

Patagonia's Long Goodbye

We crossed back into Argentina with great anticipation for its landscapes and, of course, great food. Our first destination was Península Valdés, 900 kilometers across the country to the Atlantic. The purpose: to see orcas in a truly unique setting.

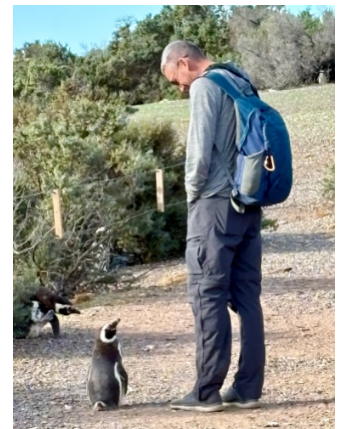
We learned during the long ferry ride that March and April are the months when orcas are in Valdés performing “intentional stranding,” a high-risk hunting technique where they beach themselves to catch sea lions and then wiggle back into the sea.



As the anticipated orca and sea lion drama built in our minds, the dramatic Andes we had grown used to in Chile disappeared. As soon as we crossed into Argentina, we found ourselves driving through immense yellow plains with no mountains in sight.

We made two overnight stops in the small towns of Comodoro Rivadavia and Trelew. Almost immediately, we noticed that towns in Argentina, no matter how small, carry a sense of care. Homes along unpaved roads are well maintained, and in restaurants, meals are prepared with attention.

Along the way, we made a quick stop at Punta Tombo, where we walked among penguins – no guides, no time restrictions, just us and thousands of Magellanic Penguins. We were told there were about 200,000 couples, and likely, not an exaggeration. Most of the penguins appeared in pairs, which made the whole scene sweet and romantic. They didn't seem bothered by people; if anything, they were curious about us. We imagine that comes from having no land predators. Interestingly, in this area penguins and guanacos cohabitate. We saw guanacos grazing alongside penguins.





The first stop in search of orcas was Punta Ninfas, a place mentioned to us by an overlander couple. The cliffs dropped sharply into the Atlantic. Perfect to set up camp overlooking the water.

We didn't see orcas that day, but we were lucky to witness something unexpected: a glimpse of a Southern Right Whale, one of the very few whales without a dorsal fin. It wasn't the season for this species, which made the sighting special.

After an incredible night of wild camping, we continued toward Península Valdés itself, staying in the small village of Puerto Pirámides.

Península Valdés offers nothing but space, distance, and the possibility of witnessing something dramatic. Inside the peninsula, every place where orcas might be seen requires long one-hour drives on dirt roads.

Our patience, and our desire to see the largest dolphin in the ocean and one of the most powerful sea predators, was being tested. Yes, orcas are dolphins, not whales. The name “killer whale” comes from a mistranslation: when Spanish explorers first saw orcas hunting whales, they described them as *asesinas de ballenas*—killers of whales, not killer whales, but “killer whale” stuck.

We drove another long hour to Caleta Valdés, where we saw colonies of penguins and sea lions, but still no orcas. Patience is part of the contract with nature. The next day, later in the afternoon, we returned to Punta Norte. Our schedule was now guided entirely by the tide.

The key, we quickly learned, is arriving two to three hours before high tide, when orcas begin approaching the shore, drawn by the presence of sea lion pups. Our first successful sighting came just before sunset. We saw a pod of six orcas swimming parallel to the coastline, silent, deliberate... spooky. They patrolled the area but were not in the mood for dinner. After watching them for over two hours as the sun set, the tide receded and no hunting in sight, we left.



The next morning, we arrived about an hour before high tide – the orcas were still there! As the water began to rise, so did the tension. What unfolded felt almost cinematic, no director except our imagination creating a script from our observations.

The orcas circled just beyond the break, sometimes nearly invisible. Then suddenly, a surge toward the shore and a body launching partially out of the water in a deliberate stranding maneuver to catch the pups.

The sea lions seemed unaware of the danger. Some watched the orcas with curiosity; others drifted toward them. Were they curious? Did they want to play? It was raw and unsettling, yet impossible to look away from.



