

Finishing the Unfinished in Chile (and a Sanitary Reminder)

After making the U-turn and heading north, still holding onto the feeling of the wildlife we had just witnessed, we began making our way back toward Punta Arenas, the next stop that would set us up for Torres del Paine. On our way to the next border crossing back into Chile, we spent the night in Río Grande, this time on the Atlantic side. In just a matter of hours, we had gone from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean.



Standing on the beach, we had one of those “wait a second” realizations. If we just kept going east... and if Taco Libre suddenly developed amphibious talents... the next stretch of land we’d reach would point us right back toward Punta Arenas.

But since Taco Libre is still very much a land creature, and very much without a snorkel, we turned around and headed west.

Why head back to Torres del Paine? We had been carrying with us a sense of unfinished business. Or maybe more accurately, unfinished dreams. The hike to Base de las Torres had stayed on our bucket list. The last time we were there, the wind had been relentless, and the day we had planned for the hike disappeared behind clouds and rain. We left knowing we would come back for it.

This time, Torres del Paine welcomed us differently. It was still a bit cloudy, but the wind had softened to about half of what we had experienced before – although still windy. The clouds drifted in and out, moving across the landscape as if they were carefully choosing when to reveal the Torres (towers) and the Cuernos (horns.)

And then, the next morning, everything shifted. The sky cleared. The clouds, which had lingered the day before, seemed to move elsewhere, gathering above the glaciers and leaving the mountains fully exposed. The Torres and the Cuernos stood uncovered, as if they had been waiting to be seen.



It was the perfect day for the hike, for one of us. Leaving before sunrise, Scott set out in the early hours, just in time to catch the first light. As the sun rose, it illuminated the Cuernos behind Lago Pehoé.

The hike to Base de las Torres is no small undertaking. Roughly 14 miles round trip, with close to 3,300 feet of elevation gain, it begins gently before steadily becoming more demanding. The final stretch is the one everyone talks about: a steep, relentless climb over loose rock.

By the time he reached the top, the Torres were mostly visible, rising sharply above the glacial lake. But the conditions were a quick reminder of who was in charge. The temperature dropped to the low 30s, and after about 45 minutes of taking it all in, it was time to head back down.



During our last day in Torres del Paine, we went searching for pumas. We had heard they could often be spotted around Lago Azul (*Blue Lake*), and Laguna Amarga (*Bitter Lake*) especially early in the morning or late in the day.

We didn't find what we were looking for. But we found something else. At Laguna Amarga, we met a couple from Chile, Eduardo and Tahia, who, like us, were traveling in their own hybrid way, mixing nights in hotels with nights in their campervan. We didn't know it then, but we would end up sharing quite a bit of time with them later in the middle of the fjords.



And as we searched for pumas, we began to notice something we hadn't seen before. In all our previous encounters, the guanacos had stayed low, scattered across the plains, often near the road, grazing calmly and watching humans pass by, mostly unbothered. But that evening was different.

As we drove slowly through the area, most of them were gone. Instead, every so often, we spotted one high up along the ridgeline, standing tall and still, overlooking everything below. We couldn't help but speculate that they were taking turns watching over the herd from the towering mountains. A kind of wild version of the changing of the guard.

After two days in Torres del Paine, we returned to Puerto Natales to catch what had been one of the most anticipated parts of this journey: the (allegedly) 42-hour ferry through the fjords from Puerto Natales to Puerto Yungay.

The ferry itself was smaller than we expected, in fact, the smallest we had taken. We knew this would not be a cruise ship, no cabins to sleep in, just a seat and a blanket, but we still expected something a bit bigger. This utilitarian ferry, built simply to move people and cars from one point to another, holds around 25 cars and about 160 passengers.

They loaded the cars first, and as we watched the process, we weren't sure if we would be able to open our rooftop tent once on board. The space felt tight, and the scale of the ferry made that uncertainty very real.

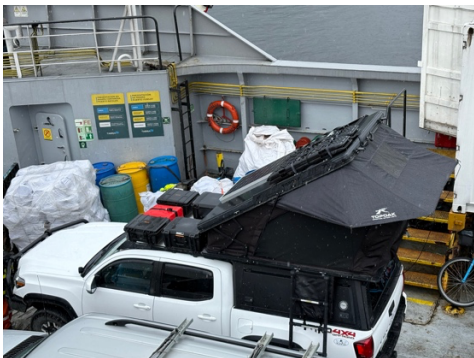
But this journey was never about luxury. It was about adventure, remoteness, and nature.

Despite its simplicity, the experience was very pleasant. We felt reassured by the four showers aboard for 160 people, especially with a sign that read "DO NOT URINE IN THE SHOWERS" (we still wore flip-flops while showering.) After the first shower, we did notice a crew member cleaning regularly – the four showers and four bathrooms, remained relatively clean.

The meal service was also surprisingly good. Three meals a day, served in groups according to your seat, simple and tasty.



We ended up with seats in the very front row, with extra space and a wide window that gave us an unobstructed view.



We boarded on a Monday at 6:30 pm, with an anticipated departure of 5:00 am the following morning. That night, after getting settled, we opened our penthouse on the ferry deck and slept extremely well... until around 7:00 am, when the journey truly began, and with it came the wind.

It was strong enough that we could feel it pressing against the tent, making us wonder, once again, whether we might take off like Mary Poppins. We made a few adjustments, tightening everything down, trusting it would hold, and it did.

