which was strangely elusive, but ended up finding Hospedaje Margo (kind of like a B&B in someone's house). Margo was the best, she served us an amazing lamb stew for dinner at just CLP3000 each, and also told us that the boat across Río Puelo, which we needed to take to get back on trail, doesn't run on weekends so we'd have to wait till Monday.

That gave us a lazy Sunday to spend in the little (but bigger than El Manso!) village of Llanada Grande. We went back to Margo's for breakfast (CLP2000), and since it started raining, spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon loitering around her house, getting lunch (CLP3000) and some bread (CLP6000 for 20 buns), and picking cherries. She kindly offered her kitchen floor for us to sleep that night as well, but we opted to stay in a refugio that was located closer to the river.



Cheese! And a 'table'! At El Manso

Day 17-19

# Border crossing: Paso Río Puelo Segundo Corral, Chile to EL Bolsón, Argentina

The municipal boat to get from Puerto Segundo Corral to Puerto Lago Puelo apparently runs from 8am, and so we got there for that time and waited for about an hour before the boat arrived to drop off a few school kids. Unexpectedly, as it was municipal, it was a free ride! We quickly arrived at the carabineros (police in Chile), and got our passports stamped. A short hike later, we crossed the border into Argentina and then reached the gendarmeria (police in Argentina) to officiate our entry, which was about 11km away from the Chilean carabineros. We found the trail in Argentina (though it was one continuous path) to be much broader, well-kept and signposted than in Chile.



Strong pose from the boatman



Crossing the border into Argentina by foot



The last day of this section took us a few hours of hiking to get to Lago Puelo town in Argentina, where we got a bus to the town of El Bolsón (ARS8) to figure out our next plans. At this point, we were still constantly hungry and weren't sure if we could actually complete the hike as planned (even with the bits of skipping on buses), since we were running out of money and finding that we weren't keeping very well to the itinerary as our pace was too slow.

Day 20-21

# EL Bolsón, Argentina to Coyhaique, Chile

We stayed in El Bolsón for 3 nights as we tried to figure out our next plan of action while fattening up. We had heard from the German guy we met a few days before that one of the sections was quite difficult to navigate, and wanted to skip that section too. But as we discussed our past experience trying to get food and the much slower pace than expected, we decided that perhaps the best course of action to take would be to hitch the bulk of the distance we were intending to cover and just hike the end sections which would be in Patagonia proper, a different landscape to the one we were in before. Eventually, we decided to hitch from El Bolsón to Coyhaique (the biggest city in Chilean Patagonia), stock up in the supermarket there, then get back on the trail from Puerto Aysén to Puerto Ibañez.

While in El Bolsón though, called the hippie city, we did a short hike up the nearby Cerro Amigo (friend hill) with some friends we made at our hostel. We also took advantage of supermarkets and cooking facilities at the hostel to eat nice meals and fatten up a bit.



As nice as it was to be in a hostel (a bed, a solid roof, hot water shower, gas stoves, what more would we want!), we couldn't stay there for ever, and so on day 24 (9 Dec 2016), we split into pairs and started hitching south, with the intention of regrouping in Coyhaique. It took the pairs between 8 and 11 hitches, and 2-3 days, to cover the 660km between the two towns

El Bolsón from the top of Cerro Amigo

Day 22-26



L: Argentine landscape

R: Chilean landscape



We stocked up on food from the supermarket Unimarc when we arrived in Coyhaique. More prepared now for the conditions of food resupply, we planned our food supply more carefully, getting lots of salami and chorizo (which can scarcely be found in the small village 'supermarkets'), chocolate, peanuts, and brown rice, brown pasta and brown flour. We then took the bus to Puerto Aysén (CLP2200), and realised on arrival that because we had decided on our next plan of action based on our proposal, which was following the pack-rafting route, we had actually made a detour. The hiking trail, as was shown on our Garmin GPS device, is from Coyhaique, but none of us had thought to check the GPS before taking the bus. So we spent a night in Puerto Aysén, before hitching back to Coyhaique the next morning.



Coyhaique at the foothills

Day 27

# Coyhaique to Villa Cerro Castillo

We finally got back on trail, though it mostly involved walking on the asphalt road. We managed to cover a lot more ground naturally, and while it's nice to walk on flat ground and not worry about tripping over roots and rocks, the dust from passing vehicles made it a less pleasant time.

