

Patagonia

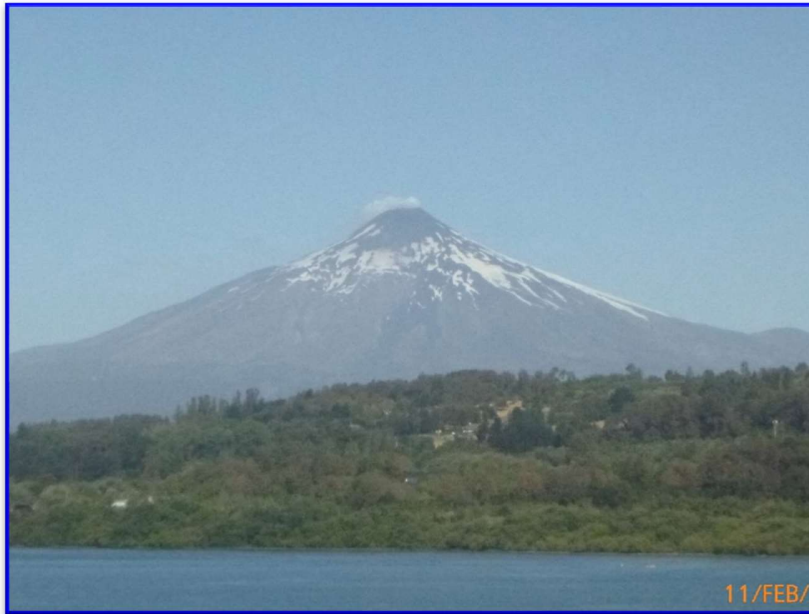
Argentina and Chile are the two countries that form the southern region of South America, generally referred to as Patagonia. It was also two years this trip, first booked in 2020 for Feb 2021, had been postponed due to covid. The “two” factor came into play again when booking flights, the price doubling from the pre-covid 2020 price, so it’s no surprise the time to process a Chile visa had also doubled from 4 weeks to 8 weeks, causing some anxiety awaiting approval.

Preparations complete, the Boeing 787 Dreamliner lived up to its name, and after a 12 hour 20 minute non-stop flight from Sydney, David and I landed in Chile’s capital Santiago at 10:55am Fri 10 Feb, 1 hour 40 minutes before we took off. Something to do with jet engines spinning furiously in one direction and planet earth spinning more sedately in the other.



Villarrica

Kurt had arrived from Florida, USA a couple of hours earlier, so we had a few drinks at the airport hotel waiting for our body clocks to adjust. From there a flight south to Temuco next morning, picked up by Peru Motors for the 60km transfer to Villarrica, a tourist city known for it’s active volcano and the starting point of the tour. A meet and greet for the tour group, three Americans, three Germans and three Aussies, all male, was held in the tour hotel, followed by the tour briefing. Lars would be tour leader and Eduardo van driver / mechanic.



Vulcan Villarrica on Lake Villarrica – real steam above

Bikes, a combination of BMW F750 Sport, BMW F850GS, CF Moto 800, Honda CB500X and a lone BMW R1250GS, were picked up at the workshop next morning, paperwork and packing took about an hour, and we were off around 10:30am through the light morning traffic. There was a slight drizzle and rain was forecast so some of us wore rain pants, but none eventuated.



getting acquainted with our new best friends, and with the tour group

Around noon, after an easy 100km, we reached the first of six border crossings for the tour. Paperwork for the group took over an hour to get out of Chile and even longer to get into Argentina, mainly for the bikes rather than the individuals. From there approx 15km of very rough gravel road gave an indication of what was to come, before a good road with strong cross winds to our overnight stay in Junin de Los Andes.

The countryside was very mountainous, with some farmland. We refuelled entering town, with a long queue for each of several bowzers, and a big crowd going to a rodeo at an adjacent arena. Hotel arrival time was around 5:15pm, beers in the bar around 6:00pm, then a walk into town for dinner. A market and festival were in full swing, US\$ were exchanged for Argentine pesos with a dodgy market stall holder, and several restaurants were tried before finding one that opened before 8:00pm. An interesting end to our first day on the road.



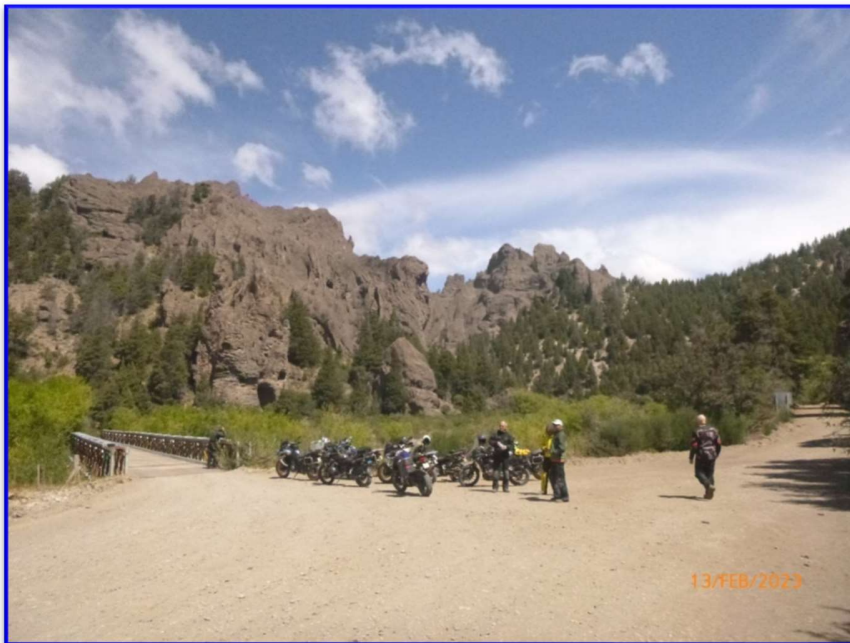
open air market in Junin de Los Andes – gauchos paradise

On the bikes again at 9:00 next morning, some clouds but mainly sunny (yet cool) and good roads on the acclaimed 5,000km Ruta 40 to San Martin de Los Andes for coffee. The terrain was now mainly flattish with mountains in the distance, more strong cross winds, then into some hilly terrain with a lot of slow drivers and a number of touring cyclists. It seemed you made up road rules as you went, and not all slow traffic appreciated being overtaken.

