



Patagonia Cycle Tour

January to March 2020

Once upon a time dinosaurs roamed the earth. Shortly after that I graduated from university and got a job. Long after that I retired from my last job and went travelling.

In fact I worked for 41 years but it seemed like an eon. Or perhaps it seemed like an era. I have never been sure what the difference is. During that time I spent most of my working hours sitting on my ass at a desk solving problems of immense complexity and social importance while doing my bit to ensure the survival of the human species on this little blue spec in the cosmos. Or something like that. I did spend a small portion of the time, lunch breaks mostly, planning what to do after I exited the rat race for good. During one of those sessions I came upon a blog post about a cycle trip along the Carretara Austral in Chile. I became intrigued, did some research, and added it to my bucket list.

Sometime later my friend Osa became aware of this idea and was instantly keen to come along. She and I have done many wilderness trips together including ocean kayaking, backpacking, backcountry skiing, and some cycle touring. So I knew how strong and capable she is. And how tough she is. But I also knew that this trip could well be at another level over the things that we had done together in the past.

I was a bit concerned about that. I forwarded lots of articles to her that I had come across in the hope that she would be going into this with a comprehensive awareness of the difficulties that we would be facing.

The Carretera Austral (Spanish for Southern Road) is a 1247 km “highway” that links Puerto Montt in the north to Villa O’Higgins in the south of Chilean Patagonia. It travels through stunning scenery of mountains, fiords, glaciers, and forest while linking most of the villages and one small town of this formerly very remote region to the rest of Chile. The road was envisioned and eventually created under the government of Augusto Pinochet. It is still sometimes referred to as the dictator’s highway. There are even a couple of monuments to Pinochet along the way. Originally it was all gravel but it is slowly being paved in short sections every year. The northern half of the road is perhaps 2/3 paved. This leads to the small city of Coyhaique at the halfway point. From there the pavement extends for another 120 or so kms to just past the village of Cerro Castillo and from there it is all gravel to the end. It has become something of a crown jewel in the pantheon of the world’s cycle touring routes. The word on the street among cycle touring cognoscenti is to do it now before it is all paved and it gets too easy. You wouldn’t want to botch the experience by riding a route that is too easy and is overwhelmed by the teeming masses.

Here’s the thing though. The Carretera Austral ends a short way past Villa O’Higgins. It’s literally the end of the road. But not the end of the journey. From there you could turn around and head back. Public transportation from O’Higgins is very limited. There is a road to the Argentine border but there is nothing on the other side other than some faint trails. This is a rarely used option. The most popular alternative is to take a small ferry across Lago O’Higgins, check out of Chile at the other side of the lake and then ride, hike, and push your bike on a trail through the mountains and across the border to Argentina at Lago Del Desierto. From there another ferry and finally a dirt road takes you to El Chalten, the jumping off point for some of the world’s most stunning mountains. As a “has been” climber I was totally keen to go see Cerro Torre and Fitzroy. Spending something like a month on a bicycle getting there seemed to me like I would be approaching these mountains by fair means.

Getting there

We left Vancouver on January 12th, just ahead of the first snowstorm of the winter. The first leg of the journey took us to Toronto with a stop in Winnipeg. Since I was flying on points we didn’t get the best routing. The plane was delayed in Winnipeg due to bad weather in Toronto. We arrived in Toronto a couple of hours late, just in time to be denied boarding on the flight to Santiago. Even though the plane was still at the gate they wouldn’t let us on because there wasn’t enough time to get our luggage onto the plane. Then after waiting in a line for 2 ½ hours Air Canada rebooked Osa on a flight the next day but refused to rebook me. Reason: I was flying on points and they wanted me to rebook through Aeroplan. But Aeroplan wasn’t answering the phone at 2 in the morning. Air Canada also refused to provide us with a motel room for the remainder of the night although they did provide rooms for most of the other passengers. Apparently their ‘loyalty plan’ only works one way. The next morning I spent 1 ¼ hours on hold trying to get through to Aeroplan. Finally I hung up and tried Air Canada again and this time they did rebook me on the same flights as they had given to Osa the previous night. That afternoon we boarded an Air Canada flight to Bogota and switched to a red eye from there to Santiago

on Latam. In Santiago we retrieved our bikes but the rest of our luggage didn't arrive. So we got refused boarding for our original flight to Santiago due to luggage concerns and then they didn't get our luggage there anyway! We went on to Puerto Montt on another rebooked flight (a day later and many dollars more than the original flight) and then proceeded to wait for our luggage to arrive. Much frustration ensued. The luggage finally got there 4 days later. All in all it was a very poor showing from Air Canada and Aeroplan.