Perhaps one of the more grim days of walking, it poured down continuously the entire of the next day. We managed to cover 21km, the most we had walked in any day. I suppose we walk more when the weather is terrible, since no one wants to stop and linger for long. As we passed Elizalde, a little village on route, there were bus stops along the road, and we took advantage of the shelter to make pasta for dinner. We had no gas stoves with us, having made fires to cook every night, but we carried used cans around with us for just such a situation. Some solid fuel tablets in a makeshift can stove, and we managed to whip up some edible grub. A word of caution to everyone out there – putting brown pasta in cold water and waiting for it to heat up enough to cook on a solid fuel stove does not make great dinners. It tasted like we were eating disintegrated semi-cooked brown wheat bits. The sauce was pretty good though, and made it easier for the stodgy mess to go down the throat.



L: Makeshift can stove!

R: A disused barn we stayed in to keep dry

Day 28-29

In contrast to the previous day, today was a bit sunnier (with occasional sprinkles). Along with having some coffee (a treat!) and muesli for breakfast, Jocelyne found it easier to keep up with the other three. She usually lags behind them a fair amount (like in this background photo), having found it a struggle to keep with their pace. That didn't last very long though, and Jocelyne was soon lagging behind again. With Hamish and Anne out of sight, Jocelyne and Omar managed to miss a sign that Hamish had created to indicate a turning, and they ended up walking an extra 1.5km along Lago Monreal.

Jocelyne and Omar realised they went off track when they never caught up with the other two, and started backtracking. But going back was way harder, as the wind was now in their faces as they struggled uphill. Hamish had gone to find them, and on the way back to where Anne was waiting, they found a settler who sold bread and little fried buns for CLP2000. We eventually got back on trail, and for once found that there were no fences on either side of the trail. As wild as Patagonia is made out to be, lots of it appears to be fenced.

Day 30

The next day, we experienced real English weather. The day started out pleasantly enough going through a forest, before getting increasingly unpleasant. First a river crossing, then a bog, more forest, scree slopes, a steep rocky scramble, before finally flattening out to a windy plateau. The trail was mostly lost by this point, and we went on following the GPS trail, along a steep side of hill. We trudged along closely behind each other, with Hamish behind Jocelyne to guard her from falling when gusts blew, but eventually Omar realised the seriousness of the situation. By this point, not only were our feet wet from crossing the bog, but it had also been raining continuously with periods of hail, and as we gained altitude, the rain became snow and we were rather soaked to the bone. With sleet in our faces and dropping visibility, Omar made the call to backtrack and find shelter. We dropped some altitude to head towards the tree line, and set up camp there for the night. Not the most comfortable, still being on the hill with roots in the way, but we were out of the gale at least, and could warm up and dry off in our sleeping bags.

T: Nice forest trail that ended up not so nice

B: Deceivingly nice looking field turned out to be a bog

Day 31







On the plateau (the next day, when the weather cleared up briefly)



We could see Cerro Castillo (castle hill) from the tree line where we camped that night

When day broke, we discussed over breakfast in one of the tents whether to proceed with the trail or turn back, given that we were unsure of weather and trail conditions. Carrying on following the GPS would have entailed going down a ravine then back up the mountain pass to get to Villa Cerro Castillo. We had enough food to last one or two days more, three days at a stretch. Despite the strong winds and freezing cold, Jocelyne and Omar were keen on going forward and exploring the possibilities of crossing the mountain pass, while Hamish and Anne erred on the side of caution and with the lack of information, wanted to backtrack to the road and hitch to Villa Cerro Castillo. There was no possibility of us splitting up, so we decided to head back down the plateau to our previous campsite, where we spent almost 6 hours drying everything out over a blazing fire.



Even heading down the mountain, the weather looked grim



Drying our shoes and socks and ourselves over a fire

# Villa Cerro Castillo to Puerto Ibañez

Getting to Villa Cerro Castillo from where we were by road was no easier, as even on the roads there was barely any traffic. We backtracked about 5km on the road, battling the winds, and stopping to have our quick lunch of, no prizes for guessing, a chapati. As always, when you start eating, a potential ride goes past. Thankfully another came by soon enough and the couple kindly dropped us off along the Carretera Austral, where we could hitch the next ride to Villa Cerro Castillo, since they were heading north back to Coyhaique. Our next ride Daniel, brought us down the Carretera Austral to the road that split off leading towards Villa Cerro Castillo. We finally got there with the next hitch, a Chilean guy and his Canadian partner who were full of interesting information. He had lived in Canada for a while, but came back join in the fight against proposals to dam the Río Baker. It was a huge controversy – in many places, we saw stickers or signs that said ‘Patagonia Sin Represas’ (Patagonia Without Dams). From him, we learnt the locals’ perspectives on the environment, the Tompkins’ work on conservation in Patagonia, and the relationships between stakeholders.

Too soon, we arrived and had to get off. As much as we wanted to practice our Spanish, it was really good and informative meeting people who could speak in English and tell us about the nuances of issues in the area.