We witnessed a calf being trained – hunting for the orcas is not instinct alone, it is taught. Then came one of the hardest moments to observe: an orca carrying a sea lion offshore, not to kill immediately, but to use it as a living lesson. For nearly two hours it became part of a brutal curriculum, adult females teaching the calf the mechanics of the hunt. Eventually, a large male appeared, his large dorsal fin seen above the water, and just like that, the sea lion went from lesson to meal.

Cruel? Yes. But this is nature in its most honest form. Watch our YouTube video on the stranding of the orcas.

As we left Peninsula Valdes, in awe by what we had witnessed over two intense days, we stopped at Isla de los Pájaros. It's believed this small island inspired Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's first drawing of *The Little Prince*. The island does resemble the famous drawing of the "hat." If you still carry a childlike imagination, you immediately see the boa constrictor digesting an elephant. As we move between orcas munching on sea lions and boas swallowing elephants, it feels fitting to end the peninsula chapter at our last dinner in Puerto Pirámides.



At a small restaurant, we met the owner who reminded us that travel is as much about places as it is about people and their traditions. She spoke with us for nearly an hour, sharing stories, including a trip she took to Seattle with her Norwegian boyfriend, and explaining something we had been noticing everywhere: the ritual of yerba mate.

We first discovered yerba mate in El Calafate during a cold boat trip among the glaciers. A family sitting next to us was drinking it from a fancy cup with a metal straw and offered us some. They were passing it around, all drinking from the same straw. At the time, we wondered about their germs' habits and thought of it as hot tea in a unique cup. We then saw the same ritual in cold Ushuaia. But later, while waiting for hours for the orcas in warm weather, we noticed the same sharing behavior, even with strangers.



Mate is a social language: the same cup passed from hand to hand creates a small circle of connection. The restaurant owner explained it's less about the drink itself and more about the act of sharing it. As it often happens, once awareness set in, we started noticing it everywhere – people carrying thermoses filled with hot water for mate, and gas stations offering free hot water for it. The thermos is essential in Argentina: mate is not something you stop for, it travels with you.

She didn't share mate with us but instead shared travel tips. She took out several maps, she loved maps, and with them showed us places to stop on our westbound journey toward the Andes.

We drove back through long open stretches before the landscape began to shift. Near Los Altares, the terrain suddenly rose into rugged red formations that felt almost imported from Utah, sharp, layered, and dramatic.

And speaking of Utah, not long after, we stopped at a place tied to legend: a cabin associated with Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid, famous outlaws from the late 1800s who fled to Argentina after being pursued for bank robberies in Utah. We made this small detour for a personal reason: the Wild West is part of Scott's own story, growing up in Oklahoma connected to the culture of cowboys, open land and legends of outlaws. Standing there, in a remote corner of Patagonia, knowing these outlaws once crossed into this part of the world, created a bridge between places and backgrounds.



The landscape shifted again as we crossed the Andes through Esquel, dressed in full autumn colors of reds, oranges, and yellows, which continued through El Bolsón, a hippy town. After a few hikes and incredible rides with TL among the colorful mountains of El Bolsón, we decided to have dinner at a small restaurant that only opens for a few hours each night.

We sat down, and the owner approached without a menu. He asked what we wanted for dinner. "Hmmm... well, what do you have?" we inquired. Again, no menu. "We have red meat, seafood, pasta..." and just like that, we ordered a meal that wasn't planned by a chef but created in the moment. This was his way of offering guests exactly what they want, how they want it, without the structure of a menu.

He had spent a significant amount of time in Colombia. He brought a bottle of Colombian rum and a glass, inviting us to pour as much as we wanted... on the house!



And with that, we headed north to San Carlos de Bariloche. Bariloche sits beside Lago Nahuel Huapi, one of the largest lakes in Patagonia. The small city, framed by mountains, welcomed us with clear blue skies and fall colors. The mornings began crisp and cool, but by early afternoon the sun lifted the chill and brought perfect warmth. It was the kind of weather that invites you to stay outside longer than planned, just one more stop, one more viewpoint, one more turn... and while we are at it, one more day.

We explored the famous Circuito Chico – each curve revealed a different view of the lake and mountains – every turn offered a new version of the city. We took the cable car up Cerro Campanario, and from the top, everything came together: lakes scattered across the landscape, some connected and others tucked into the mountains.

