

Los Glaciares is an area of exceptional natural beauty: no fogges, towering mountains and numerous glacial lakes dot the largest ice field outside of Antarctica. Abundant wildlife, including the *pudu* (miniature deer), the guanaco (cousin to the Peruvian llama), and the elusive puma, also call Los Glaciares home.

I spent a damp, chilly day admiring Perito Moreno glacier along with about 500 video camera-toting Italian tourists. Named after the 19th-century missionary-explorer who founded Argentina's National Park system, this five-kilometre-wide, 60-metre-high mass of groaning, crackling menace continually expands and contracts as huge chunks of bluish ice snap off and plunge into the lake below, creating instant icebergs.

That afternoon, I headed north along parched, desolate Ruta 40 (Argentina's answer to Route 66) to the village of El Chaltén (population 371), trekking capital of southern Patagonia. Towering over El Chaltén's assortment of cheap hostels, luxury lodges, and pizzerias is FitzRoy massif, named after Robert FitzRoy, the captain of the *HMS Beagle*, the ship that took Charles Darwin on his famous voyage of discovery. Although FitzRoy is not high by Himalayan standards, summiting its near-vertical granite spire is considered a world-class technical achievement.

The trekking here is as superb as the Andean alpine panoramas are sublime. I spent several days happily tramping along well-marked trails through wind-eroded plains and century-old *lenga* forests to reach the spectacular viewpoints of FitzRoy and nearby peaks, their bases ringed by emerald glacial lakes. If this was in fact Nowhere, I often mused happily, I could think of worse places.

It is said that if you stand still in Patagonia, all four seasons will blow past you in a day-sometimes in an hour. In El Chaltén, that hour could include blazing-hot sun, blistering desert winds, and chilling mountain fog. Little wonder that one of the world's premier adventure-clothing manufacturers took its name from this volatile land.

Hudson once described Patagonia as the ultimate mental pot-scrubber. "I had become incapable of reflection," he wrote of his time there. "To think was like setting in motion a noisy engine in my brain; there was something there which bade me still, and I was forced to obey."

My brain, too, began to feel blissfully cleansed of reflection en route from El Chaltén to Chile to catch a ferry sailing up the Patagonian channels. I had begun the day despairing of ever finding this ephemeral middle of Nowhere. Everywhere I had been in Patagonia felt viscerally like somewhere: somewhere either too familiar or too beautiful to be just anywhere, or Nowhere.

Then, just as a particularly gaunt stretch of Patagonian plateau rolled by my bus seat window, I had a sudden Zen-like realization. My quixotic search was futile, because here, amid such magnificent desolation, there was only the miniature and the massive-nothing in between was possible. No middle, nowhere.

ACCESS: Air Canada flies nonstop to Buenos Aires and Santiago via Toronto several times a week. Several domestic airlines serve Patagonia, including national carriers Aerolíneas Argentinas and LAN Chile, Southern Winds, and the Argentine air-force airline, Lade. Flying between destinations in Patagonia is relatively economical, and advisable due to the huge distances. Aerolíneas Argentinas flight passes can be good value, but you must buy them before entering the country. Comfortable long-distance buses also service all the major routes, if you have the endurance for extremely long trips.

Accommodation ranges from backpacker hostels to five-star hotels. A popular and economical option is to stay at family-run guesthouses called *pensiones*. Local tourist offices often keep up-to-date accommodation lists.

Useful Web sites include Tourism Argentina (www.turismo.gov.ar/), Enjoy Patagonia (www.enjoy-patagonia.org/), www.interpatagonia.com/, and www.patagonia-argentina.com/. For books, try *In Patagonia* by Bruce Chatwin (Penguin); *Idle Days in Patagonia* by W.H. Hudson (Creative Arts Book); *The Old Patagonian Express* by Paul Theroux (Houghton Mifflin); and *The Voyage of the Beagle* by Charles Darwin (Mentor).

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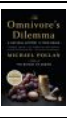

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