We came upon cafe Puesto Huemul which offered free wifi, really good food, locally brewed beers and a great view of Cerro Castillo (when there were no clouds).

We spent two more nights in Villa Cerro Castillo, though we moved to campsite El Mirador (CLP4000). We did a day hike to Laguna Cerro Castillo, about 15km round trip. It was freezing cold and super windy, but amazingly stunning, with the glacier at close view. We figured we could have continued on our hike and made it to Villa Cerro Castillo on foot if we persisted in going up the hill from where we left off, and instead of going down the ravine and up the mountain pass, just continued along the ravine till we arrived at Las Horquetas, the start point for a popular 3/4 day hike to Villa Cerro Castillo.



The glacier that feeds Laguna Cerro Castillo  
Background: the view towards Puerto Ibañez from Laguna Cerro Castillo

Day 34-35



We eventually left for Puerto Ibañez. Our mistake with the packrafting trail in our proposal meant that instead of a 150km hike to end our trip at Puerto Ibañez, from Coyhaique it was just about 115km or so, and our hitching to Villa Cerro Castillo cut that by even more. The next stretch of hiking from Villa Cerro Castillo to Puerto Ingeniero Ibañez though, was really scenic and pretty. A fairly sunny day for once, we stopped by Museo Escuela to look at the exhibits and the Alero de las Manos (wall of hands). Camping that night by Lago Central was extremely windy and cold, but we were thankful that the Americans who owned the surrounding land had built a little shack, which they kindly permitted us to use to hide from the blasting wind.



T: Stunning view of the mountain range

L: Winds whipping up the waves at Lago Central

Day 36

We got into the next valley the next day, after a short detour when we went around Lago Central (which would have brought us in a loop back to Villa Cerro Castillo), and again it was a brilliant, sunny day. It made us like Patagonian weather a bit more – it had initially seemed to be a horribly rainy, windy, cloudy, and miserable place. There was much less wind in this valley, and a lot of rock all around.



View of Cerro Castillo from the bank of Lago Central

We finally got into Puerto Ibañez, and it being Christmas soon, we decided to spend it there. We stayed at a great campsite, Don Omar camping and hospedaje (CLP3000 + CLP1000 for a hot shower). We were basically camping in his backyard, but he also had a little shack with a wood fire stove and electric sockets and toilets for us, and we had the entire place to ourselves.

Day 37-38

# Christmas at Puerto Ibañez

We spent all of Christmas Eve preparing dinner. A 2.5kg chicken was cleaned, marinated and put in the gas stove oven by 11am (it took 2.5 hours to make bread the night before – we weren't sure how long the chicken would take to cook). There was a big cherry tree in the middle of the backyard that was full of cherries, and Jocelyne happily spent an hour or so picking cherries, which the others then pitted to make a cherry jam (an attempt to create something like cranberry sauce). We also made some banana chocolate bread and cooked potatoes, carrots, and onions over the griddle on an open fire (so much oil we were basically deep frying it). After 9 hours, the chicken was finally cooked and we finished it over the fire. It was probably the best meal we had cooked for ourselves. We offered some of the banana bread and cherry jam to Don Omar and his family, and wished them Feliz Navidad, and he was so nice, he gave us a bottle of apple cider in return and invited us to lunch with them the next day.

Christmas day was an amazingly nice and chill day. We had a lovely lunch with Don Omar, his wife Claudia and daughter Cathy, finishing off with a drink of apple cider topped with pineapple sorbet – apparently a classic drink of the area. He offered to take us kayaking after lunch, and we paddled around the shores of Lago General Carrera, the second largest lake in South America for a bit, before the strong winds sent us all scurrying back to the campsite for warmth.



Christmas dinner!

Day 39-40

# Puerto Ibañez to Villa O'Higgins

To get to Villa O'Higgins from Puerto Ibañez, there was the option of taking the ferry across Lago General Carrera to Chile Chico, and then head south by bus/hitching, or to go back northward to Villa Cerro Castillo and then take the bus/hitch from there. We were told it would be easier to hitch from Villa Cerro Castillo, so back there we went. We managed to get a ride back to Villa Cerro Castillo, after a fair amount of waiting time. Hitching from Villa Cerro Castillo onwards (to Puerto Tranquilo) was tough going, and after hours of trying to hide from the blasting wind and sand, we retreated to Puesto Huemul for a coffee. We stayed there for another night, before attempting the next day.