We detoured onto unsealed road #65 beside Lake Trafal which may have been a short-cut to somewhere but mainly seemed to service a host of camping sites, cafes and restaurants. Forsaking the latter, we had a picnic lunch by the lake.



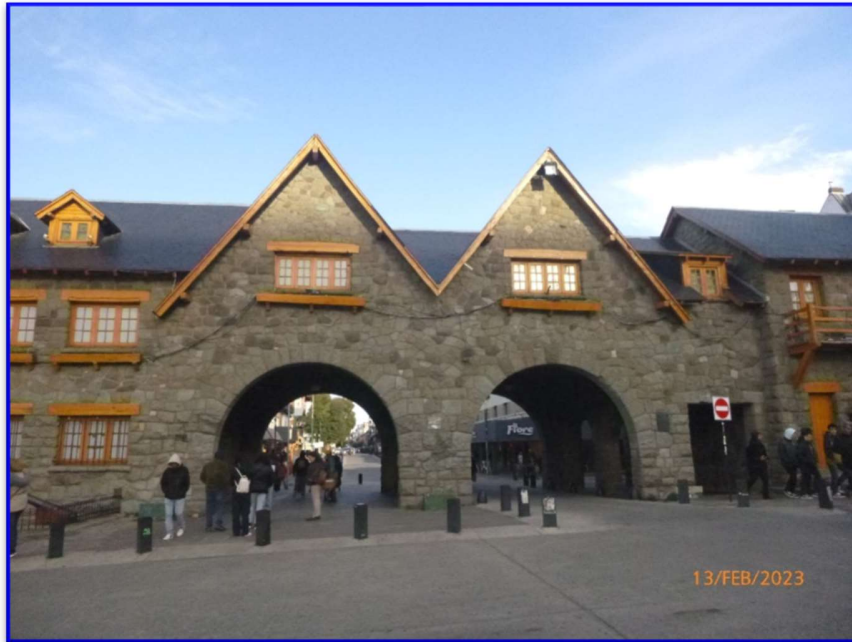
our first test on unsealed road #65 beside Lake Traful – kindergarten stuff



before some primary schooling

Eventually we were back onto a sealed road (#237), the cross winds returned, and my fuel warning sign came on several km from our destination. Lars intended to refuel at the end of each day so I wasn't too worried. I also knew the back-up van carried spare fuel.

Refuel we did entering San Carlos de Bariloche before reaching our lakefront hotel around 4:30pm. Michael shouted drinks in the hotel bar before a walk through this pleasant city, often referred to as the unofficial capital of Patagonia. It was again around 8:00pm before we found a restaurant open, and a large steak was washed down with a nice syrah at AUD\$6.50 per bottle.



San Carlos de Bariloche

Another 9:00 start next morning with overcast skies and 12°C, some traffic getting out of town and the great sealed Ruta 40 with sweeping bends around a couple of lakes, then up and down mountains with the temp dropping to 8°C. For warmth I put on my rain jacket at the first coffee stop, and had the heated grips on maximum.

We saw what appeared to be an army helicopter hovering over hippie El Bolson but none of the town's claimed UFO sightings, then turned down Ruta 71 for 20km to see Butch Cassidy's isolated shack. No wonder he resorted to bank robbery.

Lars, Dell and Micha continued on Ruta 71 to tackle the 128km gravel section, while the rest of us back-tracked to Ruta 40 and the sealed road to Esquel, arriving at our hotel around 3:15pm and walking into town for a late lunch. We also had a chat with the hotel owners, impressed by the many photos on the hotel walls of their motorcycle adventures around the world.

The dusty trio arrived later, then back into town for dinner, finding many venues still closed. Not sure whether this was a consequence of covid or typical for the country. After the late lunch, I had a light "sandwich", washed down with a nice but cheap "Norton" brand cab sav.



