


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

Patagonia

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 do like 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





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





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.



