

Title:

"Peaks of Patagonia & Chilean Vineyards"

Word Count:

744

Summary:

For the true venturers who've "been there done that," come now to the Last Wilderness in the most southern part of the world. This 11-day expedition provided stunning scenic wonders. In UNESCO National Parks we saw volcanos, alps, crystal fjords, canyons, fields of heather, emerald rivers, orchids and glacier pillars thrusting 8,000' high and the famous mountain massifs of Torres del Paine and the great Grey Glacier.

Keywords:

Article Body:

Dramatic landscapes provided us a continual Kodak moment throughout. It is late spring in the region and the weather was cooperative with a lot of sunshine. This however is a land where the unexpected is the norm, so we came prepared for occasional wind and rain.

After a rest at the lovely Hotel Neruda and a city tour in Santiago, we flew south to Punta Arenas. There we transferred 2 hours by coach to Puerto Natales at the Patagonia steppe. We welcomed an overnight at the spartan but cozy Charles Darwin Hotel and a fabulous dinner of king crab and fresh salmon.

The following day we sailed several hours on the cutter vessel "21 de Mayo" up the fjord of Ultima Esperanza. We stopped for a hike around the fabulous Serano Glacier and a lunch on lamb at a remote cattle ranch. Later we boarded zodiac boats for a thrilling ride to our lodge located inside Torres del Paine National Park. Hosteria Pehoe is rustic for a rate of \$200 per room but it lies on the edge of a turquoise glacial lake with an indescribably beautiful view. The backdrop of the spiny tall rugged mountains capped with ice was as vivid as a postcard.

Three days were spent touring the park. We were able to photograph the wildlife including guanaco's of the llama family, foxes, flamingo, sea lions, black neck swans, condors, cormorants and more. Several in our group arranged a nocturnal hike to view the elusive puma but none were spotted. Free time was provided for

horse riding and boating to magnificent Grey Glacier which was a delight. Some people opted for an arduous 8 hour hike up the famous towering peaks known as The Torres.

We flew on to Puerto Montt and checked into the first class Hotel Gran Pacifica for four glorious nights to explore Chile's lake region. It began in Puyehue National Park with the backdrop of two spectacular and very active volcanos named Osorno and Calbuco. The afternoon was spent at the hot springs area of Aguas Calientes for a soak in the 110° crystal clear water. Here we participated in an optional canopy cable swing adventure through the treetops which was more fun than a barrel of monkeys. Enroute back to our hotel, we visited a handicraft market with excellent buys on alpaca sweaters and blue lapis stoned jewelry.

The next day we rafted the powerful Petrohue River on class 3 and 4 white water rapids. Four people fell out of an overturned raft but wet suites provided protection from the frigid water and expert guides in kayaks were able to quickly retrieve all. This excursion for me was the highlight of the trip.

On day 8 we enjoyed a catamaran cruise along the shores of All Saints Lake also named Emerald Lake for it's vibrant color in Peulla. The lush green forest here is set in the Andes foothills and covers 220,000 acres. We photographed a succession of beautiful and powerful waterfalls cascading over volcanic boulders of the ice capped Osorno.

Our vacation experience culminated back in Santiago with a farewell feast of seafood at a deluxe local restaurant. Prior to airport departure, we toured the Cavas del Maipo Winery. We enjoyed a lunch of fantastic BBQ steak and imbibed on endless wine, including several vintages which rank among the nations most esteemed exports.

Ten days was sufficient here to see an eyeful. I've had my fill of salmon and lamb for a lifetime and reflect back on a journey well done. We had a wonderful group of 35 participants, most who met as strangers and returned as lifelong friends. The cost of this trip was \$2397 plus taxes which included roundtrip air from Miami and all internal flights. The \$100 Chilean entry visa was extra. It was a good value and the guides throughout were excellent.

I have toured over 30 countries. The beauty here lies simply in the remoteness; pristine and unscarred nature in her finest glory. In Patagonia God created a perfect juxtaposition of New Zealand's fjords, Switzerland's Alps and British Columbia's forests and lakes. Chile is a misnomer with no connection to peppers. It was the Incan word for "land far away." I felt far removed in this narrow land that stretches to the end of the world yet was able to experience all the

comforts of home. It certainly exceeded my expectations and I recommend it for any intrepid travelers list of must-see destinations of a lifetime.