the renowned Ruta 40

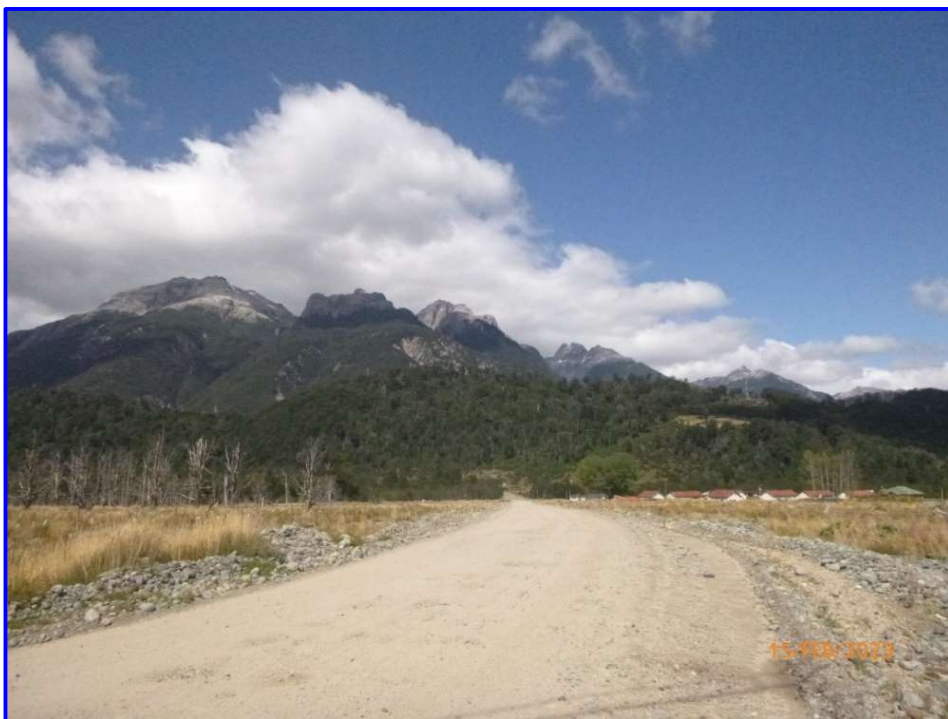


less elaborate sign-posting for Butch Cassidy's shack

Alarm at 7:00am, breakfast at 8:00 and on the bikes at 9:00 was becoming a familiar pattern. There was a detour leaving town to ride a twisty section of road and to stop at a viewpoint, then a reasonable sealed road #259 to Trevelin and precautionary refuel. Apparently servos were known to run out of fuel.

Just after town I stopped for a photo and was doing around 130kph trying to catch up when I saw dust clouds ahead, resulting in some hard braking before #259 changed to gravel about 100m from a T-intersection. To be fair, a few roads did have warning signs before the gravel. But not this one.

There were the usual frustrating waits exiting Argentina and entering Chile before Futaleufu, a welcome 10km of sealed road after the border then more gravel, a stop at a white-water rafting area for another picnic lunch, then even more gravel to Villa Santa Lucia, site of a 2017 landslide that killed 22 people and partly demolished the small village. My annoyance at dropping the bike riding onto some small rocks at the intersection pales into insignificance.



looking back at Villa Santa Lucia, and the end of 90km of gravel

That was the last of a total 90km of gravel for the day, turning onto a sealed section of Carretera Austral 7, the 1,200km main route connecting communities in southern Chile, and arriving at our hotel before La Junta around 5:15pm. Even the driveway up to the hotel presented a challenge, nearly dropping the bike again at a U-bend half way up the steep gravel incline. Don't know how Eduardo managed with the van and trailer.

The bikes had frost on the seats next morning, my phone showed 1°C, and the bike showed 4°C when we set off. After another precautionary refuel in La Junta, the temperature gradually increased as we followed a great section of Carretera Austral 7 beside Lake Risopatron with mainly long sweeping bends, some tighter corners, and a good sealed surface.

We stopped at Puyuhuapi for a break, continued beside the estuary connecting to the South Pacific Ocean then hit gravel, this time mainly rutted pot-holes, including a series of tight uphill U-bends on a rough and loose gravel surface. This was still Carretera Austral 7, the main route in southern Chile. Finally we got back onto a sealed surface for lunch at Villa Amengual.



Puyuhuapi

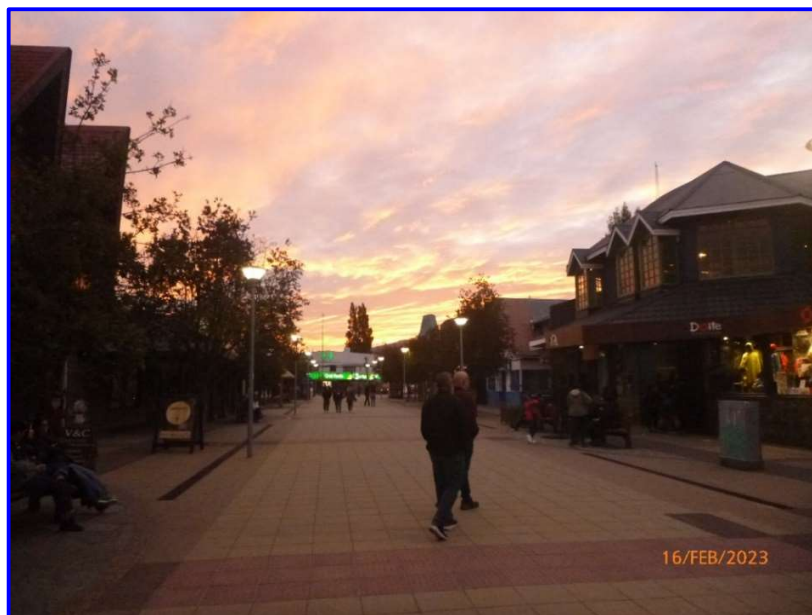


approx 2 km of rough gravel & tight up-hill U-bends – no photo stops here



in anticipation of the next section of road

The sealed surface continued for a series of downhill bends, numerous pot-holes, then a rise to a viewpoint to salivate on the next section of road. Playing the tourist, we stopped at Virgin Falls, then again at a viewpoint overlooking Coyhaique, a major city with a population around 50,000, before arriving at our hotel around 4:15pm. The walk into the city centre was a bit longer than Lars had indicated, but the restaurant, the food and the ambience were good.