Getting started

We used the 4 day wait for our luggage to decompress, put the bikes together, and explore the area around Puerto Varas where we were staying. When the luggage finally arrived on our fourth morning in Puerto Varas we were ready to go. We put the panniers on the bikes and headed out. We were taking the 'long start' to the Carretara Austral. The official start to the road is in Puerto Montt about 20 kms south of where we were. Instead we went east along the southern shore of Lago Llanquihue to Ensenada. Here we found a place to camp on a beautiful beach on a huge freshwater lake below Volcan Osorno, an incredible Mt. Fuji style volcano. The riding was superb along a paved bike path on the shoulder of a nice road with moderate traffic. Not really the arduous experience that I had been trying to prepare Osa for. The next day started out with similar riding for the first half. Then we hit the first of the 'ripio'. Ripio as a noun in Spanish refers to gravel roads. It is also pretty much a swear word among Carretara Austral cyclists. In this case the ripio was being prepared for paving so it was even more chewed up than usual. This day brought us to Cochamo where there was a street fair in process. We got some beer, some barbecued kebabs, and the best pie limon of the trip.



Over the next two days we rode more ripio, took a detour to see the Cochamo valley (the Yosemite of Chile), camped in the yard at a fish farm, had dinner with the fish farmers and ate a salmon that Osa caught for breakfast, and generally got horribly beat up riding our heavily loaded bikes up and down steep hills on loose gravel. On day four we finally got to the Carretara Austral proper. We had ridden over 200 kms to get to a point 45 kms from the official start of the road in Puerto Montt. We were finally back on the pavement. We rode down this road for 8 kms and then deviated again at Contao. Here the main road goes inland and another longer road follows along the coastline of Seno Reloncavi. Of course it is all ripio but it was so highly recommended that we took it anyway. We managed 35 kms of this, had dinner at the most well regarded restaurant in the region, and started looking for a place to camp. Fortunately we were right next to a quite suitable place when the rear rack on Osa's bicycle broke. The vertical strut that supports the entire load sheared in half. We tried various things to jury rig it so that we could carry on but nothing we tried came close to working. So we camped where we were. It turned out to be one of the nicer spots that we camped. It was a very rocky beach with surf pounding on it but with a small patch of sand above the high tide line. A beautiful sunset lulled us to sleep. In the morning we discovered a nearby stream so that coffee, tea, and breakfast were on the agenda. We discussed the options but there really was only one. The next bike shop in a forward direction was likely about 10 days' ride away in Coyhaique. Not a good option. We would have to go back to Puerto Montt to buy a new rack. But how to carry the panniers with a non functional rack? We had small backpacks

that we used for carryon luggage in the plane which we then strapped to our racks for cycling. So now we each carried what we could on our backs, strapped one of Osa's panniers to the top of my rack where my pack had been, and she carried a lightly loaded pannier on the side of her rack that still had support. In this way we were able to ride back the 35 kms of ripio and 8 kms of pavement to where we had first joined the Carretara Austral. Here we caught a short ferry across the Estuario Reloncavi to get to the road into Puerto Montt. On the ferry Osa struck up a conversation with a fellow driving a pickup truck. He offered us a ride and we gladly accepted it. It was mid afternoon when we arrived in Puerto Montt and got dropped off right in front of possibly the only bike store in Patagonia that sold a selection of decent bicycle racks. We bought a rack and were pointed to a bike repair shop nearby that was able to mount the rack for us. This turned out to be a tricky job that would have been impossible with the tools I was carrying. We got very lucky with this whole experience. 24 hours after the rack broke we were 100 kms away (in the wrong direction mind you) with a repaired bicycle, with our tent pitched at a hostel, and were eating a wonderful meal in a pub. Sometimes things work out. But we were now back essentially where we had started. We had to be 1600 kms away in southern Chile at Puerto Natales to catch a ferry in six weeks. Between the five days of riding to get nowhere and the five days of unexpected delay due to missed flights and lost luggage we were now seriously behind schedule.