During our first full day on board, we ran into Eduardo and Tahia again. We picked up the conversation as if we had known each other for years. They invited us over to their campervan for a glass of wine, which we gladly accepted.

It turned out we had a lot in common, more than just a passion for travel, adventure, and nature. Eduardo, like Scott, is an engineer and enjoys carpentry. Tahia, like Mafe, has a special place for dolphins. And just like us, their lives reflected a balance of opposites, small town for Scott and Eduardo, and big city for Mafe and Tahia.



It was one of those unexpected connections that seem to happen more easily out there, where the world feels both vast and strangely small.

As the ferry moved deeper into the fjords, the landscape began to shift. At first, the mountains were covered in deep green, with glaciers tucked between them. Then, almost without noticing, the scenery changed. The green gave way to rock, the glaciers disappeared, and the mountains became sharper, more rugged... only for the green and the ice to return again.

We had been hoping for clear skies and sunshine. Instead, the days were mostly cloudy, with stretches of rain drifting in and out. But it didn't matter. It was still beautiful.

As Scott likes to say, part of having good weather karma is appreciating the weather you get – in Patagonia, where clouds and rain are the norm, it felt especially true.

The mountains revealed themselves in fragments, playing hide and seek with the clouds as we moved through narrow passages. In the distance, waterfalls appeared suddenly, like streaks of lightning frozen in place.

From inside the ferry, we could still spot life moving through it all. Penguins and sea lions added to the experience.



We also passed an abandoned ship that has been there since 1968. Some say it was intentionally grounded after a stolen cargo of sugar, others say the captain was searching for gold from another wreck. Whatever the story, it was shocking to see such a massive vessel in such a remote and beautiful place.

During our second day, the ferry made a brief stop in the small, remote village of Puerto Edén. We stepped off for a few minutes, just enough to take it in. Only accessible by boat, it felt like a place that exists entirely on its own terms.

We found a local selling empanadas. Naturally, we didn't think twice: crab and cheese... delic!

And then we noticed a sign still hanging: Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. It was March 17th! Maybe it was the remoteness, or maybe time simply moves differently there, or maybe it is the leprechaun who brings presents in exchange for empanadas on St Patrick's Day.

That night, the wind eased, and we climbed into our penthouse, warm and steady above the deck, as the ferry carried us deeper into the fjords. By Thursday morning, the journey was nearing its end. The ferry made an early stop at Caleta Tortel, but we stayed tucked into our sleeping bags, knowing we would return soon enough.

At around 9:30 am, we arrived in Puerto Yungay. What was supposed to be a 42-hour journey had turned into 63 hours. And yet, we wouldn't have changed a thing.

From there, we stayed on the ferry to Puerto Río Bravo, and then continued the drive to Villa O'Higgins, the end of La Carretera Austral. The road from Puerto Río Bravo felt like a world of its own.

Narrow, winding, and surrounded by towering mountains covered in green and decorated with waterfalls in every possible form: tall, short, narrow and wide. We noticed this particular stretch did not have a circuit name, like the rest of Chile, so we decided it needed a name: El circuito de las chorreras (*The circuit of waterfalls.*)

Driving along, we had mountains to our right, often marked by recent rockfalls, or “failed geology” as it is referred to in Colombia, and steep drops to rivers and lakes on our left.

Villa O’Higgins welcomed us as a quiet mountain town, with wooden homes and a central *plaza de armas* framed by towering peaks. It reminded us that, like in Peru, the main squares in Chile carry the same name “plaza de armas.”

We explored a few detours, including a border crossing that required driving through a river. The water reached the middle of the doors. What stopped us? Taco Libre still doesn’t have a snorkel.



The crossing was closed anyway due to high water from the river in the Argentina side, but we were pointed toward Lago Christie, another remote and stunning lake.

On the way back, condors filled the sky, circling, interacting with one another, and at one point, one flew surprisingly close, a juvenile – unafraid like human younglings. Check out our YouTube video: Condor!!!



After Villa O’Higgins, we camped along the Río Baker, Chile’s largest river by volume, known for its striking turquoise color. The next morning, we made our way to Caleta Tortel.

A village founded in 1955, built entirely without roads, connected instead by wooden walkways, built on stilts, stretching along the fjords. What surprised us most was how complete it felt. Despite its remoteness, it had everything a town needs: a public library, university, daycare, two plazas, city hall, even a cultural center!

It left us wondering: how was all of this built? We cannot imagine how machinery could have arrived. Getting there required a tiny ferry, even smaller than the others, carrying only about eight cars – the farther south we went, the smaller the ferries became – and the ferry ramp did not appear to be able to hold a bigger boat.

After Tortel, we continued toward Cochrane, where we witnessed two remarkable confluences: at the meeting of the Río Baker and Río Chacabuco, the contrast was immediate, Turquoise met deep brown, the colors running side by side before blending. And Río Baker with Río Nef, where glacial milky blues joined the mix, creating a swirling palette of turquoise, white, and soft blue.

Then, one last ferry, an even smaller one! A single-car platform carrying us across the Río Baker, with no engine, guided only by the current.

On the other side, we rejoined Ruta 7 and continued toward Lago General Carrera. In the distance, we had once seen Cerro San Valentín in full view. This time, it remained hidden behind the clouds.



And with that, we completed all 1,247 kilometers of La Carretera Austral.

From here, we cross back into Argentina and continue north, anticipating east-west zig-zags that have become part of how we travel.

March 29, 2026