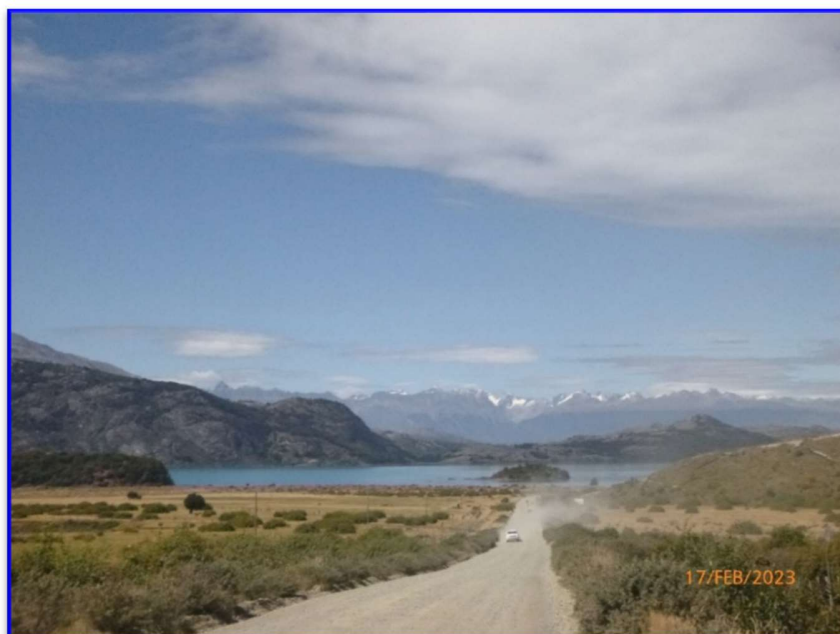


Coyhaique city centre

Next day would be challenging. The initial section of Carretera Austral 7 was a good sealed road with mountains either side, followed by an even better section, with a stop at viewpoint Mirador Cerro Castillo and another short section of sweeping bends, before confronting 196km of variable gravel road.



the view from Mirador Cerro Castillo



major route Carretera Austral 7, and snow on the mountains

The road surface varied frequently, from corrugations and pot-holes to hard-packed and loose gravel in probably equal proportions. We stopped just after half way at Puerto Rio Tranquilo for a picnic lunch and a small boat cruise on Lake General Carrera to see the Marble Caves, a unique series of natural caves worn into marble deposits by lake water around surface level. The marble colour is further enhanced by the bright blue tint from glacier meltwater.



Marble Caves on Lake General Carrera

Lars and Eduardo had refuelled the bikes while we were on the cruise, then back on the gravel and the welcome break was soon forgotten, turning onto more gravel on #265 and reaching our Patagonia Acres resort 33km past Puerto Guadal around 6:30pm. The light was still good but the dusty conditions occasionally had us riding blind after each passing car. This must have been even more uncomfortable for touring cyclists, their slow progress exposing them to more dust from traffic (including us) in both directions.

We didn't often come into contact with the cyclists so didn't determine where they were from, but overall there weren't as many foreign tourists as I had expected with only a few tourist or local buses, although there were a number of back-packers on the roads and in several hotels we stayed in. We did meet motorcyclists from Italy, Germany, Brazil and Australia, and passed more on the roads. Foreign tourists appeared to be concentrated in major centres so perhaps they prefer to fly in and out rather than endure the unavoidable long stretches of gravel.

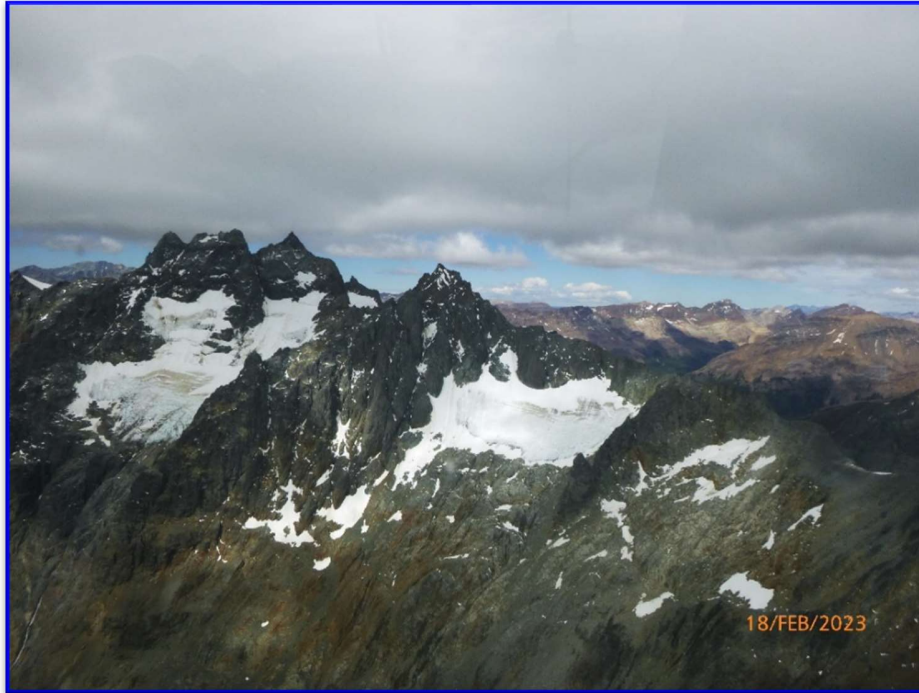


a less celebrated section of Carretera Austral 7

The stay in Patagonia Acres was the first rest day of the tour, giving a chance to wash away the dust. Three afternoon helicopter flights were specially arranged to take off and land at the remote resort, enabling all the tour group to fly over a nearby mountain range, with each flight landing for 20 minutes on a small glacier near a meltwater lake. Excellent.



