


Poking around one of South America's emptiest quarters, **Tim Cahill** goes looking for a new favorite place—and for an answer to that eternal question: Was I the first?

The Accidental Explorer's Patagonia



PADDLE STATIONS: Exploring
Lago Leones (Lake of the
Lions) in Chilean Patagonia

Guide to

Onia

AURORA

Photography by David McLain

WAS ON MY WAY TO MY FAVORITE PLACE ON EARTH. I hadn't ever been there before and wasn't exactly sure where it was, but I knew, in the way a man knows these things, that we were drawing closer and that the place I found would be my new favorite place on Earth. Never mind the slight tug of airsickness.

The float plane was following the deep valley of a mud-choked river. It wheeled this way and that against glacier-clad spires glittering in the sun. The colors were intense in this corridor of ice: The river below ran over gold sandbanks that rose sharply to become grassy hillsides, bright green against the dazzle of the ice above. It was incredibly beautiful.

"Isn't this incredibly beautiful?" Eric Hertz shouted over the howl of the engine. He was so pumped up and so sincere that I just couldn't help myself.

"If you like this sort of thing," I said.

In fact, I *love* this sort of thing. I had an aviation map of the area open on my lap. Our plane had risen out of the lake called General Carrera here in Chile. We were in the lower portion of South America, at about 46° south latitude. The float plane was flying at about 2,500 feet, under jagged icy peaks that rose to more than 6,000 feet. The guy sitting beside me, Dave, a pilot himself and an aviation buff, pointed out the advisories stamped all over the map: "Relief Detail Unreliable." In other words, this area of Chilean Patagonia was so little known that no one could say precisely how high the mountains were.

Mark, our float plane's pilot, followed the Río Leones as it ascended into what is known as the Northern Ice Field. Combined with Patagonian glaciers just a bit to the south, in the Southern Ice Field, this area is sometimes called the "third pole." It carries a lot of frozen water, all of it cascading lickety-split down the mountains. There's a lot of geology happening here, and it's happening right in your face.

We topped a ridge, and an immense lake, Lago Leones, surrounded by mountains and ice, lay before us like a dream. The water was pea-soup green where it was shadowed by shards of wind-whipped mist and emerald green where slanting shafts of light fell on its surface this bright summer day early in December.

Mark put the plane down, helped off-load our camping gear and inflatable kayaks, then went back to pick up the rest of our crew. This



was an “exploratory” trip mounted by Earth River Expeditions, the adventure travel company owned by Eric Hertz a forty-something outfitter. Some commercial clients—I count myself among them—prefer exploratories. Eric had come to find a new place to bring clients, and I was looking for my new favorite place on Earth. These weren’t necessarily antagonistic ambitions.

Except that Eric thought we might find a place “where no other human being has ever been.” Since it is generally impossible to prove a negative—no one has ever been here—this sort of claim is usually an exercise in what I call GCB, or gratuitous chest beating. Eric Hertz, however, is not a chest beater; he’s simply enthusiastic and so obviously sincere that his fervor is contagious whether you agree with him or not. Over the years he’s led clients, journalists, and celebrities to speak out about saving this bit of wilderness or that. The guy’s heart is in the right

place, and several months ago, when we began talking about a trip to Patagonia, I was swept up in the current of Eric’s passion. He said he was looking for a discovery. Me? I’d settle for a new fave.

READ THE LITERATURE: Patagonia is either an Eden of soaring mountains and alpine lakes or it is a monotonous revelation of the merely horizontal—more than 300,000 square miles straddling portions of Chile and Argentina in the southern cone of South America. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* calls the Argentine portion a “vast area of steppe and desert” stretching from 37° to 51° south latitude. Of course, the topography offers a

SHORE LEAVE: Unloading gear for a base camp on the shores of Lago Leones. Opposite: Flying in over Lago General Carrera.





Patagonia is like a bizarro version of the American West, with hints of another dimension leaking in.

bit more drama if you include the lower spine of the Andes along the international border. But many travelers have nonetheless come away with the image of unrelenting flatness as the primary impression of the area. Charles Darwin, who visited the region on the voyage of the H.M.S. *Beagle*, said that “these plains are pronounced by all wretched and useless. They can be described only by negative characters; without habitations, without water, without trees, without mountains, they support merely a few dwarf plants.”

These wretched and useless plains, I must confess, have used up a goodly portion of my life. They came to my attention a quarter century ago, when I met the climber Yvon Chouinard. In 1968, Yvon and several friends had driven a van down to Patagonia. A summit flag taped to the back window identified the occupants as “Phun Hogs,” and indeed, they scaled peaks, climbed glaciers, rode horses, walked mountain trails, and caught several dinners worth of large, dumb trout. They never made it all the way to Tierra del Fuego, the archipelago at the end of the Americas that is politically split between Argentina and Chile and that some geographers say is part of Patagonia proper. The actual borders are a bit hazy: Patagonia is as much a state of mind as it is a region. Chouinard, impressed with this state of mind, visited the region again in 1972, which is when he decided to call his garment company Patagonia. Maybe you’ve seen some of his clothes?

And Charles Darwin, having cogitated on Patagonia for a time, wrote, “Why . . . have these arid wastes taken so firm a hold on my memory?” Darwin said he could “scarcely analyze these feelings: but it must be partly owing to the free scope given to the imagination. The plains of Patagonia are boundless. . . .” Who, Darwin wondered, “would not look at these last boundaries to man’s knowledge with deep but ill-defined sensations.”

