

Three Valentíns, One Unforgettable Road – Carretera Austral, Part I.

After leaving Gran Chiloé, we returned to Puerto Montt with a sense that the long-anticipated adventure was about to begin.

“About to begin?” you might ask. Well, although we’d known from the moment we set foot in Cartagena that this trip would be an adventure, the Carretera Austral carried a different kind of anticipation. Maybe it was the remoteness. Maybe it was the fact that we built Taco Libre specifically to handle the hard-to-reach stretches of this legendary road. Whatever it was, it called to our adventurous spirit in a different way.

So onward, onto the journey. Check out the “Onward” YouTube video on our channel, link below.

From kilometer zero of Route 7, the Carretera Austral “La Carretera” – yes, mile zero, but we are in the metric world of South America – we drove to catch our first ferry in La Arena. We crossed to Caleta Puelche, a short but symbolic passage as this was our first “Carretera” ferry ride.



At Puelche, we detoured from the paved road of La Carretera, which gradually became narrower, quieter, and dustier, while the water remained to our left until we reached Cochamó. There, we stayed at a small, well-kept campground where disciplined horses, goats, and sheep wandered freely, completely unbothered by visitors. The campground also had two beautiful and extremely well-behaved German Shepherds. They seemed to act as guardians of the campground, keeping a quiet watch without ever intruding.

After a restful night, we rejoined La Carretera and continued south toward Hornopirén. Arriving there felt like reaching a threshold. Not because it was rough, but because it marked the first place where we couldn't secure ferry reservations, and life had redirected us toward Chiloé.

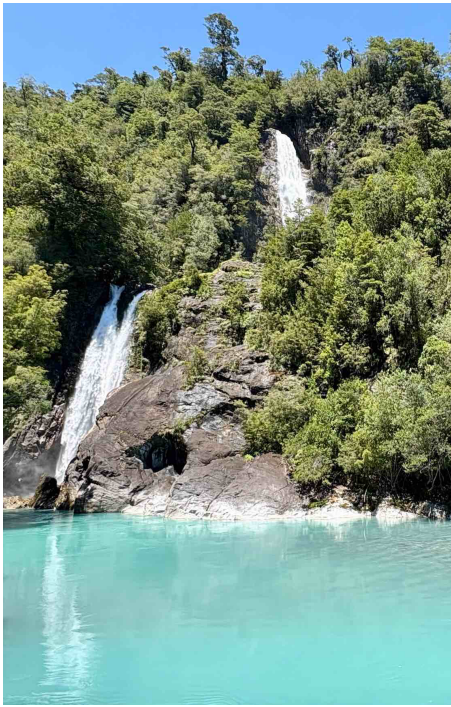


Appreciating life's lesson, we stayed at a campground near town for two full days! Enough time to set up the hammocks on the trees and gather wood from the forest. During our first night, we made a new friend... Valentín. As we were getting our fire going, a 5-year-old Chilean boy came running asking Scott “¿te puedo ayudar?” “*can I help you?*” And, that he did! He added more wood, and paper from his notebook to the fire. Shortly thereafter, his sister and her friend, Emilia, also joined in. It reminded us of the kids we met in Colombia, who were so curious and eager to meet strangers.

The next morning, Valentín came back and made himself at home or “at camp.” He was fascinated with Taco Libre and wanted to sleep in a tent on top of a car someday. It was one of those small encounters that stays with you. Mafe took this opportunity to read him one of her upcoming children's stories.



That day, we hiked to Río Blanco in Parque Nacional Hornopirén. Valentín wanted to join, but his parents wisely said no. The trail is six miles round trip, plus a short drive from the campground. Valentín then suggested meeting at the waterfall.



The trail at Hornopirén winds through dense forest and follows the Rio Blanco river upstream. The hike leads to a series of waterfalls, with crystalline water, a striking deep turquoise-green color, fed by the only glacier in this area, Glaciar del Rio Blanco, located next to the rugged group of peaks nicknamed “Siete Cabezas” (*Seven Heads*).

We ran into Valentín and his family on the trail. He was thrilled that his idea of meeting at the park worked out! On our return to the campground, we found three drawings awaiting on TL from him. That evening, Valentín returned once more, asking Mafe to read another story. We also learned from him that in Chile, “onces” means dinner, not an afternoon snack as in Colombia – a small reminder of how language shifts across borders.

The next day, we took the ferry from Hornopirén to Caleta Gonzalo, a journey that can take anywhere from four to six hours, depending entirely on your luck. The crossing requires a second ferry, and it’s during this transfer that you arrive within Douglas Tompkins National Park, named after the co-founder of The North Face and a major conservationist.

The first leg of the ferry is more than transportation, it’s an experience. Open water is framed by tall green mountains, their slopes decorated with waterfalls that appear and disappear as clouds drift through. In summer, the later 6 p.m. departure feels like a light show. As the sun lowers, the light keeps shifting transforming the landscape.