a room with a view - Patagonia Acres resort



can't do this on a bike

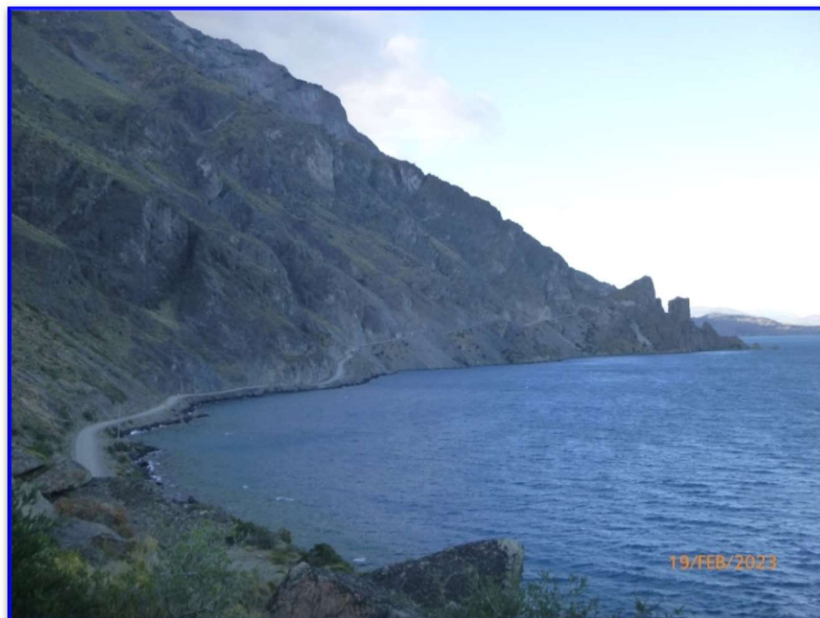


enjoying a pleasant afternoon stroll, on a small glacier

The cold shower and 8°C outside temperature next morning set the scene for the rest of the day, with three of us dropping our bike on the loose gravel while getting out of the resort driveway, not confidence inspiring for the very scenic gravel road #265 beside Lake General Carrera, eventually surviving to the sealed section leading into Chile Chico.



a great ride on #265 beside Lake General Carrera



deserves another photo

We regrouped in Chile Chico for the border crossing into Argentina 8km down the road, had a coffee at Los Antiguos while Lars and Eduardo sorted out some issues at the Argentine customs, then lunch and refuel at Perito Moreno, named after popular explorer Francisco Moreno.



to Chile Chico – most towns had elaborate signs, statues and memorials

Onto Ruta 40 again and another refuel at Bajo Caracoles, 130km further on, experiencing the Argentine pampas with wide open and barren plains, mountains in the distance, a good sealed road with occasional sections of gravel, groups of guanaco on either side of boundary fences, and the strong cross-winds we would live with for the rest of the tour.

On two separate occasions I saw a single nandu, the South American rhea or small ostrich. The sightings were probably more than 100km apart, and each nandu appeared to be in total isolation with no other wildlife around. I'm no David Attenborough, but I don't understand how the species manages to survive under these circumstances.

Estancia Santa Thelma appeared around 5:45pm. The manager greeted us with beers in a garden setting, showed us around the quaint combination of hotel style rooms, bunk rooms and glam tents, and pointed out the barn where we would have a B-B-Q dinner that evening.

The barn was a treasure trove of the estancia history, had puma skins hanging from the rafters, and gave the impression it would soon require an extension to display the multitude of empty wine bottles lining the interior walls. I think we brought that extension forward by a few weeks.

The property itself was huge, generally ran sheep, and we later discovered the manager and his charming wife divided their time between the estancia and their property in southern France.



Argentine pampas on Ruta 40



and guanacos



Estancia Santa Thelma



and our host for the night

A hot shower next morning made up for cold water the previous night, breakfast was in the main farmhouse, and on the road by 9:00am. The sealed section of Ruta 40 was welcome to start the day, although 10°C and the strong winds were a challenge. We refueled in Gobernador Gregores, and hit gravel again shortly after. For me, this would be the most uncomfortable ride of the tour, 79km of mainly loose gravel or corrugated surface, at least 10km of deep loose gravel with minimal defined wheel tracks, and I nearly dropped it at least 4 times, thrown off the footpegs when the front dug in and banging both shins a couple of times. Ouch. Others, who shall remain nameless, dropped their bike on several occasions, all at low speed so no physical harm and only minor bike damage.

When we eventually reached paved surface and regrouped, we met an Aussie from Brisbane who had bought a Harley in Indiana 7 months previously, travelled a meandering route through USA and Central America, and thought the last section of deep loose gravel wasn't too bad. I might add he was also wearing a skull-cap helmet and no gloves.



the acclaimed Argentine Ruta 40

Lunch and refuel at Tres Lagos, a couple of photo stops, and 2 small foxes at the viewpoint overlooking Lake Argentina, turning onto Ruta 11 and arriving in El Calafate around 4:20pm. With a population of 30,000 El Calafate is another touristy town popular for day trips to the 250km² Perito Moreno glacier, the largest in the southern hemisphere and unique in that it is maintaining its size despite regularly calving into Lake Argentina.