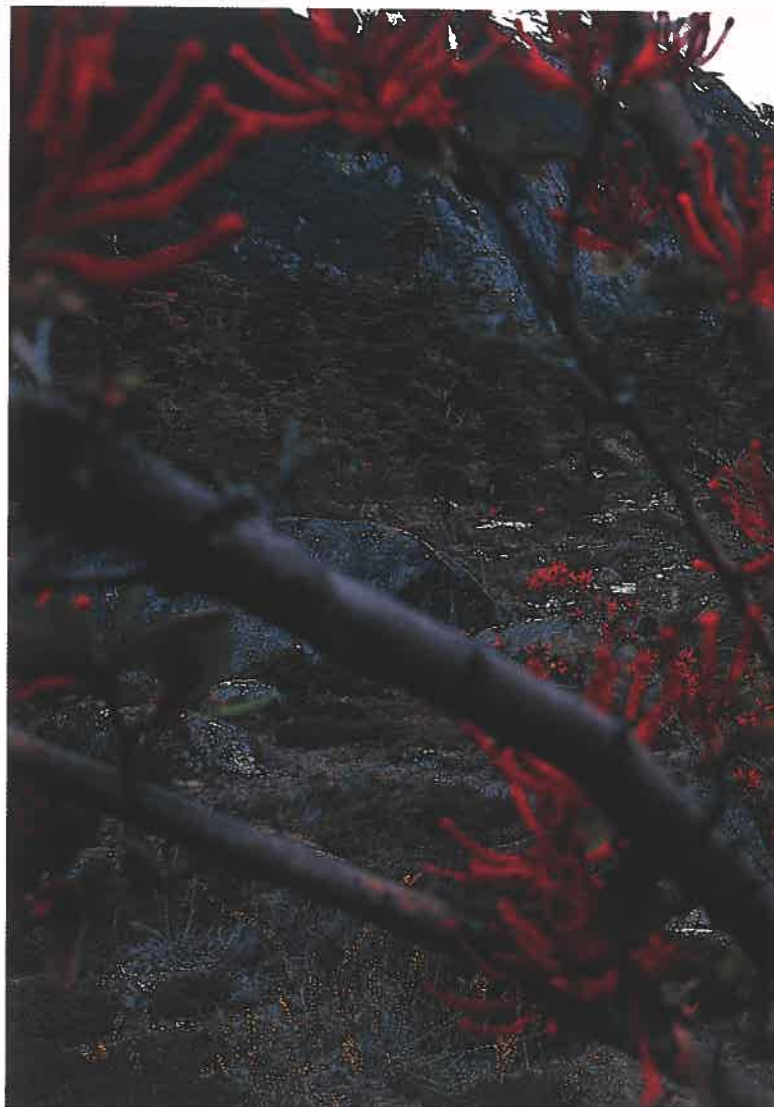
NICE WORK: Earth River guide (below) reassembles a kayak at camp. Clockwise from top left: Trail food; Eric Hertz and son Cade navigate the icy waters of Lago Leones; hiking amid the *ciruelillos*.



Not me. There have been a lot of deep but ill-defined sensations in the half dozen times I’ve visited Patagonia since I first talked about it with Chouinard 25 years ago. Clearly, the region was not all arid plain and desert. On the Península Valdés, three-ton elephant seals lie like slugs on the beach, or they battle one another in bloody contests of sexual domination. Orcas motor up onto the beach and eat baby sea lions like canapés, while Southern right whales breach in the deeper waters.

Not too far inland, there is a kind of cowboy heaven just east of the Andes, near the towns of El Bolsón and Esquel. If you were to drive a gravel road out of El Bolsón, you’d notice fat cattle and fast horses in the fields and old log cabins on the riverbanks. Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, and Etta Place lived in a few of those cabins, on land they ranched for four years.

The old cabins are tumbling down now, and bees hum in the fields. The river flows into a large lake, and glaciers glitter in the mountains above. All in all, this place is a Southern hemisphere mirror image of my home in south-central Montana, except that when the snow piles