We took a bus to Puerto Tranquilo (CLP 5000) the next day. Sited on the western shore of the Lago General Carrera, it is famed for its marble caves (called capilla de marmol or marble chapel). Puerto Tranquilo was the first of the subsequently very many touristy places, along the Chilean Patagonian Carretera Austral. On arrival in the fairly small town, we saw a row of booths, all advertising for trips to the Capilla de marmol or for glacier tours. There were many backpackers standing around, waiting for buses or tours or trying to hitch a ride, which was a sight we had not previously encountered.



L: Last view of Cerro Castillo

R: Capilla de marmol

Day 41-42



Jocelyne woke up feeling feverish, as we continued headed south towards the next town of Cochrane along the Carretera Austral. We realised that southwards of Villa Cerro Castillo, it was much harder to hitch rides, so we took the bus when it came around (CLP 6000), which took almost 4-5 hours. We found the campsite San Lorenzo (CLP 4000) where Jocelyne slept away the rest of the day and soon felt better.

We had gotten some bread, cheese and butter, and were looking forward to having some of that for breakfast the next day, but woke up to a surprising mystery. Our cheese, bread and butter was gone. The pot which stored the cheese and butter was on the floor, but the meat that was also stored in it was still on the table, as well as the pot lid. There was also some leftover butter left lying on the table from previous campers, and that was left untouched. It was a mystery we never managed to solve, though we guarded our food more carefully afterwards. We did another major food shop in preparation for the higher prices further South. Prices are three times higher in Argentina than Chile, or so we were told.



We also made can stoves for use later, when we were in the national park and could not start fires

Day 43-44

We attempted to hitch out of Cochrane to Villa O'Higgins the next day, but the going was slow. We walked a bit out of town before getting a short hitch to a junction, walked another >20km before we got another short hitch, on the back of a pickup amidst some poop, a dead animal, and pots of cooked food to Puente Barrancoso. There we found a pretty decent campsite, if not for the tonnes of mosquitoes.

We had heard from the lady at the tourist office that the bus from Cochrane to Villa O'Higgins leaves at 7am, and with all our luck in hitching so far, thought it might be best to try and catch that bus as it passed us by. It was pouring with rain as we woke up, but the fear of missing the bus was a strong incentive, and we quickly packed up our tent after waking up at 645am and attempted to hide in the bus shelter. It eventually arrived at 845am, though not after we were all soaked to a certain extent.

The Carretera Austral is not all road, and there's a stretch where a water body connects two ends of the road. After a short ride across the river on the municipal ferry, we got back on the Carretera Austral, and arrived in Villa O'Higgins at 330pm. The El Mosco campsite (CLP 6000) has an excellent reputation, and for good reason. They've got really good kitchen facilities, open to both hostel and camp guests. It was New Year's Eve by this point, and we had arrived just in time to join the party. We made some stew to share with the rest of the guests. Villa O'Higgins is reputed to have one of the best firework displays in Chile, and it was an excellent 15 minutes display, ending with a fiesta in the town hall till the wee hours of the morning.



T: The municipal ferry at Puerto Yungay  
B: Villa O'Higgins

Day 45-46

There are two companies that take tourists across Lago O'Higgins/Lago San Martin from Villa O'Higgins to Candelaria Mancilla: Robinson Crusoe (CLP44,000), which is slightly more upmarket and has a bigger ferry, and Las Ruedas (CLP40,000) which is smaller but cheaper. The lake is notoriously difficult to cross, with bad weather often forcing the ferry services to halt. The week before we arrived, people were apparently stranded on the Candelaria Mancilla side of the lake for 3/4 days (and since there's not a village there, they also had no food supplies) as the ferries were suspended due to bad weather.



There was a Robinson Crusoe ferry guaranteed to leave on New Year's Day, but we didn't want to have to wake up at the crack of dawn to get the ferry nor did we want to pay more (we had tried our hardest to look for cheaper alternatives to cross the lake but there were none), so we opted to take our chances and hope Las Ruedas would be running two days later. We thus spent the first few days of the new year rather lazily.

The second day of the new year started out drearily, with rain chucking down almost the entire day. The one shortcoming of El Mosco was that they did not allow guests to stay past checkout at 10am. It was raining heavily and were allowed to stay till noon. We made the most of the extra time and the kitchen facilities to cook our lunch and dinner to take away, then took refuge in the village church for most of the rain to pass. The evening was spent at Puerto Bahamóndez 7km away from the village where we found a bit of a grassy patch to pitch our tents.