Getting started again

It seemed like it would be an iffy proposition to start all over from the beginning and still get to Puerto Natales on time. So we decided to jump forward a ways by taking an overnight ferry from Puerto Montt to Chaiten. We hung out in Puerto Montt for the day and then boarded the ferry for an 11 pm departure. On the ferry we met an American couple from California and a group of Spaniards. These were the first other cycle tourists that we would meet along the way that we would either ride with or at least meet in other places along the way. We arrived in Chaiten early the next morning and then went for breakfast with the Americans. The Spaniards disappeared up the road. They looked like a seriously competent bunch and I never expected to see them again.

Chaiten is an interesting place. It was destroyed when the nearby Volcan Chaiten erupted in 2008. The town was completely evacuated but has since been reconstructed.

We had an easy day of riding on mostly flat terrain but then detoured into Parque Pumalin for 10 kms on steep roads to an incredibly beautiful camping area. Parque Pumalin is one of several very large national parks in Patagonia that have been purchased and donated to the Chilean people by Douglas Thompkins, a Californian climber and founder of The North Face outdoor clothing empire.

The next day we headed on south to the village of Santa Lucia. To this point we had been having excellent weather, but that all came to a screeching halt that afternoon. We slogged up the first long, sustained climb of the trip in a drenching rain storm. On the way down the other side we passed through a small valley that was completely devoid of any forest. At first I didn't understand what I was seeing. The road and the deforestation then descended through a ravine and out onto a flat river valley where Santa Lucia is located. Then I understood. This was a mudslide of enormous proportions which had occurred in December of 2017. It had descended through the ravine and wiped out much of the

village. 21 people died. We got a room that night due to the ongoing rain. The house next to where we stayed had been destroyed by the mudslide.

Over the next several days we continued riding south through La Junta, Puyuhuapi, Villa Amengual, Villa Maniguales, and on to Coyhaique. We stayed in commercial campgrounds, a covered mirador in a national park, and



at a rural farmhouse along the Rio Grande. Osa caught some trout for dinner from Rio Simpson. We had breakfast with the couple in the farmhouse. These people were living an extremely low tech, basic rural existence that reminded me a lot of the way that my grandparents lived on the farm in Ontario where I started life.

The middle of Chilean Patagonia

Coyhaique is the largest city along the Carretara Austral. And it is approximately midway on the journey. It sits in the upper valley of the Rio Simpson and being further inland it enjoys a drier climate than we had been experiencing. The coastal rainforest gave way to open vistas over grasslands and hay fields. Coyhaique is a thriving tourism centre that is thronged with travelers. In addition to a lot of cycle tourists we also met backpackers, hitchhikers, motorcycle tourists, and people with rented cars and camper vans. Being roughly the halfway point it seemed to me that we should take a rest day here. We had been making good steady progress and so I was becoming somewhat less worried about getting to Puerto Natales by Feb 25. But Osa was having none of that. She really doesn't like cities or crowds, or supermarkets for that matter. So we spent half a day replenishing supplies and got back on the road.



The next leg of the journey would take us to Cerro Castillo, a village well known for scenic amazingness and awesome hiking opportunities. It would have been a huge task for us to get there in one day so we took it easy and planned a two day trip with a stop in El Blanco for the night. Shortly after leaving Coyhaique a stray dog came out and started running along with us. He was a friendly dog but was likely the stupidest creature on the planet. He had a very disconcerting habit of running in front of vehicles and trying to bite their tires before dodging out of the way at the last second. Osa named him Spot because she was sure that he would be nothing but a red spot on the road in the near future. For this reason we tried to not encourage him and hoped that he would give up on us and turn back. Now Spot may have been stupid but he was also persistent and incredibly fit. He kept pace with us for at least 20 kms. He would not go home; he likely didn't have a home. The terrain here was gently rising but rolling. We would get pretty far ahead on flat to downhill stretches but Spot would invariably catch up to us on the uphill. We finally managed to lose him for good on a long gentle downhill before reaching our overnight destination of El Blanco.