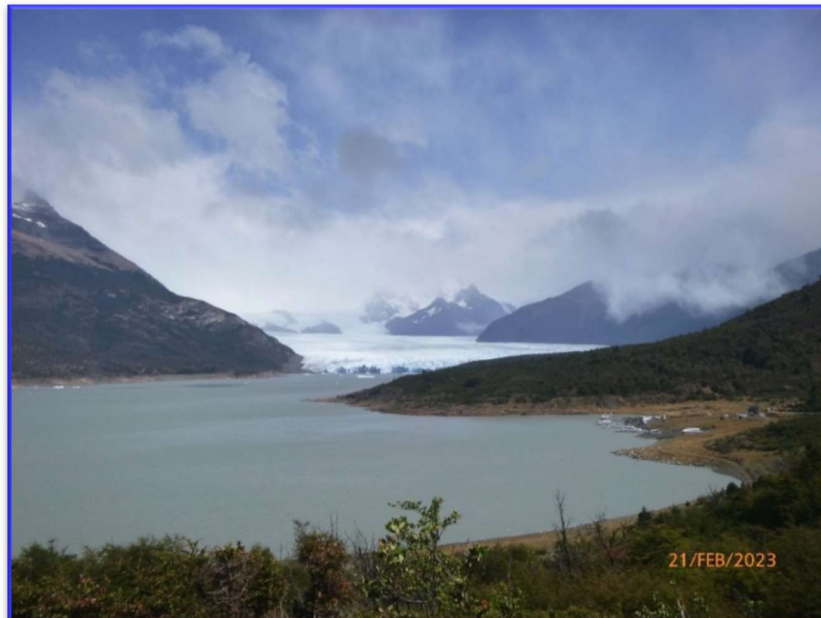


Lars getting acquainted with a local



guess where

Perito Moreno glacier was the destination for this “rest day”, setting off around 9:30am and encountering real rain for the first time. Rain, cloud and fog impacted but could not hide the sheer magnitude of the glacier, and our 2 hour boat cruise gave a good indication of the glacier’s size, colours and jagged features. And it was wet, cold and windy on the water.



Perito Moreno glacier



massive in size, with vibrant colours and occasional calving

The sun came out on the ride back to town, helping dry out wet gear, and provided the opportunity for a walk into town in the late afternoon and a bit of souvenir shopping.

12°C next morning, mainly clear but windy, a short stint on Ruta 40, then onto sealed Ruta 5 and the temperature dropping to 10°C as we climbed a mountain range and stopped at a viewpoint. After that it was long straights with small mountains (big hills?) in the distance, strong gusty winds and barren countryside. On many occasions the GPS appeared blank apart from a vertical purple line in the middle of the screen. Welcome to the Argentine pampas.

Lunch and another refuel at Rio Gallegos, the strong winds and lower geared gravel roads playing havoc with the fuel consumption. Early in the tour, after riding mainly sealed roads, I'd checked the screen display after refuelling and it indicated a theoretical range of 339km. On a later occasion, after mainly gravel roads, the bike's computer calculated the range after refuelling at 187km. Lars questioned whether I rode the gravel in first gear!

Another border crossing after 67km with less hassles than previously, back into Chile but no change in the countryside or the cold and windy weather, reaching the ferry near Punta Delgada lighthouse around 4:45pm to cross Magellan Strait onto Tierra del Fuego. I estimated there were at least 30 trucks and numerous cars lined up in separate lanes with typically 8 trucks making each 30 minute crossing on the larger of two ferries. No wonder the lighthouse was converted to a hotel.



and we complain about our transport systems



strong winds, no jetty, and a very wide shore landing ramp

Fortunately bikes were ushered to the front of the queue and after loading perhaps 10 trucks the bikes were snuggled in, then a number of cars. With no mooring facilities, the ferry used its side thrusters to maintain position on the shore ramp against the strong winds, and I felt my rear tyre being blown sideways riding up the wet steel loading ramp. The bikes weren't tied down, presumably packed in so tight they weren't going anywhere.

Apparently it's not uncommon for the ferry to be cancelled due to strong winds, so I can't imagine how long some trucks must wait to make the crossing. Lars' reassuring words were "the hotel stays open for us" if the ferry is delayed. Fortunately it wasn't, and after disembarking, it was another 40km to our hotel in Cerro Sombrero, arriving around 6:15pm.

6°C at clutch out next morning, with more wind, more pampas and more guanacos on #257, reaching yet another border at 123km, and yet another episode in depriving me of an hour of my life. We refuelled on the Argentine side, the temperature increased but so did the wind, and we had lunch in the oil/gas city of Rio Grande, where we passed numerous military memorials set along the shoreline. A stark reminder the Falklands Islands were only 500km off-shore.

Another hour of my life was lost waiting for lunch to be served in the "fast-food" restaurant before continuing on Ruta 3 and seeing trees for the first time in several days, apart from trees planted in towns. Not really trees, more a petrified forest, but the incidence of trees increased as we headed further south, most with a permanent lean.



one (nameless, not me) can't always choose where to run out of petrol

Lars had said the wind would drop, but it would get colder. He should have said it would get colder, and the wind might drop. Marginally. Perhaps. We refuelled again at Tolhuin, followed Lake Fagnano for a while, and the wind finally eased as we approached the mountains outside Ushuaia, stopping for photos at the Garibaldi Pass viewpoint and again at the Ushuaia sign.



Garibaldi Pass



and the view from the top



still leaning into the wind

We arrived at our hotel in the city centre around 4:45pm, safely negotiated yet another loose pebble driveway, and celebrated the day with a few beers. The highly recommended clams weren't available at the highly recommended restaurant, but the second choice food was good, the view and the wine were better, and the 'morrow was a rest day.

A nominal rest day, as the itinerary included a ride to Fin del Mundo, the End of the World. We set off around 9:30am, encountered more traffic than in all the previous week (apart from the ferry), and hit hard-packed gravel just out of town.

Gravel continued for 11km to the National Park entrance, another 7km of gravel to the End of the World boardwalk, and another 13km to another viewpoint hosting a souvenir shop where tourists could send postcards from "The End of the World". And view the magnificent scenery. Obviously by this stage I was counting down every km of gravel.



all dressed up and nowhere (further south) to go - next stop Antarctica

A good day, sunny but cold and negligible wind, and I generously let Lars ride my (and several others) bike up the hotel driveway on our return. In fact I think Lars and Eduardo insisted, wary of guests' cars parked in less than convenient positions.

Topping off the day was a 2 hour afternoon cruise on the Beagle Channel (named after Charles Darwin's ship) where it was even colder, much windier, but equally impressive scenery.



the End of the World



cruising the Beagle Channel



judging by the smell, that isn't snow on the outcrop



Ushuaia

Overcast and cool next morning so rain pants and jacket were worn. Ruta 3 is the only road in and out of Ushuaia so back across the mountains, stopping again at Tolhuin to refuel and have coffee in a very popular bakery, its reputation evident from the many bikes and cars parked in the surrounding streets. Another long delay getting served, the wind picked up as we continued the ride, the temperature rose to 18°C, and another refuel at the same servo before the same Argentine border. For the first time, the Chilean authorities required the customs declaration to be completed on-line, but fortunately the customs agent was far more helpful than previous experiences, working 3 of our phones concurrently to cope with the slow wi-fi.