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We stayed right on the lake at a charming lodge, and what started as a simple booking turned into one of those rare travel gifts you don't forget. We had reserved a standard room with a jacuzzi but somehow found ourselves in a luxury suite complete with a private sauna, a steam shower, and even a small kitchen. When we realized the mix-up, we did what any reasonable traveler would do, we asked to stay longer. And, they honored the same price for an additional night, no questions asked.

Our mornings in Bariloche began slowly with a delicious breakfast, the kind of breakfast that invites you to stay a little longer, enjoy another cup of coffee, maybe even a mimosa to start the day. And our evenings ended tasty!



One evening, we had dinner in what might be one of the most memorable settings of the entire trip: a private treehouse dinner at “Little Stag.” Suspended above the ground with panoramic views of the lake and mountains at sunset, it felt like stepping into a romantic movie you don't quite believe exists in real life. There are usually two tables for two couples, but that night it was just the two of us. The waiter offered that we connect our own music, which we did. It was intimate, surreal, and simply magical.

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The next morning at breakfast, we saw her again, this time with a large family group. What stood out wasn't seeing her again, but the scene itself: the entire group casually having breakfast in their pajamas, completely unfazed, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. One of those unfiltered travel moments, unexpected, funny, and entirely newsletter-worthy.

Bariloche has a well-earned reputation for sweet indulgence, particularly when it comes to alfajores and chocolates. An alfajor, at its simplest, is two soft cookies held together by dulce de leche, often finished with powdered sugar. But here, “simple” doesn't quite apply. Bariloche's alfajores are famously coated in chocolate.

We wandered from shop to shop tasting different variations of artisanal chocolates, truffles, and alfajores, giving ourselves yet another reason to stay one more day.

Leaving San Carlos de Bariloche felt a bit like closing a chapter we weren't entirely ready to finish. But Patagonia has a way of pulling you forward, always hinting that something spectacular is waiting around the next bend.

Our next destination was San Martín de los Andes, only about 108 kilometers (67 miles) away on Ruta 40, the longest route in the country at 5,224 km (3,233) running north to south. But distance here is a misleading metric, much like the "20-kilometer" hike in El Chaltén that became 24. This stretch of road, known as the Ruta de los Siete Lagos, *Route of the Seven Lakes*, isn't meant to be driven quickly. It's meant to be experienced slowly, with frequent stops and detours

We were lucky in all the ways that matter. We had blue skies and peak fall colors. The route includes seven main lakes (Lago Nahuel Huapi, Lago Espejo, Lago Correntoso, Lago Villarino, Lago Falkner, Lago Hermoso, and Lago Machónico), but there are many more if you have the curiosity and openness that makes Taco Libre special.

Each lake is framed by the Andes, each one reflecting a slightly different version of the sky. Some were perfectly still, mirroring the mountains with almost unnatural precision; others carried just enough movement to break the surface and scatter light. Each had its own tone of blue, some shifting into greens and aquamarines.

Because we wanted to take our time, and yes, take detours, we didn't cover the entire route in one day. Our first stop along the way was Villa La Angostura, a very small town with small shops, inviting restaurants with meals having that sense of care we have noticed across Argentina. This is also a good place to note another observation: Argentinians are not glued to their cell phones. At restaurants, people eat and talk, the phones aren't part of the table.



We noticed the same at Punta Norte, during long stretches of waiting, when there was nothing but the anticipation of the orcas, people were rarely on their phones. They talked, watched the horizon, and stayed present in the place itself. A small but striking contrast to what has become an almost automatic habit elsewhere – a lesson we find ourselves wanting to perfect.

After a delicious pasta meal in Villa La Angostura, we took a detour off Ruta 40 toward Villa Traful, down a long dirt road. Villa Traful sits along Lago Traful, so clear it almost feels unreal. It was here that we visited the bosque sumergido, *the submerged forest*, a cluster of cypress trees beneath the water.