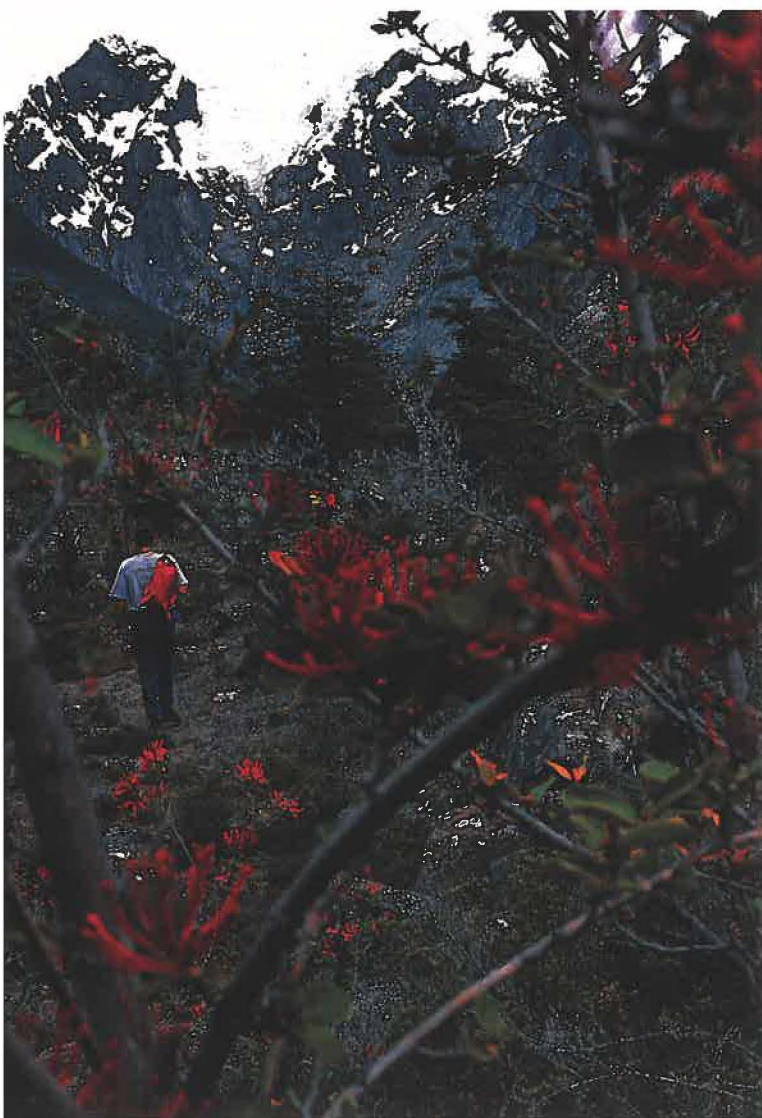


up above the windows in January where I live, people in Patagonia are enjoying 16-hour summer days. Riding horses. Having barbecues.

Aside from this seasonal inversion, Patagonia can be conveniently compared to the American West: There are endless scrublands and deserts and canyonlands and mountains and glaciers and any number of extraordinary places to send the soul soaring. It is a place of special oddities. In 1905, for instance, Butch and Sundance were said to have robbed a bank in Río Gallegos, about 700 miles south of their ranch.

I've seen the robbed bank at Río Gallegos—it still stands—and later on the same day I visited the nearby penguin colony. It was the American West all right, but a bizarro version, with hints of another dimension leaking into the scene. I was forced to imagine a daring daylight bank robbery, accomplished on horseback, with penguins strutting about underfoot.

And people ask me why Patagonia is my favorite place on Earth.



THERE WERE 13 of us standing on the shores of Lago Leones, all men. "We had one woman who wanted to come," Eric said, "but she runs marathons for fun and didn't think this trip would be strenuous enough for her."

People find Eric's trips on his Web site, Earthriver.com, or are attracted by word of mouth, but most everyone on this go-around had traveled with Earth River before. Aside from gender, there was no common denominator: Ed was a doctor; Fermín was an accountant from Mexico; José Luis, from Chile, and John, from Canada, were businessmen. Some guys were wealthy; some were just scraping by. All knew that things seldom run absolutely smoothly on an exploratory trip like this. They liked that.

So we were an all-male expedition, ready to endure any hardship, and we might have felt pretty macho out here in the Northern Ice Field, except that the only woman who took the time to investigate the expedition thought it was a sissy trip.

I believe the marathoner might have changed her mind that very afternoon when we went looking for a waterfall we'd seen from the plane. It was several ridges over from our campsite, and we side-hilled it through thick, intensely annoying, ankle-grabbing vegetation. When you fell, and everyone did now and again, the vegetation caught and enfolded your body so that it was difficult to get up, in the manner that it is difficult to get up when you've fallen into deep snow on a steep hill.

Every once in a while we'd pass red flowering plants with woody stems that sported flowers like hands with way too many fingers. José Luis, who as a Chilean knew such things, said the plants were called *ciruelillos*. They grew from two to twelve feet high and were our friends. We could grab the whiplike trunks and take a few easy steps over the matted vegetation. Our feet never touched ground; we moved on uneven, springy beds of branch and vine. We looked,

altogether, like a bunch of drunks stumbling over the hillside.

An occasional tree, looking vaguely tropical, rose out of the low vegetation. Thunder rumbled in the distance, but this late afternoon was perfectly blue and cloudless. We were hearing the sound of the glacier pouring into the lake as it calved off great icebergs. I contemplated the glacier, juxtaposed with the seemingly tropical vegetation. Here was a good slice of Patagonia bizarro: a world of ice framed by red flowers and lush plants.

A mist rose from the drainage one ridge away: It was the waterfall, less than a mile off and, we calculated, about, jeez, another hour and a half away. Hell with it: We abandoned the waterfall. Probably wouldn't have been a favorite place, anyway.

For the hike back we moved to the high ridges, which were less choked with vegetation, and it took us only 27 days to get to camp, or so it seemed. My infallible adventure watch, with time and date and altitude and compass functions, said that we had been fighting through the foliage for only about five hours total. We were beat, and it would have been easy to think of ourselves as highly robust hikers except for one fact I've neglected to mention: Eric's ten-year-old son, Cade, was along on the trip and had done everything we'd done, only faster.