By this time wind gusts had increased even more, at one point blowing me onto the opposite side of the road while passing over an elevated bridge deck and narrowly avoiding an oncoming car. Others reported similar experiences, particularly when overtaking or passing semi-trailers.

At the left-hand turn onto #Y-71, main road #257 curved sharply to the right with a steep camber, and strong winds gusting from the left. The 2 bikes in front of me (no names) had to stop for oncoming traffic and both were literally blown over. I stopped to help and suffered the same fate, as did the bike behind me. First time I'd participated in synchronized drops.

Upright again but confidence shattered, the #Y-71 to Porvenir immediately turned to gravel, some good and more bad surface for the next 87km, the strong winds continuing and photo opportunities very limited. I counted 3 oncoming cars in the first 60km before fishing shacks and farmhouses increased the traffic density.



another 87km of gravel road to Porvenir

We refueled again at Porvenir, almost missed the new hotel when the GPS ran out of streets, and dinner conversation included embarrassing confessions of more bikes down. We were warned.

Porvenir to Puerto Natales had an 8°C start with overcast skies and rain forecast. The #Y-65 was paved for the first 40km loosely following the Magellan Strait coastline, then long sections of road reconstruction had reasonable gravel detours for the next 80km. This was one of the few occasions I was sufficiently confident to use 6th gear on gravel.

Many sections of the new road were blocked off but appeared complete apart from edge backfill and line-marking, and after a stop for a photo I'd lost sight of other bikes and inadvertently rode approx 12km on some new work before having to make a tricky exit. Apparently I wasn't the only one, and rumour has it Lars rode all the new work.

The gravel finished at the intersection with Hwy 257 approx 15km from the ferry, where we regrouped and a quick dash had us all on board without waiting. Unfortunately the same couldn't be said for the usual line up of trucks. Last on meant we were last off, so we had a number of trucks and cars to pass, not fun with the strong winds.

San Gregorio on Hwy 255 was a rest break and an opportunity to see shipwrecks Vapor Amadeo, a steamer built in 1893 and beached in 1932, and Barca Ambassador, a sailing clipper built in 1869 and beached in 1926. Both vessels served sheep and cattle ranchers before roads were established in the region. This old wool export town appeared deserted, some wool bales still in storage in the abandoned sheds.



Vapor Amadeo (foreground) and Barca Ambassador (background)



abandoned wool sheds at San Gregorio

Lunch and refuel at the Puerto Natales turn-off onto Hwy #9, my bike display showing 1km range remaining. Approx 50km from Puerto Natales snow was visible on mountain tops, the first sight of Torres del Paine National Park. We reached our hotel around 4:45pm, with dinner in a nice restaurant on the estuary waterfront where I tried guanaco for the first (and last) time.

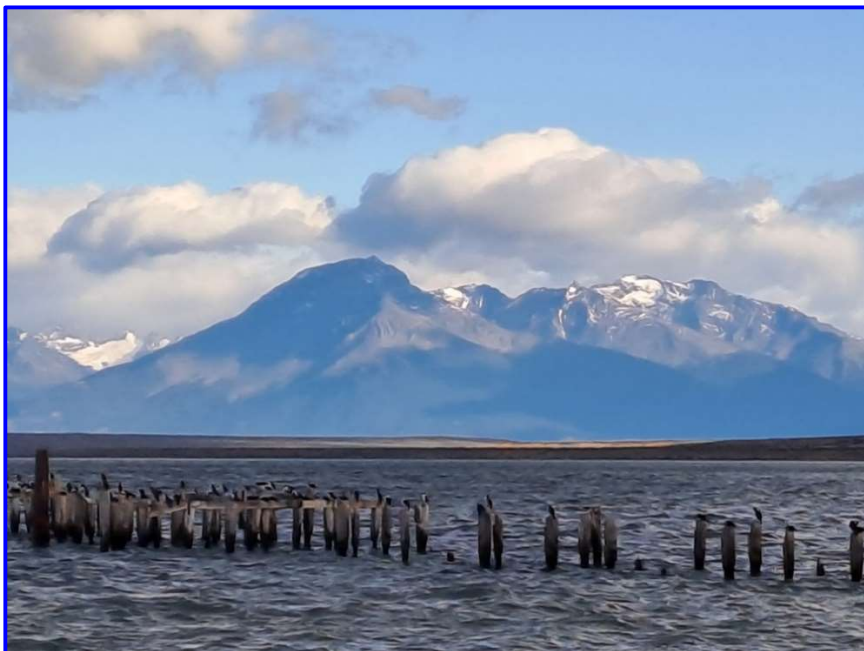


1km left in reserve - enough to do the fuel test



what wind?

Puerto Natales was our last stop on tour, with a nominal rest day where everyone opted for the ride to the magnificent Torres del Paine National Park. Sealed roads gave way to gravel after 20km with surfaces ranging from average to poor, with several short sealed sections to remind us how good it could have been. This pattern continued for the 150km loop around the Park.



the view from Puerto Natales waterfront



on the way to Torres del Paine National Park



this gravel road was definitely worth the effort



Paine Grande behind Lake Nordenskjold - been there



rode that



no caption required

I felt fortunate to see a condor soaring high above the mountains at the appropriately named Mirador (Lookout) Condor, but several of our group hit the jackpot, having the rare opportunity to see the elusive puma in action, feeding on a guanaco they suspect had been hit by a car. I'm happy to use a borrowed photo.