It is believed the trees were submerged after a landslide triggered by an earthquake in the 1960s. We took a small boat out to see it, and somewhere along that ride, the figure of Francisco Moreno came to life. Known as “Perito” Moreno, where “perito” means expert in Spanish, he played a key role in defining Argentina’s southern borders, offering geographic expertise during disputes with Chile. His work helped shape the map of Patagonia as it exists today, which is why his name echoes across the region.

We ended the day in Traful with hikes to waterfalls and spent the night by the lake.

And speaking of disputes with Chile, it was also in this remote corner that we had one of those conversations that stays with you. We met Hugo “el argentino,” a retired member of the military, who spoke to us about something we had been noticing everywhere since arriving in Patagonia: the phrase “Las Malvinas son argentinas.” “*the Malvinas are Argentine.*” It appears persistently on signs, murals, and buildings, and on a replica of a Mirage fighter jet in Bariloche. For Hugo, it wasn’t just a slogan, it was lived history.



He told us about the Falklands War, known in Argentina as the Malvinas War. In 1982, Argentina and the United Kingdom, with the assistance of Chile, went to war over the islands. The conflict was brief but intense, ending with British control of the Falkland islands. But for Argentinians, “las Malvinas hoy y siempre son de Argentina” “*the Malvinas are today and will for ever be from Argentina.*”

As Hugo spoke, the history shifted. His voice carried feelings, not just facts. He told us about loss, about memory, about attending the funeral of a soldier’s mother just months earlier. Decades later, the emotion was still there, just beneath the surface. At one point he became teary-eyed and apologized for it.

It reminded us of our interaction with Humberto, the Colombian man who was displaced by the guerilla and welcomed us into his humble home as he played music. Places hold stories, and sometimes, if you are lucky, someone is willing to share them with you.



We rejoined Ruta 40 and stopped at the magnificent Cascada Ñivinco, where you have to walk through a river – you either go barefoot in the freezing water or hope your hiking boots are tall enough to keep your feet dry. Then another detour to Lago Hermoso before arriving in San Martín de los Andes, a mountain town that feels both, peaceful and lively.

We had planned to stay several nights, but travel, as it often does, had other ideas. A scheduled four-hour power outage meant adjusting our plans. What stood out wasn't the inconvenience due to a scheduled mediation, but the response of the host. Without hesitation, she offered a full refund. It wasn't expected, and certainly not necessary for such a short interruption, but she understood what it meant to us. In a trip already filled with small acts of kindness, it felt like one more reminder that the experience of a place is shaped just as much by its people as by its landscapes.

It also continued to challenge the reputation about Argentinians being arrogant, rude, and cold. Outside of a single rude customs officer, our experience has been the opposite. From south to north in Patagonia, we have encountered warmth, openness, and a human connection that keeps surprising us. True to form, the host offered a suggestion: "stay at Villa Meliquina."

The power outage in San Martín led us to one of the most peaceful places in the lakes' district.

Villa Meliquina is remote in the truest sense. No cell signal, no noise, no central electricity, no lights at night in the town, just a lake so clear it feels like glass stretched across the land. The mountains reflected perfectly on its surface, doubling the beauty before our eyes. A detour from the main road took us to a drive of sculptured rocky mountains. All you had to do was use your imagination to see beyond rock formations and find chess pieces, castles, spires, and even a baby bottle!



We stayed in a small cabin by the water, relying on Starlink to stay connected just enough for work, but otherwise completely removed. Days slowed, nights came early, meals were cooked on the grill, heat came from the fireplace, and electricity from the wind and sun. For a few days, the last days in Patagonia, everything was windy, beautiful, and simple.

As we leave Patagonia, it feels important to understand the name.

The word dates back to the early 1500s, when Ferdinand Magellan arrived in the region. He and his crew encountered the indigenous people, the Tehuelche, and described them as “Patagones,” or “big-footed people.” Whether it referred to their actual stature, their footprints, or the imagination of explorers encountering the unknown, the name endured, as the killer whales.



Over time, Patagonia came to define not just a place, but a feeling of vastness, distance, wind, and raw nature.

As we moved through it, from oceans filled with orcas to lakes that mirror the sky, from empty plains to forests turning gold, it became clear that Patagonia isn't just something you visit, it is something you take in with every breath.

April 20, 2026