Cade was writing a diary for a school project, and it is instructive to see a ten-year-old cover the same day with a good deal more dispatch than I can muster: "My dad the guides the clients and me went on a float plane to Lago Leones which mean Lake of the lions because there are so many mountain lions there." We did, in fact, find the scat and tracks of a lion near our campsite. Cade describes our walk in this matter-of-fact manner: "Then everybody went on a hike to a creek. We did some bushwhacking but did not see much except for bushes."

THE NEXT DAY WE INFLATED THE KAYAKS and paddled down the lake toward the glacier. The sun was bright, and there were more thunderlike rumblings that grew ever louder as we approached the ice, a wall perhaps 80 or 100 feet high. Some in our party, thought it was closer to 250. Let's call it 150 feet.

Occasionally a chunk of ice the size of a three- or four-story building calved off the ice cliff, and this calving occurred in what appeared to be slow motion. The ice, exhibiting a great deal of leisure, tumbled lazily into the water below, eventually sending a fountain of spray 30 or 40 feet into the air. These calvings generated waves several feet high, and the waves became a concern as we approached the glacier. It was, according to my watch, 65°F out, but there was a cool breeze from the glacier, as if someone had left the refrigerator door open.

Lago Leones, according to the infallible adventure watch, which is usually right plus or minus a few hundred feet, was only 1,070 feet above sea level. A lowland lake. It is true that there are glaciers at sea level in high latitudes, in Alaska, for instance, but this was 46° south. Portland, Oregon, is close to 46° north and also near sea level, but you seldom hear of glaciers stopping traffic on the interstate there.

Beyond this glacier, to the west, there were some pretty substantial mountains, including Monte San Valentín, which, at 13,240 feet, is the highest point in Patagonia. So it was staggering to think that if all these glaciers were grinding away down here at a thousand feet, there was surely ice beyond comprehension at 13,000 feet.

Our kayaks were doubles, and I was paddling with a guy who prefers to be nameless in this instance. We decided to defy the thunder and paddle close to the glacier. A line of calved-off icebergs floated near the place where ice met water. We calculated the risks and moved in among the bergs.

Every now and again we could hear this odd clicking. It was the sound you hear when a really cold ice cube is dropped in a glass of water. We moved in closer yet and sat in the kayaks, staring up at all the ice in the world. My paddling partner said, "Makes me think of my girlfriend."

I looked up at the frigid world above and almost said, "I'm sorry." Silence seemed the best course. He said, "It's the blue color."

In places, parts of the glacier had fallen away in huge, hundred-foot-high pillars, and the underlying ice was a deep and clean cornflower blue that seemed to glow, as from within. "She has blond hair and blue eyes," my partner said.

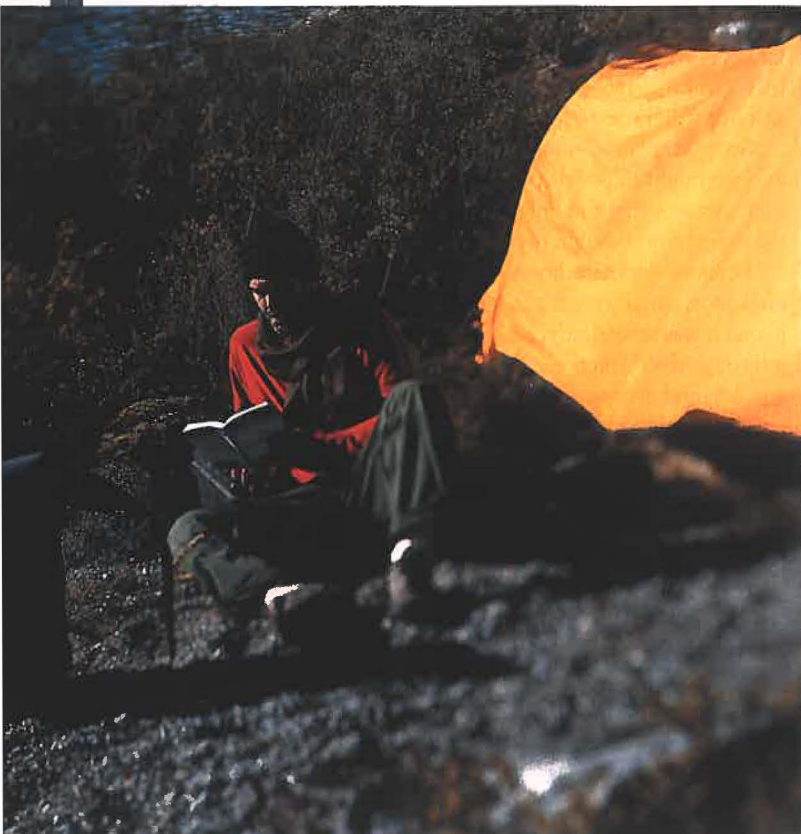
"Yes?"

"So I'm thinking lingerie."

A few judicious questions established that the woman did not presently own any blue lingerie. That situation would be rectified immediately upon my partner's return.

Thus occupied with our thoughts, we threaded through the icebergs floating at the base of the glacier. None of them was much bigger than a house. The smaller ones were not blue but white in the sun, all pocked and melting, with small rivers flowing off their backs. The sun was sculpting these bergs into various fantastic shapes. One looked like a fox's head with water dripping off the nose.