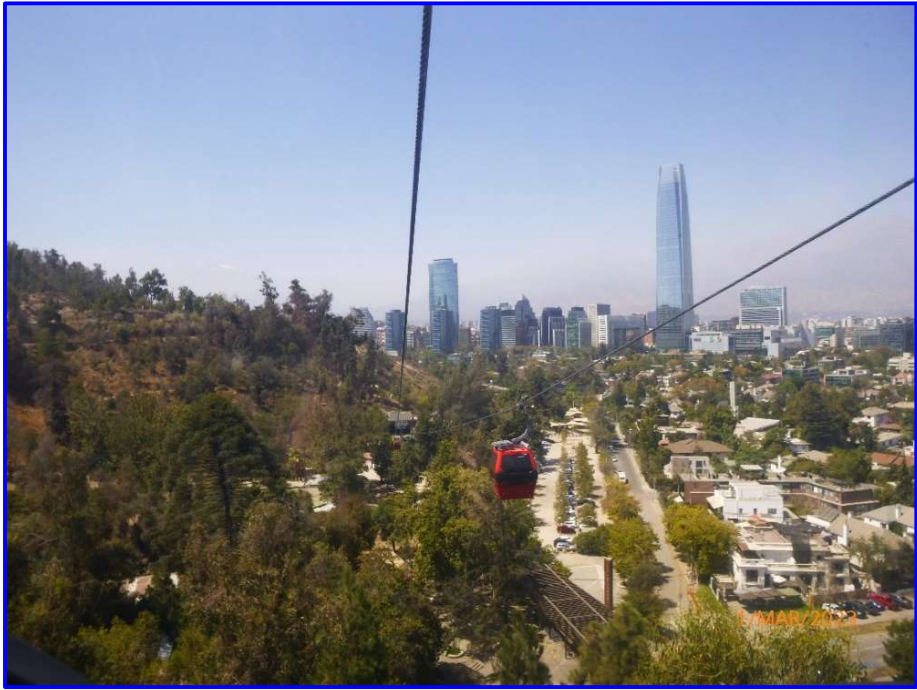


the elusive puma

After leaving the park, we re-grouped for a late lunch at Cerro Castillo, and a good paved section of Ruta 9 led us back to Puerto Natales for the last 65km, strong cross winds returning to give a final and lasting impression of riding in Patagonia.

We refueled the bikes before handing them back, had beers in the Charles Darwin hotel across the road, then dinner in an Asian restaurant where we all wore our complimentary Peru Motors T-shirt. Total distance travelled on my bike was 4,537km. At dinner, embarrassment was forgotten as many more bike drops were revealed, before conversation turned to the next trip. Watch this space.

Doug and Steve stayed on in Puerto Natales while the rest of the tour group flew back to Santiago next day, Kurt, David, Micha and myself stopping there for two days of R&R while others continued on to their home destinations. After the cold, the strong wind, the gravel, the dust, the scant population, the wide open spaces and the magnificent scenery of Patagonia, two days of 39°C temperatures in a sprawling city of 7 million people was quite a contrast.



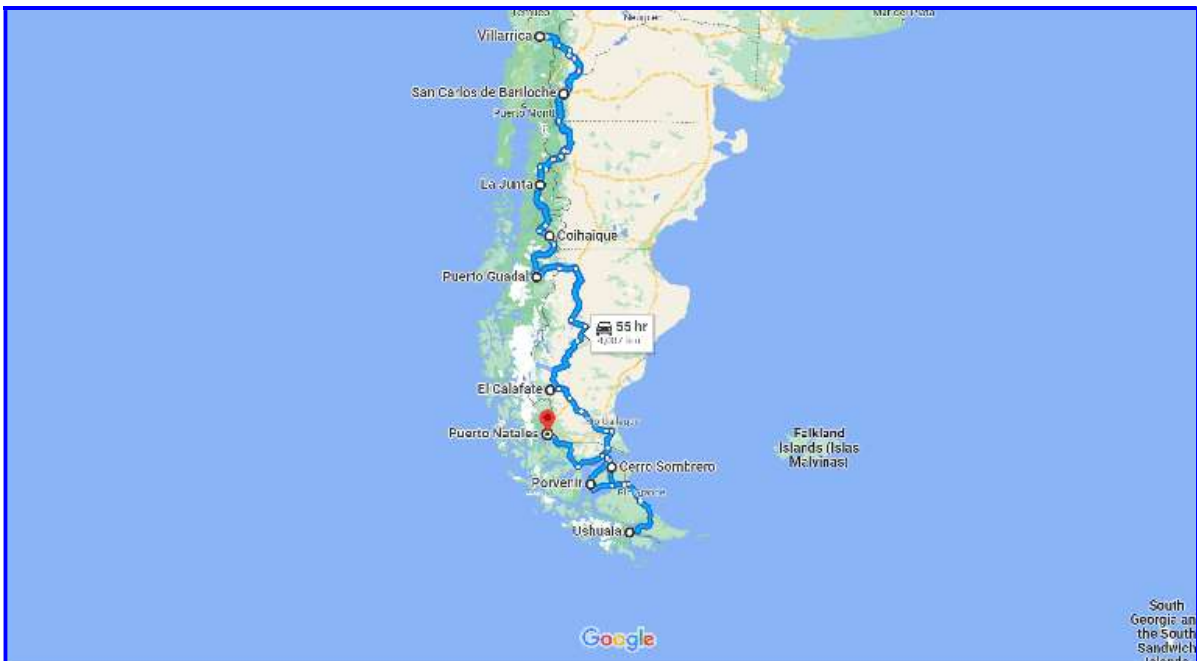
Santiago cable car



Santiago Plaza de Armas



riding to the End of the World



total distance travelled 4,537km