There was a very clean and friendly campground in El Blanco. In the morning we met Gianni, an Italian living in Britain and working for Japan Airlines. He was riding a Brompton, a small wheeled British folding bicycle that seemed very much the wrong choice of conveyance for what lay ahead. Gianni had flown to Coyhaique to start his tour so he had yet to encounter any ripio. I didn't think that he was going to do well when he got off the pavement. I kept that thought to myself.

We had a tough day of cycling over the high point of the entire route in a light but steady rain. It was cold and we got very wet. At one point we met a cyclist walking back down the hill we were riding up. She was looking for a shoe that had fallen off of her friends bike. This was Jenny and Nikki, two German women who later became good friends. Both were med students on an extended cycle tour. They had stopped in Santiago earlier to do a practicum.

In the mid afternoon we descended out of the clouds, down a long switchback section and into Cerro Castillo. At the edge of the village we saw a classic Chilean Gaucho sitting on a horse with a small child in front of him, by the side of the road. Then we saw a herd of cows coming toward us, being driven down the



road by some more Gauchos. Then after them came a whole string of Gauchos (and Gauchettes?) and children all riding into town. We had somehow managed to arrive just in time for the annual festival. The livestock and people paraded through the town and then there was a street party with dancing and food.

The next day we headed west on the most recently paved section of the road. We met a French couple doing the same tour as us but with the added challenge of doing it with a 2 year old and a 5 year old child. Each parent had a child riding behind them in a child seat over the rear wheel. Dad was carrying panniers and mom was towing a Bob trailer. We never saw them again but we occasionally heard about them from other folks. The reason that we never saw them again is that they stayed ahead of us all the way to Argentina.

After 15 kms of very fresh pavement we got to the end of the pavement for good. At first we had decent riding on ripio through a broad river valley with tall mountains and glaciers all around. Then we got to a very torn up section that was being prepared for paving. Fortunately this was a Sunday and the road was open. Had it been a weekday we would have been delayed for hours here. Osa got her second flat on this stretch. The German girls came along and stopped to help. Their plan was to go on to the next commercial campground which was about 50 kms further on. This was much too far in my opinion as it was already mid afternoon. Then it started raining. In the late afternoon we stopped to camp at a

spot that had a very small abandoned shack where we could cook. There were already two cyclists here who graciously made room for us. These two were travelling north and were able to fill us in on the conditions ahead of us. We were particularly interested in knowing about the crossing from Villa O'Higgins to El Chalten. They assured us that it wasn't too bad. Later on an Australian woman also moved in. That night it rained hard. We were very glad to have the shack for cooking in. We packed up our very wet stuff in the morning and carried on in a steady rain. This was the most miserable part of the entire trip. By mid morning we came to a brand new tourist lodge that had only just opened its doors. We went straight in and were able to get second breakfast. There was a very distinctive British folding bicycle at the entrance. Gianni was here. After a while he appeared and told us his story. He had seen the abandoned shack where we camped but chose to carry on a short way to another spot by a small stream where he camped. It rained so hard at night that the small stream became a large stream and his tent got flooded. When he got to the tourist lodge in the morning he immediately got a room and had just woken from a well deserved nap. Obviously his budget was a little better padded than ours. Thus began a steady theme with Gianni. We saw him many times after that, often emerging from some room in a place where we had chosen to camp. He was also a master at finding meal options that we were oblivious to. He was not carrying any cooking gear as his choice of bicycle caused him to travel much lighter than us.



That afternoon we got to Puerto Rio Tranquillo on Lago General Carrera. This is a very well known spot famous for its marble caves along the lake shore near the village. Osa and I were in agreement here that it was finally time for a rest day. We got a room for the night even though the weather was much better by then. We really needed to dry out our stuff. In the morning we took the standard tourist boat trip to

the marble caves and in the afternoon we went for a hike up onto the top of a bluff overlooking the village and the lake. Here we saw our first Condor. It came circling up from below riding a thermal. It was magnificent and it was huge. After this we saw quite a few Condors but always they were just specs way up in the sky. This was a rare opportunity and we were thrilled.