I was contemplating the oft made assertion that there is no geographic cure. If you're an alcoholic in Maine, you'll be one in



CAMP LIFE: Photographer/Guide Stephen Mahan takes a break at base camp (left). Above: Fermín, prepped for sun, rain, whatever.



Missouri, or so they say. The observation, I think, is both smug and erroneous. My favorite spots have all been something a good deal more than a photo op. Once, I climbed to the foot of a glacier in Torres del Paine National Park in Chile. No big thing, except that I was recovering from a back operation I'd needed after a climbing fall. For two months before the operation, I had been unable to walk. Torres del Paine is a favorite place. I learned to walk there.

I visited the Península Valdés during a career crisis that involved a lot of angry, high-volume negotiations. On the peninsula, I took some pleasure in watching three-ton monsters battle on the beach. And outside El Bolsón the wind whispered that a sudden and unexpected vacancy in my love life was all for the best. For both of us.

So it is my contention that favorite places have the capacity to heal. I wasn't presently in any particular mental or physical turmoil. But, as every Boy Scout knows, it is wise to be prepared. I was looking for a new favorite place, just in case.

It was the warmest part of the day, and the glacier was calving frequently. Massive quantities of ice fell, and the rumbling thunder was constant for 20 or 30 seconds at a time. A few moments later, a wave formed at the base of the glacier and radiated outward, lifting the icebergs all about. It was no good running from the wave: The awful thing could simply crest up over you and drop several dozen tons of ice on your head. No, we wanted to face the wave and

ROCKSLIDE RUNNING: Negotiating the talus around Lago Cachorro.

Bottom: Drinking straight from the lake—no filter required.

paddle over the crest, dodging ice as we rose five or six feet on the swell and then fell down the other side, drawing ever closer to the glacier. In the interval between calvings, we retreated rapidly.

"Lingerie?" I asked my partner.

Ice clicked suggestively on all sides.

"Lingerie," he said.

OUR PARTY LUNCHEd on a rocky point overlooking the glacier, which creaked and groaned beside us. Below, it cracked and boomed into the lake. Some thought it was possible no one had ever been here before.

"I doubt it," I said. I had read a report about a Chilean climbing team that had entered the Northern Ice Field by way of Lago Leones and spent 22 days on the ice, climbing San Valentín, among other peaks.

"Okay," Eric said. You could see the wheels turning in his head. "But," he said, "we may be the first to kayak this lake." "It's not well known," said Jose Luis who lives in Santiago and has a cabin a few of hours north of where we were sitting.

Here was a place where you
could easily freeze to death while
slathered with suntan lotion.



"I've been coming to this area for over 20 years, and I never heard of Lago Leones before."

I thought that "not well known" was a better formulation.

Presently Eric said, "Let's go find that high lake we saw from the plane." It had looked pretty good from the air—a potential favorite place for sure—a small alpine lake set up against a headwall maybe 2,000 feet high.

It took us two hours to climb 600 feet. The high lake was still about 1,400 feet above us, which meant we were only a third of the way there. I didn't think I could get up to the lake and down to the kayaks before dark and decided to turn back — a wise move.



After paddling for two hours, we landed on the beach. John dropped to his knees and kissed the ground.



We arrived back at the lake, and it didn't look good at all. A late-afternoon wind was howling off the glacier, and Leones was a sea of whitecaps. The icebergs that had been floating at the base of the glacier were off in the far distance, congregated near our campsite several miles away, sailing on the katabatic wind that poured off the ice. John the Canadian and I launched first, and that was the last we saw of Robert and Ed. The lake required our full attention.

We knew we had to cross quickly or the wind would drive us past our camp, which was on the other side of the lake. If we missed it, there'd be no paddling back. This required that we take the short-est possible route across, which put us broadside to the wind and waves. It was scary out there, and John, who's run his share of Class IV and V rivers, shouted over the wind.

"What?" I hollered back.
"Never . . . thought . . . sea kayaking . . . was . . . an adrenaline sport," he yelled.

But it was. If the kayak flipped, we wouldn't survive long in the frigid water. There were four- and five- and six-foot waves coming in sets, and they slopped over into the kayak, which, thankfully, was a self-bailing model, or we'd have been sunk. John thrust his paddle into the belly of the waves as they reared up on us, and I steered in a manner that put us three-quarters broadside on the crest of the waves, which brought the rudder out of the water and rendered it useless for several moments. All that was required in that situation was a quick corrective backpaddle. In this way, zigzagging through the wind and waves, we crossed the lake and neared the icebergs, which were spread out in a defensive line blocking the promontory we had to round in order to get to camp. They glittered in the sun, melting to death in various evocative shapes as the waves exploded against them, sending spray ten feet into the air.

John and I decided not to chance the icebergs and made a pretty fair surf landing on a small stone beach one ridge away from our camp. We hadn't stopped paddling once in almost two hours. John dropped to his knees. "I'm doing a pope," he said, and kissed the ground.

Presently we began to wonder what had happened to Robert and Ed. They weren't out on the water, or we'd have seen their bright yellow kayak cresting the waves every once in a while. We climbed up the ridge for a better view and stood facing the

wind-whipped lake. We scanned the water for ten minutes or more.

There was a rustling behind us. "You guys just get in?" Ed asked. He and Robert were carrying their gear to their tents. They had followed us across the lake, zigzagging in the same manner, but had made it through the line of icebergs and around the promontory.