Day 47-48

# Border crossing: Paso Dos Lagunas Villa O'Higgins, Chile to EL Chaltén, Argentina

Our ferry was due to leave at 8am, and as the clock ticked by and no one appeared, we started to worry that perhaps the weather forecast was bad and we weren't going to leave after all. Another passenger was going on the same boat, a 74-year-old American named Gary who was on a cycle tour. We eventually did depart a little past 8am, with just the four of us as passengers. After two hours on



the lake, seeing the snow-topped mountains go by, we arrived at Candelaria Mancilla, and continued on our hike. With a couple of short-cuts (not possible for cyclists, but they've got a nice wide gravel path anyway), it didn't take us long to arrive at the Chilean carabineros passport control check point.

We continued on the gravel path on the Chilean side before the frontier, where it somewhat abruptly transitioned into a muddy hiking trail on the Argentinian side. There, the going got pretty tough, especially if you've got a bike. We met a few cyclists pushing/hauling their bike along the muddy, bumpy, winding trail and across rivers, and we were all just glad that we didn't have bikes. We made camp with Gary that night, and shared our dinner and had some whisky.



T: The end of the Carretera Austral at the port of Villa O'Higgins

B: Crossed the border into Argentina!

Day 49

The next day, we quickly got to the Argentinian passport control and got our passport stamped, before getting on the 16km trail that ran alongside Lago del Desierto. There was the option to pay for a ferry ride across, which was what most people took. We didn't even think of it, not having that much money on us and with the whole point of the expedition being to hike, and there was absolutely no sense of regret, for that day's hike was probably one of the most beautiful in the entire expedition. It was amazingly sunny, in contrast with the cloudy, rainy previous days, and we had a great view of all the mountains around us and the glaciers too. Mount Fitzroy itself loomed into view whenever we approached a clearing, and it was such an awe-inspiring sight, we stopped countless times just to take a few minutes to admire the view. This however was also the end of our wild camping days, as the high volume of traffic meant that everyone had to stay in designated campsites. We camped that night in Estancia Lago del Desierto (ARS130), which had a nice indoor area that was sheltered from the freezing wind.