That night we camped in a commercial campground and left the following morning. Our next destination was Cochrane which was a stiff two day ride from Puerto Rio Tranquillo. In the afternoon I got my first mechanical of the trip. My rear brake pad had worn out. I was carrying a spare but was flummoxed because the bolt that held the pads in required an Allen key that I didn't seem to have. But at that point along came the German girls and they did have the right tool and once again they stopped to help. We got going again and late in the afternoon came to the end of Lago General Carrera. This is the largest lake in Chile and it is the headwaters of the largest river in Chile, the Rio Baker. This is possibly one of the world's most beautiful rivers, and likely is the world's bluest river. The color is startling. By this point we were riding to the east of the Northern Patagonia Ice Cap (the Campo de Hielo Norte in Spanish). There were glaciers tumbling off of the ice cap all around. Across the lake was another range of ice covered pointy mountains. This is some very amazing scenery which is not overrun with tourists. Likely because of the difficulty of access and in no small part because of Patagonias well deserved reputation for dismal weather.

We camped that night at a relatively new campground at Cerro Color. This was run by an older couple who had been here all of their lives. They raised three children in this remote place but the children were now all gone out into the wider world. The owner told us that he had raised sheep for a livelihood but eventually got tired of losing too many sheep to Puma kills. So he decided to take advantage of the increasing tourist trade along the Carretara Austral by opening his campground. The common room was still decorated with balloons from the couples 50th wedding anniversary. Here we also ran into the Spanish cyclists that we had last seen getting off the ferry in Chaiten.

The next day we rode on to the last settlement on the Carretara that can reasonably be thought of as a town. Along the way we followed the Rio Baker to its confluence with the Rio Neff. There is a big waterfall here that we hiked to and again ran into Gianni and the German girls. Farther along we rode past the spot where there had been a plan to build a very major dam for the Hydro Aysen project. This had been a plan to build five major hydro dams in Patagonia that would have likely assured Chile's energy independence for many years to come. It also would have altered Patagonia forever. After much public protest the plan was eventually scrapped.

Late in the afternoon we pulled into Cochrane. From here on the nature of the trip was going to change.

The bottom of Chilean Patagonia

Up to this point there had been villages or towns at least every 120 kms. We never had to plan for more than one night of rough camping before finding a resupply point. This allowed us the luxury of not carrying a lot of food with us on the bike, and of taking a rest day pretty much anywhere. That we had only had two rest days to this point came down to us not agreeing on when or where to stop. Osa's preference was always to stop somewhere remote which would have required carrying extra provisions on the bike. My preference was to stop in villages or towns to mingle with cyclists and locals but Osa

always wanted to push on from those kinds of places. So we kept moving. The two exceptions were the forced rest day when we returned to Puerto Montt and had to wait for the night ferry to Chaiten, and the rest day in Puerto Rio Tranquillo where we took the tourist trip to the marble caves. Now we were faced with the prospect of 220 kms of emptiness between Cochrane and Villa O'Higgins. This is the longest stretch without services on the Carretara Austral. At our average daily pace this was going to take us four days. That made for some very full panniers and heavy loads on leaving Cochrane.



In Cochrane we made a new set of friends. Here we met Leah, Sarah, and Izzy; henceforth referred to as the American girls. Osa immediately took a huge liking to these women because they never stopped laughing and having a good time. They could always be relied on to find the best bakery in each place where we met them afterward. This was Leah's first bicycle trip. I really admired that kind of sense of adventure.

We spent the morning helping Jenny to fix a broken spoke, getting supplies, and sampling Pie Limon ice cream. We left Cochrane in the early afternoon knowing that the best option for camping that night was at a river crossing some 45 kms away. That distance was likely to take us about 5 hours so we didn't need an early start. Along the way I was lucky enough to come around a corner to see a Huemule crossing the road. This is an extremely endangered deer that is only found in Patagonia. Its numbers are in severe decline for reasons that I don't know. In late afternoon we got to a well used rough campsite near a bridge over the Rio Barrancoso. The American girls were already there and the German

girls came along a couple of hours later. It was interesting to me that in the commercial campgrounds there were always several other groups of touring cyclists but we always seemed to travel in sync with the same few folks. I guess that the other groups were either faster or slower than us. And of course there were groups that were travelling in the opposite direction.