"We were worried about you guys," I said.

"You didn't look back," Robert asked, "check on us once in a while?"

"You're a guide," I said.

"Guides are people, too."

THE WINDS DIED DOWN, and the surface of the lake glassed off and mirrored the sunset. Eric and the rest of the group came paddling back through the various reds and pinks around ten o'clock. They hadn't quite made the upper lake, just as we hadn't quite made the waterfall a day ago. Eric said he wasn't going to push things too much with Cade along. If his son got hurt, he'd have to answer to his wife, and then he'd be in the cat box.

"The cat box?"

"It's a step down from the doghouse," Eric explained.

"Anything lower than the cat box?"

"Hell."

I slept like a rock and woke late the next morning. It was 10:70. Apparently, everyone had left except for Robert, who offered me a cup of coffee without a trace of sarcasm.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.



"Asleep," Robert said.

And it occurred to me that there was no such time as 10:70 and that I was looking at the altitude calibration on my infallible adventure watch. I punched a button and discovered that it was actually 6:15.

The next day we broke camp and made our way to another, higher lake called Lago Cachorro, Chilean Spanish for Puppy Lake. We found a rough trail hacked out of the bush, but other than those few machete cuts, there were no signs of human visitation: no plastic bags or bottles or candy wrappers. We didn't even find a single fire ring.

"And," Eric said, "It's possible no one has ever been down to the narrow arm way down on the other side of the lake."

I didn't say anything.

"You know Mark, our pilot? He's been here ten years. He doesn't know anyone who's been there."

"Okay," I said.

OFF THE MAP: Kayaking Lago Cachorro, another potential favorite place on Earth.



THAT AFTERNOON, as we set up camp at Lago Cachorro and reinflated the kayaks, horseflies assailed us in a continuous swarming attack. I found myself wishing it would rain and drive the insects away. So, of course, the next morning dawned cold and gray and a steady rain drummed down on the tents. The sun bullied its way through the clouds by about 11, and we paddled off down the lake through various shafts of light that angled down out of dramatic, even operatic, cloud forms. We made directly for the end of the lake, where a snowcapped mountain stood behind the others like the fin of a shark.

The lake ended at a perfectly vertical rock wall that rose 3,000 feet (at a guess) out of the water. We turned left, into the narrow arm of the lake, and paddled down a fjordlike channel with rock walls rising close on either side of us. I was beset by a sudden vertigo. The rock loomed over us. A dizzying assortment of ledges ran every which way: They rose on a diagonal and then dropped like a bad day at the stock market. Waterfalls fell silver against the slick black walls that now towered between 4,000 and 6,000 feet above us. There were more than (Continued on page 106)

ADVENTURE GUIDE PATAGONIA

Spanning Chile and Argentina, Patagonia is arguably more geographically diverse than the American West. From its snow-fluted peaks to its chiseled coast, it has nearly limitless potential for trekking, paddling, and skiing.

■ **VISAS:** Visas aren't needed for stays of under three months; Chile's \$100 entry fee is good for your passport's duration. Contact the **Consulate of Chile** (www.chileny.com) or the **Consulate of Argentina** (www.congenargentiny.com).

■ **GETTING THERE:** **LAN Chile** (\$950; www.lanchile.com) flies to Santiago, **Aerolineas Argentinas** (\$640; www.aerolineas.com) to Buenos Aires. From either city, local carriers cover most of Patagonia for \$25 to \$200 a ticket. If you have time to spare once you've arrived, **Navimag** (www.navimag.com) operates a four-day ferry between Puerto Montt and Puerto Natales for \$250 a berth.

■ **TREKKING:** Most national parks feature marked trails, campgrounds, and hostels. **Cascada Expediciones** (www.cascada-expediciones.com) guides the 50-mile circuit around Chile's Torres del Paine massif in ten days for \$1,470 and up. **Fitz Roy Expeditions** (www.elchalten.com/fitzroy) offers various treks and climbs in Argentina's spectacular Los Glaciares National Park (www.losglaciares.com).

■ **RAFTING:** Chile's Futaleufú region is Patagonia's white-water capital. Its crown jewel: the 60 miles of Class III to V rapids on the Río Futaleufú. **Earth River Expeditions** (800-643-2784; www.earthriver.com) has deluxe eight-day rafting trips with lodging in tree-house camps and cave dwellings for \$2,700. **Expediciones Chile** (888-488-9082; www.exchile.com) conducts more modest, one-day trips (\$75 to \$100) down the "Fu" and its nearby tributaries.

■ **SEA KAYAKING:** Chile's coast is a maze of islands and fjords, but facilities are sparse and access is challenging—self-sufficiency

is a must. **Cascada Expediciones** (contact info above) leads a six-day kayak camping trip along the eastern edge of the Gulf of Ancud for \$990 and up.

■ **SKIING:** **Cerro Catedral** (www.bariloche.com/catedral), near San Carlos de Bariloche, is Argentina's largest ski resort, with a thousand skiable acres (\$5 to \$30 per day). For skiing at the bottom of the world, try the downhill and cross-country trails at **Cerro Castor** (www.cerrocator.com), near Ushuaia in the Argentine portion of the Tierra del Fuego archipelago, for about \$20 per day.