Approaching Lago del Desierto

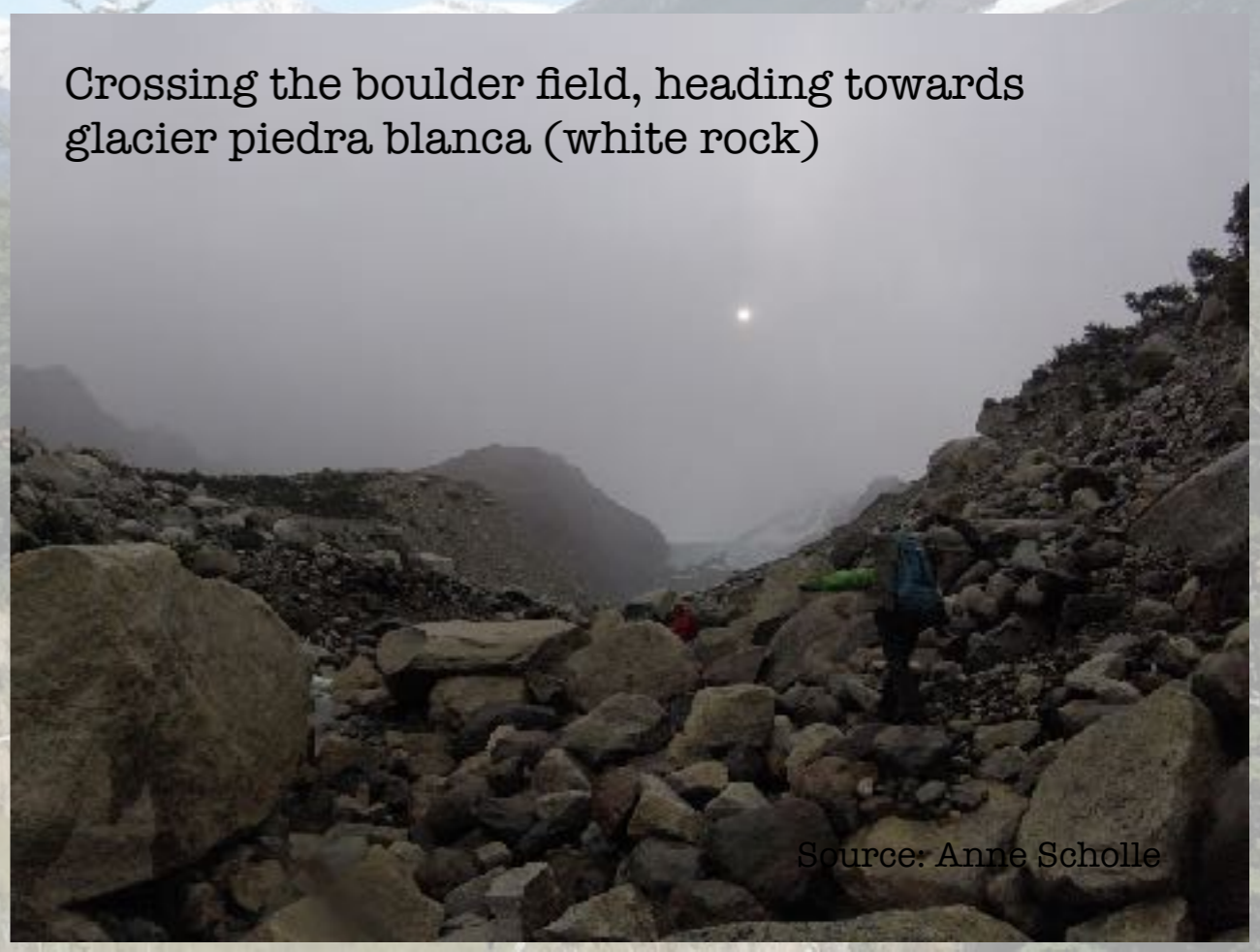


Admiring Mt Fitzroy

Day 50

Our penultimate day of hiking was another rather epic one, though perhaps not quite as much as that day we attempted to cross the pass to Cerro Castillo on day 31. Between Lago del Desierto and El Chaltén National Park was a 37km stretch of (pretty bad) road which we hitched to get to where the trails in the national park start.

It was raining by the time we started our walk towards Mount Fitzroy, along the Piedra Blanca trail. It turned out to be fairly hazardous, with a huge boulder field to cross, and being pelted by heavy rain and strong winds, it made for quite an exciting journey. The wind was so strong that at one point all of us were blown flat on the ground! We managed to get a really close look at the glacier piedra blanca amidst the clouds, but it was quite awe-inspiring nonetheless, though we didn't loiter too long to admire the 'view'. We got into Poincenot campsite (one of the 3 free campsites situated within the national park) and quickly set up camp to try and dry/warm ourselves up a bit. Our alcohol can stoves came in really handy and we made ourselves a nice dinner of mash potatoes. The winds were so strong that sand and grit were blown into the tent (despite the fly sheet being zipped up), and we realised why all the other campers around us had huge stones weighing down their tents.



Crossing the boulder field, heading towards glacier piedra blanca (white rock)

Day 50

Source: Anne Scholle

Our final day of this expedition to Patagonia involved very little and fairly easy hiking. From Poincenot campsite, it took us less than 3 hours to make our way to El Chaltén town, while enjoying the sights. It was another nice day, with a clear view of Mount Fitzroy and the other peaks around it. As civilisation loomed nearer, our spirits got higher (and our tummies got hungrier). To celebrate the end of our expedition, we got 12 empanadas from Che Empanada (the nicest and cheapest place to get some good grub; ARS 20 each) and met up with Gary again. We stayed at campsite El Cuatro Estaciones (ARS120) which had a decent indoor kitchen.



# FINANCES



El Chaltén, Santa Cruz, Argentina



Pre-trip expenses		Source
Group equipment (tent, satellite phone, GPS device)	£550	loaned from Imperial Exploration Board
Insurance	£300 each	Imperial Exploration Board
Group equipment (cooking pots, water filter, spare zips, GPS maps, satellite subscription etc.)	£500	Jeremy Willson Charitable Trust

Expenses on trail (per person, on average)		Source
Flights	£550	Imperial Exploration Board (£500 each)
Internal transport (buses, ferries)	£110	Personal savings
Food (variable as we had group food and personal snacks)	£160-200	
Accommodation (campsites, hostels)	£110	
Equipment (if any of us lacked personal items. e.g. for shoes, poles, merino wool clothing etc.)	£250	

# PRACTICAL ADVICE



unnamed lake near Lago Vidal Gomez, Los Lagos, Chile

# General advice

Our expedition involved extensive periods of living unsupported outdoors, where we had to deal with the weather, physical condition, keeping warm, and finding food.

A general recommendation for planning hikes would be to plan for rest days, which we had omitted to do. Even when hiking at a slower pace, facing the external environment 24/7 wore us down and increased our mental and physical fatigue.

Another point to note about travelling in Chile and Argentina is to plan ahead for cash withdrawal. While cards are commonly accepted in cities, in smaller towns and villages, it is still a cash-only system, and ATMs are non-existent. Even in smaller cities where ATMs are available, they are often not stocked with money, and queueing for the bank can be a pain.

Living in the wild in Patagonia comprises of two aspects, keeping warm and sourcing food. As the region is littered with lakes and rivers, all supplying clean fresh glacial melt water, finding water is not a problem and filtration is not necessary. The next few pages will focus on keeping warm, obtaining food, and making fires.