A word about planning. I like to have a plan, both short term and long term. The long term plan in this case was to get to Puerto Natales by February 25 to catch the Navimag Ferry. The short term plan always involved getting to the next resupply point before running out of food. Also to find the nicest place to camp whether that be rough camping or a commercial campsite in a village or town. For this I used an app on my phone called iOverlander. This is a community involvement thing where people post short descriptions of places where they have stopped and others can comment on their experiences there. It's a brilliant tool for finding the beauty spots and avoiding the not so desirable spots. It also gave us a goal for each day and a way to modify that goal with other options if necessary. My other tool for knowing the way ahead was OsmAnd+, an offline mapping tool for Android. There is an equivalent app for the iPhone called Osmlos. This tool was pretty good at showing the distance to the next campsite and the amount of elevation gain to expect over that distance. This was never accurate but was good enough for knowing whether the day would be painless or painful, and to modify the goal if necessary. I always had a goal. Osa has in the past accused me of being goal oriented and I readily admit that it is true. Where we disagree is that she thinks it's a bad thing; possibly akin to being a mass murderer or a Walmart executive or something equally sinister.

Osa wants to live in the moment and be free to stop anywhere at any time to camp, hike, or fish. In general I agree with this but I was always the practical one and wanted to find a reasonable place to camp and I also wanted to get to the next resupply point before running out of food. Going hungry is not high on my list of reasonable ways to have an adventure. We had a lot of conflict over our differing points of view regarding this. We always worked it out but we never seemed to get on the same page. We did stop a lot to fish and we sometimes ended up camping in places other than the ones that we (or at least I) originally thought that we might get to. There were other times when we had to push on when Osa was getting pretty tired.

One such time happened the next day. We had a beautiful day of cycling through the Valle Tranquille. The weather was good and the scenery just kept getting better and better, although it got quite warm in the afternoon. We eventually came to a junction where a side road split off to go to the coast at Caleta Tortel. The main road went up a long and steep climb over a pass and down to Puerto Yungay where we wanted to catch the last of the Carretara Austral ferries the following morning. There was a bus shelter here where I waited for Osa to catch up. Bus shelters often provided us with great stopping points. There were very few buses in this part of Chile and none that would have provided an option for us. They were invariably small, extremely infrequent, had no space for bicycles in their luggage compartments, and didn't have bike racks. The shelters made for great lunch stops and occasionally a place to hide from rain squalls. In this case the shelter at the road junction provided shade from the sun. When Osa got there she was exhausted. She was bonking but didn't realize it because (I think) it had never happened to her before. She was pretty upset at me for making her suffer so much (even though we hadn't gone that far that day and hadn't yet climbed any notable hills). It was a distinct low point for her. She grabbed my hat and flung it away into the bushes. Fortunately that was the extent of

her tantrum. She soon recovered some of her strength and calmed down. I have had a lot of personal experience with bonking and recognized it for what it was and didn't get too upset. I realized that she just needed to eat some food and rest for a bit and wait for the day to cool off. We looked for a spot to camp and found a fine spot nearby. There was a stream for water and some level ground, or we could have pitched the tent right in the bus shelter. But after a couple of hours Osa felt much better and wanted to carry on. So we did the steep climb up to the pass which involved both of us pushing our bikes, and then we found a spot to camp next to a lake in the pass. Osa was able to fish here and was back to her normal cheerful self after that.

In the morning we rolled down the other side of the pass to the ferry landing at Puerto Yungay. Here we met up once again with Gianni who had now teamed up with a German fellow named Christian who was riding a fat bike. They made an interesting pair insofar as they were riding the smallest and largest bikes that we had seen in Chile. After the short ferry ride they took off quicker than us. Osa and I rode along through a long river valley and then over a couple of passes switching from river valley to river valley. In the late afternoon we camped in a cow pasture that had the worst mosquitoes in Patagonia. The land here was marshy and not well drained. There was a peak that rose up just across the road that had a glacier that came down to about 500 meters above us. If we had the time and equipment we would have climbed that hill. We had neither. This was our third night out since Cochrane and we were eating the last of our food. But all that advance planning was paying off; we were an easy 50 kms from Villa O'Higgins and no longer worried about getting there.