■ **LODGING:** Hotels in Patagonia are not cheap; hostels are often a better deal, while campgrounds, many with showers and hot water, abound. Still, there are some reasonable hotels. In Futaleufú, **Expediciones Chile** operates the **Hostería Río Grande** (\$150 per night; contact info above), a good base for rafting and hiking. The **Hostería Pehoe** (\$105 per night; www.pehoe.com/pehoe.htm) is set on a private island in Torres del Paine National Park with panoramic views of the towering Horns of Paine. Mountain sports enthusiasts flock to Bariloche's **Albergue La Bolsa de Deporte** (\$5 for a bed; +54-2944-423529) for area advice and a climbing wall. To stay on a traditional sheep estancia, see www.estanciasdesantacruz.com.

■ **WILDLIFE:** Argentina's **Península Valdés Animal Reserve** (www.madryn.gov.ar) is an acclaimed breeding ground for Magellanic penguins, elephant seals, and the occasional southern right whale.

■ **RESOURCES:** **South American Explorers** (www.sameplo.org) provides trip reports, advice, and Patagonia discounts for \$50. **CONAF**, the Chilean park service, maintains an informative Web site at www.conaf.cl; the **Tierra del Fuego tourist board** operates another at www.tierradelfuego.org.ar. —Cliff Ransom



(Continued from page 74)

a dozen falls, and they dropped down obvious drainage patterns or followed the rock ledges for a time. They braided back and forth or pooled up on shelves, then poured over flat, vertical slabs in wide sheets, an effect architects attempt in the fountains of buildings that aspire to grandeur. One of the more substantial falls plunged down rock carved and weathered in such a way that it resembled a ski jump. The water was propelled out into space and fell 150 feet or so to the rocks below.

All of which was dizzying enough, but when I followed the waterfalls to their source at the top of the cliffs—it was necessary to crane my neck and lean back—I saw any number of glaciers peeking over the ridges of rock several thousand feet above us. Streams of meltwater flowed out from lingerie-blue caves under the glaciers. The ice was poised, hanging there and ready to fall at any moment, so that the slender arm of Puppy Lake was filled to the brim with the certainty of imminent avalanche.

We felt reasonably safe in the center of the channel, though a few immense rocks poked

five and ten feet out of the water, and it was pretty clear where they'd come from. Every 15 minutes or so we heard a sharp *crack* and then a rumbling that echoed through the high rock canyon. It was difficult to pinpoint the location of the avalanche, and we looked up at the assortment of hanging glaciers overhead. The sound grew in volume, overwhelmed the echo, and drew all eyes. The ice that had broken off the glacier above was battered violently against the cliff so that it was cracked and finally crushed high above us, and then it fell like water, silver against the black rock, a mobile margarita kicking loose a few Volkswagen-size rocks that bounded joyously above and beside the waterfall of crushed ice.

The banks of the lake were narrow, and it was no more than a hundred yards to the cliff face, I suppose, but the ice hit this gently sloping apron and piled up on itself, forming large ice fields where you didn't want to be standing when the daiquiri of death came thundering down the cliff. Streams from the waterfalls flowed under the piles of ice and emptied out into the lake.

This was my new favorite place on Earth.

We beached our kayaks on a gray, pebbly shore at the end of the channel, where the largest of the streams poured into the lake, and then just stood there for several minutes, silent and stupefied. After some moments, we attempted speech. Eric was keen to come up with a name for the place. He didn't think people would want to travel thousands of miles to see Puppy Lake. We tried the Ice Palace, the Glacier Gymnasium, the Coliseum of Ice. Eric conferred with Robert, who, in his farming days, had worked with Chile's Mapuche Indians. They had a word meaning "where heaven meets the earth."

"Too pretentious," I said.

"The Shackleton Arm," Eric said without a moment's pause.

"Historically inaccurate."

Eventually, Robert and Eric came up with an evocative Spanish name: Cañon Cascada de Nieve. I liked it: the Canyon of Cascading Snow. As we contemplated the name, another avalanche dropped a daiquiri of death on an ice field just a couple of hundred yards away. The name seemed appropriate.

 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CHANNEL
PRESENTS

Surviving EVEREST

SUNDAY APRIL 27 8 p e t / p t
ENCORE PRESENTATIONS MAY 25 & 29 8 p e t / p t

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I stood there, looking up, and felt something inside me rise with the rock. It was strange. Here was all this violent geology going on all around, and it seemed to inspire a certain tremulous serenity. I suspected that the sensation was something you might feel after sitting in an empty room meditating for a couple of decades.

Dave, the aviation buff, and I talked about it for a bit. We'd both paddled kayaks in Alaska, where the lakes were bigger and the mountains higher. "But," Dave said, "everything is always somewhere off in the distance." Here, the mountains and glaciers rose directly out of the lake, right in front of you, and there was something in that proximity that generated grandeur. Dave, with his aviation background, called all this sudden rearing up of rock and ice "immediate vertical relief."

I liked the phrase and wrote it down in my notebook. If life ever got the best of me again and I started going bughouse, I think I'd take a pass on the pills and come down to Cañon Cascada de Nieve for a couple days of immediate vertical relief. It was a

place that kicked and pummeled you into a state of reflective tranquillity. And I'd already scouted it out.