# Keeping warm & dry

To keep warm, it is necessary to bring clothing and sleeping equipment suitable to -5C and also to be aware of your environment. A wet windy environment can significantly reduce body temperature and dry clothes should always be carried for an emergency. Walking through the rain for long periods in cold conditions can be dangerous and it always worth considering stopping in some shelter to dry off or wait for the rain to clear. A strong tent that can withstand high winds of weather Patagonia is essential and you should only ever use your sleeping bag inside the tent to reduce the risk of getting it wet (especially with the morning dew). When crossing rivers frequently or walking in heavy rain, the sleeping bag should be stored in a dry bag within the backpack. A waterproof coat is useful however waterproof trousers are unnecessary.

For footwear, waterproof shoes can be a problem when walking through hot climates due to excessive sweat, so we chose non waterproof shoes, which are more comfortable and after a bout of rain, should dry quickly. When walking day after day, foot health is very important and each person must keep a close watch on the state of their feet. Walking with wet feet due to sweat or rain can quickly cause blisters which makes walking extremely painful. Always be aware of hotspots on your feet and cover them with tape before the blister develops. In the case of a blister, draining it immediately with a sterilised needle before the skin dies will allow it to heal faster and avoid pain. To avoid any problems try to keep socks dry at all costs, and always have a dry spare (hence we recommend bringing 3 pairs!).

# obtaining food

When spending extended periods of time in the wild away from shops, large amounts of food need to be carried and weight efficiency is important. The bulk of calories should come from dried food such as rice, pasta, flour, nuts and beans. Small amounts of meat and vegetables can be carried for vitamins and protein. Shops in Patagonia generally have a frustratingly small selection of dried foods and we ended up relying mainly on rice, flour, peanuts and lentils for sustenance. Making bread is always a good idea as it can be eaten the next day without having to make a fire for breakfast or lunch. It can also be a good idea to carry fishing equipment as the lakes and rivers of Patagonia are full of trout and salmon, a great source of minerals and protein. Buying food from local settlers is a good idea and can provide some unexpected treats on the trail, but these are infrequent and shouldn't be relied upon as a food source. They are also quite highly priced. Some travellers choose to carry gas and a stove for ease of cooking, however relying solely on wood fires can save a lot of weight and hassle trying to find gas canisters. Wood fires also provide warmth and permit long cooking times which allowed us to cook brown rice and lentils which wouldn't be possible with a gas stove. If relying on wood fires, it is recommended to bring a small amount of firelighters to assist in starting fires in rainy or wet conditions, as well as lots of lighters.



Calafate berries are edible and quite delicious



The stem of the nulca is also edible and juicy, quite like sugar cane but without the sugar



Wild cherries can be locally abundant



Fishing is a great option if one is able to fish



Stock up on spices, condiments and various dried goods!



A good breakfast/lunch



A less-than-ideal breakfast/lunch



Bake your own bread and cook chapati to save weight



A pretty decent dinner

# Making fires

We feel there is a need to highlight the use of fires in this trip and what our experience was to provide others in the future with advice.

Modern camping equipment has developed rapidly over the two decades with portable stoves not being an exception. A new JetBoil for example, as the name suggests, boils water very quickly, usually in about 90 seconds dependent on environmental conditions. Other stoves can burn petrol, kerosene and pressurised gas. Tablet and alcohol burning stoves are also prevalent in the stove market too, which are sold as lightweight and efficient alternatives.

Considering these many options we still opted to choose traditional fire making as our day to day method of cooking food and making hot drinks. The main reason was that finding the fuel sources above would be a total uncertainty in the remote landscape of Patagonia. After having conducted research on the locations where we would be able to purchase fuel, the reality dawned on us that making fires would be absolutely necessary.

Dead wood is a copious resource across much of Patagonia due to high winds causing dead branches to fall to the ground as well as natural forest management by the authorities (CONAF). We were assured that wood would be copious and it was. It is important to note here that burning sequestered carbon stored by trees was not the ideal situation for environmental students, especially doing it everyday (and breathing in the smoke was not great for our health either). It was definitely the second biggest aspect of our carbon footprint after our long-haul flights.



Omar and Hamish were fairly practiced at making fires before using aids (lighters, matches), and this was how we usually made our fires. There were 2 occasions in which we had to use our emergency fuel tablets as the wood was quite wet after heavy rain. We used a twig lean to start the fire. Being attentive and providing a balance between oxygen and shelter is necessary at the start. Very small twigs about 2mm thick and 50mm long were used. In areas where bamboo was prevalent we always sought its aid as it is extremely flammable even when wet and green. We would subsequently seek larger pieces until we would use small logs as to keep the fire going for usually 2-3 hours. It was necessary for fires to last this long as our main source of food was rice, brown rice and lentils which needed long cooking times. This was nearly always followed by making a loaf of bread or chapatis for the next day's sustenance.