The next morning we packed up and headed toward O'Higgins. We rode along the shores of Lago Cisnes and then stopped by the bridge over the outlet. There were several cycle tourists here who had also stopped and were fishing from the bridge. So we stopped also and Osa fished for an hour or two. Then we carried on and rolled into Villa O'Higgins in the early afternoon. We found a place to camp and then went to see about getting the ferry across Lago O'Higgins.

The Carretera Austral terminates at Lago O'Higgins 8 kms further on from Villa O'Higgins. However for the touring cyclist the end of the road isn't the end of the trip. There is no public transport that is going to work for getting a bicycle away from there. Folks have been known to sell or ditch their bikes and then either fly (very limited capacity) or take a bus back to civilization. There is a road north of V. O'Higgins that goes to the Argentine border but there is nothing on the Argentina side except for some cattle tracks that eventually reach a road. Cyclists have gone this way and reported that it is very high on the adventure scale and even higher on the misery scale. Most cyclists carry on by taking a boat across Lago O'Higgins and then crossing into Argentina at one of the world's most remote, interesting, and beautiful border crossings. That's what we wanted to do. There are three boats that operate on Lago O'Higgins. Of the three by far the largest is the Robinson Crusoe boat. It was broken. We learned that it is more often broken than not. There is a much smaller boat that goes to Candelaria Mancilla and there is a tourist boat that runs tours to a glacier that spills off the Southern Ice Cap into Lago O'Higgins and then stops at Candelaria Mancilla. The destination for cyclists is Candelaria Mancilla which consists of a couple of houses and a Chilean border post. We managed to secure a spot on the small boat for two days in the future. This turned out to be highly fortuitous as the weather was forecast to deteriorate badly and the boats would maybe not be running for up to a week after that. In

O'Higgins we met a fairly large group of British cyclists who opted for the pub first and the ferry after that.

Argentina



We had a rest day in O'Higgins where we did very little and then the following morning got up early and cycled to the end of the road. The boat was indeed small with a capacity of about 20 people and 9 bicycles. We were joined by Gianni and Christian, the American girls, and Janis and David (a Canadian couple of the same generation as Osa and I), and several others that we didn't know. The German girls (who never liked early starts) had gotten tickets for the afternoon boat. This was very fortunate for them as they ended up on the last boat out of V. O'Higgins for the next week. The weather was good that morning and the boat ride was spectacular. We offloaded at Candellaria Mancilla and proceeded to the Chilean customs post to get our exit stamps. We managed to be the last in line except for the American girls. The process was quite slow. Why does it take a long time to get a passport stamp saying that you are leaving a country? Maybe it was just a diversion for the border guards who were quite affable and liked to chat. Osa and I finally got our stamps and then proceeded up the last road in Chile for the next several hundred kilometers. This was steep and loose and it's only purpose was to serve a remote airstrip some 15 kms away up in the pass between Chile and Argentina. After a while we stopped for some lunch. While we were eating a truck came along. It was driven by the border guards and in the back were the American girls and their bicycles. The girls had charmed the border guards into

giving them a ride! It occurred to me that being young and pretty and friendly has some distinct advantages.



After watching the truck disappear we continued riding and pushing our bikes up to the airstrip at the top of the hill. Shortly past this the road ended at a rusty sign that marked the border with Argentina. Behind the sign was a single track footpath that headed off into the forest. We took some photos and before we left Janis and David arrived. We chatted with them for a bit and took some more photos. This was the beginning of what turned out to be another fine friendship established during the trip. The track wasn't too bad at the start. Some sections were rideable but only for a short way before a fallen tree or a steep section would get me walking. Osa walked almost all of it. Soon the rideable sections diminished to few and far between. It also got muddier. And then we started getting to small stream crossings and a few larger stream crossings. The going became quite arduous and very muddy in places. We had 5 kms of this to negotiate. This might have even been fun with a proper mountain bike (which I had but Osa didn't), proper mountain biking skills (which neither of us had), and no luggage. Eventually we got to a place where we could look down to Lago del Desierto and the end of the difficulties. From here the track went down steeply in an eroded trench. This was wide enough to attempt riding down; it turned out to be manageable and a lot of fun. Osa walked this as well. At the bottom there was the largest stream crossing yet. I got my bike across and then went back to help Osa with hers. She didn't

want my help so I went on for another few hundred meters to the lake and the Argentine border post. Osa arrived and we got our passports stamped and were officially in Argentina.