The others had turned their attention to the rushing stream at our feet that was pouring out of the only nontechnical climbing drainage in the whole canyon. It rose about 2,000 feet in a series of ridges that terminated at another cliff wall crested with glaciers. Eric expressed his opinion that there was a lake up top, probably located between the last ridge and the headwall. Eric always thinks there's a lake up top, and even if there isn't, inconclusive walks are the very essence of exploration.

We climbed for a couple of hours, rising up over gray granite, moving ever closer to a small glacier at the base of the headwall.

I was walking alone, at a meandering pace, when Eric and Cade passed me on the way down.

"No lake," Eric admitted.

"Look at it this way," I said. "Cade is almost certainly the only ten-year-old from Accord, New York, to have ever stood on this spot."

By the time I got down to the kayaks, most everyone had left for camp. Fermín from Mexico and Ed the doctor were standing on the shore. José Luis from Chile was still up there, as was Robert the guide, who is a person, too. Those of us on the shore thought it was best to wait for Robert and José Luis, just in case.

Presently it began to rain. After 20 minutes Ed and Fermín and I got really good at standing in the rain together. A stiff wind sprang up and drove the rain horizontally into our faces. We retreated up-canyon to a house-size granite boulder, where we perfected standing in the rain behind a rock in about ten minutes flat. Ed and I walked down the shore, emptied out a kayak and carried it back to the rock. Then we practiced huddling under a kayak in the rain for an hour and a half. Where the hell were Robert and José Luis?

I stepped out into the rain and tried walking over a boulder. Rain had made the rock as slick as ice. The guys were going to be a while getting down. This was unfortunate, because Fermín was wet and very

Some trails are so magical, they lead back to your own childhood.



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PATAGONIA

lightly dressed. He was beginning to shiver, and it was odd to see and a little scary because his face was absolutely white, rather like a mime's. He had been badly sunburned on the first day. Now he was using the only lotion he had, a cream that, whatever it was, never really dissolved on his face, not even a little bit. Huddling miserably in the rain, he looked like a zombie in the first throes of convulsion. I thought it a graphic evocation of Patagonian weather: Here was a place where you could easily freeze to death while slathered with suntan lotion.

God, I loved Patagonia.

It was eight in the evening before Robert and José Luis got down all that treacherous rock. We piled into the kayaks and paddled hard, racing the approaching darkness. Back at camp we drank mugs of steaming tea while Eric talked about tomorrow, our last day. The float plane would come late in the afternoon. In the morning, if it was clear, we could climb the ridge just across the lake, where there would be a fantastic view of the mountains and ice fields. "There might even be a lake up there," he said.

Dave the aviation buff doubted it. So did I. The two of us went back to the Canyon of Cascading Snow: my new favorite place. The folks doing the real exploring did not have a great deal of fun.

From Cade's diary: "The rest of us went on a hike to a good view of the mountains and a glacier. We did not make it. We went through prickles over my head and down a giant slide full of rocks." The next line is my favorite in the whole diary: "I went on that hike with pants and came back with shorts." The very last line of the diary rings with conclusive finality: "The float plane came and picked us up."

And that's exactly the way it happened. There is no mention of Eric's contention that it is possible that no other human being had ever seen the Canyon of Cascading Snow, which, I think, is really just my friend Eric's way of saying that it is one of his favorite places: a setting where a human being might come in a time of emotional or spiritual crisis and experience immediate vertical relief. ▲

For outtakes of David McLain's stunning
photographs of Patagonia, visit
www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure.

LEWIS & CLARK

(Continued from page 80)

found it too painful to write, yet he could not help himself. He had noticed a new kind of cherry growing on the Montana bottomlands, and he could not forbear writing a scientific description of it. To discipline men, first you discipline yourself.

A crucial test of Lewis and Clark's leadership came in June 1805, after they had left Fort Mandan behind, after the Corps had spent more than a year together, after they had all been hardened by a Dakota winter during which the temperatures routinely touched 40 degrees below zero. They poled their pirogues that June in what is now eastern Montana to the junction of the Missouri and a river none of their Indian informants had told them to expect. It came in from the north, it was turbid and full of sediment like the Missouri, and it was a big river—no minor tributary. They knew the Great Falls were on the Missouri and that the Missouri was the way into the mountains, but they had yet to reach the Great Falls, and beyond that they knew nothing. So they had no idea which branch to follow. The decision, furthermore, was critical. If they took the wrong fork, they could lose months or the whole season on the wrong river and wind up well short of their goal, out of provisions, the entire expedition a wash.

Every single member of the expedition except Lewis and Clark believed that the northern fork, which Lewis ultimately named the Marias River, after a cousin he was fond of, was the actual Missouri. Lewis and Clark thought not. They believed that the southern fork, its water clear like a mountain stream, was the true Missouri and would take them into the mountains.

Their first act was to send a pirogue some miles up each branch to scout out the lay of the river. When that proved unhelpful, Lewis and Clark split up and each took a small party of men a couple of days up each river, Lewis up the northern, Clark the southern. Clark went up 55 miles and came back, having found nothing. Lewis went up 60 miles. He was still convinced that the northern branch was not the Missouri; it swung too far north. The weather turned sour. They walked back the 60 miles. And his men still thought this was the Missouri. All of them. Pierre Cruzatte, Lewis writes, "who had been an old Missouri navigator and who from his integrity, knowledge, and skill as a waterman had acquired the confidence of every