After leaving Futaleufú, we noticed something interesting. In the Atacama Desert, every turn had prompted an audible reaction. WOW. WOW. WOW. Everything was new, extreme, unreal. Patagonia was still beautiful, but our reactions had softened. Don't get us wrong, we were still in awe, but the WOW effect was gone. Maybe because green, lush, snow-covered mountains weren't new to us.



And then, suddenly, the WOW was back as we were headed to Puyuhuapi.

Every turn demanded attention. Peaks rose sharply, one after another, each with its own shape, color, and character. Glaciers appeared unexpectedly. What stood out most wasn't just the contrast of colors, but of forms. The rounded mountains next to jagged spires, next to triangle-shaped mountains. It felt like the landscape was deliberately showing its artistic creativity and geometry.

We stopped constantly. Took photos. Flew the drone when we could. And still, nothing captured what it felt like to be there.

We camped near Puyuhuapi and spent the afternoon in Queulat National Park. We hiked to see the Queulat Ventisquero Colgante, took a boat ride on Laguna Témpanos to see waterfalls up close, then joined a boat tour out to sea. One of those rare days where everything aligns. Penguins, condors, two kinds of dolphins, a sea lion, and a glacier seen from two different bodies of water. You can see it all in our Queulat and Puyuhuapi YouTube video.

We made a short stop at Coyhaique, a relatively large town for Patagonia, and then began our drive to Cerro Castillo. According to Google Maps, three hours, but in reality, closer to seven. Not because the GPS was wrong, but because we couldn't help but stop constantly. Another look. Another photo. Another quiet moment of disbelief. "Is this drone-worthy?" Of course, every turn was!

By then, it was undeniable, La Carretera wasn't just offering scenery. It was reshaping how we moved through it. Slower. More attentive. Less attached to the clock. As someone once said, "those who rush in Patagonia are wasting their time."

As we approached Cerro Castillo, the mountain the town is named after revealed itself. Jagged and imposing, a stone castle rising straight from the earth.





We settled in, had dinner, and waited for dusk. As the light softened, we went searching for huemules, Chilean's national animal. And then two huemules crossed the road, to join a third one just on the other side. With only about 1,500 left in the wild, seeing three felt like a gift.

The next day, we continued toward Puerto Río Tranquilo. Once again, an “easy” three-hour drive stretched into seven, and we didn’t even make it there. Shortly after leaving Cerro Castillo, three condors appeared, soaring high above the mountains. They circled effortlessly, sometimes dipping low, their movements so synchronized it felt choreographed. We had to stop and watch, as it felt as if the show was just for us.

Within 24 hours, we’d seen both of Chile’s national animals, the huemul on land and the condor in the sky.

We skipped the direct route and took dirt roads instead. The reward was turquoise rivers, dramatic peaks, and wide-open silence. As daylight faded, we stopped in Puerto Ingeniero Ibáñez for the night.

The next morning, we continued toward Puerto Río Tranquilo. As we approached, Lago General Carrera came into view, not before spotting another group of condors landing for “onces”. Lamb was on the menu. Lago General Carrera is the largest lake in Chile and the second largest in South America, and home to the famous Marble Caves. The water glows with Caribbean-like shades of blue and green.

Rain was forecast for the following day, but we arrived under clear skies. We headed to Bahía Mansas, found kayaks for rent, and soon were paddling toward the caves. The marble formations rise directly from the lake, sculpted over thousands of years by sediment and minerals.



From Río Tranquilo, we hiked to Glaciar Exploradores (*Explorers' Glacier*) at the National Park San Rafael. The trail moves through the forest, guided by the sound of the river, until the glacier appears. We could also hear the glacier moving, ice cracking and groaning as we walked. Once at the highest viewpoint, if you look closely, you see streaks of blue inside the ice. On clear days, Cerro San Valentín rises above at 13,300 feet, the tallest mountain in Chilean Patagonia. That day, it played peek-a-boo with the clouds, so we just got a glimpse of it.

The following morning, we prepared to leave the Carretera Austral for a while, detouring toward Chile Chico and Argentine Patagonia, with plans to return in about a month and a half to finish La Carretera.

Just after turning off the road, near the bridge over Lago General Carrera, Cerro San Valentín appeared in full glory. A final gift from the road, reminding us that this wasn't an ending, only a pause in the Carretera Austral. And the realization that maybe that's why the name Valentín kept returning: Valentín at the campfire, reminding us of curiosity and connection; Cerro San Valentín, rising from stone, reminding us that beauty exists in both clouds and sun, that nature doesn't need perfect conditions to be extraordinary; and the third Valentín? not on the road at all, but at the very beginning of it – it was Mafé's cousin, Valentín, the one who instigated this trip and made us realize this had been a shared dream for a long time. Three Valentíns. Three reminders... that some encounters shape the journey, and others are the reason it ever begins.



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