A twig lean

Without a fire, we would have never been able to cook the food we needed. Stoves would have sufficed for dehydrated food but this would have not been feasible to do in Patagonia, unless we arranged a very logistically challenging food drop system on which we would be totally reliant. Part of this trip for us was about living more simply and living in the wild, and we feel fires greatly contributed to this aspect of it.

In addition, fires kept us warm, dried our wet gear and most importantly held a social significance of telling stories, discussing plans and sharing time as a team in less stressful conditions which was necessary for collective well-being. A caveat of this however, and one that changed the trip totally was that making a fire everyday takes time, perhaps too much time. This always caused us to camp earlier than we would have had we used stoves, as we know we would be hungry and the amount of effort it entailed in making a fire. 15 minutes was the shortest time it ever took us to start a good fire. We would never be able to start cooking on it before 30 minutes was up. In short we would have walked further without fires and this will be important information for anyone thinking to do a similar expedition. But despite it all, as a team, none of us would have wanted to travel otherwise.

# Crossing rivers

Without crossing rivers we would have not got very far in this trip. In fact we couldn't have even got past the first week. Patagonia is full of rivers and lakes and especially true in the Los Lagos region. Depending on the time of year, many the rivers we crossed would be impassable. In the winter where precipitation levels are extremely high, travelling on the prevalent muddy trails would have been nearly impossible. Even in the summer, they would turn into streams and flow into rivers. These rivers are usually fed by snowmelt and glaciers and were usually between 5-12° C. Most rivers we crossed were never higher than 35cm but even these at times would be dangerous and could unbalance you very easily.

We advise that everything should be in dry bags even if attempting a small river crossing with a low water level, to always use walking poles to maintain balance, and not to rush. When we came across a river, those who were better at hopping on stones often opted for that riskier but usually drier option, while others would resign to getting their feet wet and wade across.

There was only one time we actually had to swim across a river with our backpacks. The current was not strong, and we took the necessary precautions. We prioritised what could get wet and what couldn't. Not putting everything in dry bags for the swim enabled us to trap more air in the bags which increased buoyancy. Adopting a lifeguards rescue technique, we treated the bags as people, wrapping one strap across a shoulder, and using the other to swim, kicking with legs and twisting with your back to the water to rest if needed.

Overall crossing rivers presents another interface for connecting with nature and was often a highlight of our day, further embodying the remoteness and 'wilderness' of our expedition.

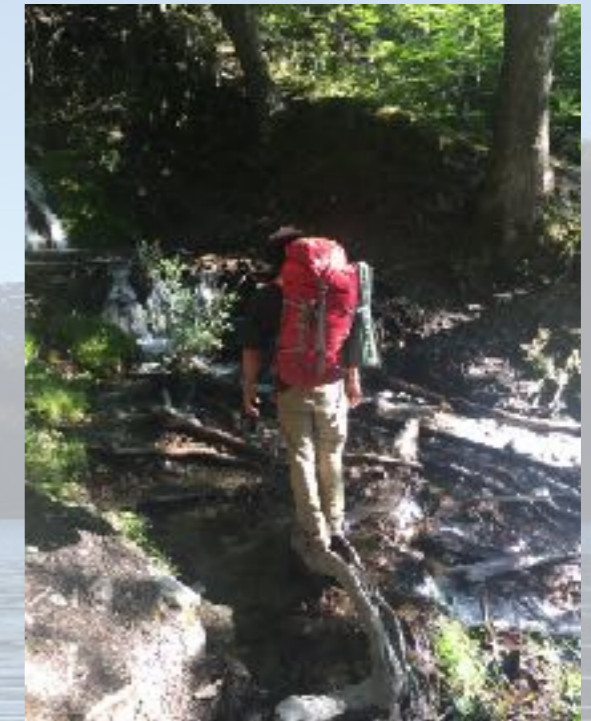
# Varying degrees of ease in crossing a bridge



Where there are no bridges, the options were to:

1) Jump across if small enough

2) Hop over on stones/logs & try not to fall



3) Remove shoes to wade



4) Swim



# Acknowledgements



Lago Central, Aysén, Chile

We would like to thank Imperial Exploration Board for their generous support and contribution, without which this expedition would not have been possible; Jeremy Willson Charitable Trust for helping to alleviate our expenditure; Snow+Rock for the discount of items purchased in their store; and most of all to our family and friends for supporting us and providing moral support and financial assistance.