We had arrived a little too late to get the afternoon boat across the lake. This was OK with us as we had planned to camp here anyway. I went off to set up the tent and Osa disappeared. I didn't see her again for a couple of hours. She had gotten quite exhausted from the difficulties of the trail and had bonked again. This time she just went off by herself to do some fishing and recover slowly and not involve me in her misery.

The campsite at the border post at the north end of Lago del Desierto was my favorite camp of the trip. It is stunningly beautiful. It is a grassy area at the head of an amazing mountain lake. At the far end of the lake there are views of Monte FitzRoy and the surrounding peaks. Unfortunately the weather down that way wasn't clear enough to get that view. Our friends Tobi and Andy (also from Germany) had been there for a day and showed us pictures of the phenomenal views that they had gotten that morning. Osa eventually came to the camp and we had a very fine evening. In the morning she went fishing again and this time caught a nice two pound rainbow trout. We had fish for breakfast and then caught the 11 am boat across the lake. From there a 37 km ripio road leads to El Chalten and the beginning of Argentina civilization and the end of our worries (or at least my worries) about completing our journey and getting to Puerto Natales on time for the ferry.

We made a stop in a restaurant with Janis and David. Then we rode down a mostly flat road to the extremely touristy, but quite pleasant, town (village?) of El Chalten. This town didn't even exist 50 years ago. Back then the place was known only to climbers who spent entire summer seasons hanging out in the forest and waiting for brief breaks in the weather in order to climb some of the worlds then most difficult peaks. Now the climbers are still coming but so are the trekkers and various assorted tourists.

El Chalten

We stayed in El Chalten for 8 days. We parked our bikes and went hiking. The first day we hiked up to a lake and got some views of the clouds clearing off from FitzRoy. It was spectacular. That afternoon we got some beer and whiskey and sat in the sun outside the hospedaje where Janis and David were staying. We toasted the cycle tourists coming into town. These would be the last cyclists arriving from the north for the next week due to bad weather shutting down the boats on Lago O'Higgins. The first group to come by were Jenny and Nikki and they were soon followed by Leah, Sarah, and Izzy. A minor celebration ensued with relief that all of the folks that we had



become friends with had safely arrived in El Chalten.

The following day I was sick and didn't go anywhere. I had gotten a slight sore throat back in V. O'Higgins which slowly got worse over the next several days and developed into a bad cough and general malaise. So I took this day off while Osa and Janis went hiking. By the day after that I was feeling a bit better so we hiked with Janis and David up to Lago Torres at the base of Cerro Torre, Torre Egger, and Cerro Stanhardt. We didn't get good views here because the peaks were still in the clouds. These peaks rise right out of the Southern Patagonia Ice Cap and have generally horrendous weather. By contrast FitzRoy and its adjoining peaks are a little farther east of the ice cap and have marginally better weather. Around this time the Brits that we had met back in V. O'Higgins turned up. They had missed getting a ferry across Lago O'Higgins and learned that they weren't likely to get one for another week. So they opted for the northern road and the cattle tracks through Argentina. When they finally turned up in El Chalten they told us tales of woe and hardship.

The following day it was Osa's turn to be sick. She had clearly gotten the bug from me and had the same symptoms. Unfortunately her recovery turned out to be much more difficult than mine. But she is very tough and didn't let being ill slow her down. She took a day off while I went for a bike ride out into the Pampas east of El Chalten. Then we packed our camping gear into our day packs and went for an overnight backpacking trip. We hiked to the Poincenot camp on the first day, set up camp, and then hiked on to Lago Sucia for some stunning views. Despite being pretty sick Osa went swimming in this lake among the icebergs. We went back to camp and then got up in the dark and hiked up to Lago de Los Tres to catch the sunrise from right below the FitzRoy massif. Back to camp for breakfast and then we hiked out by way of Lago Torres. This time we got spectacular views of the Torres and surrounding peaks and glaciers.



It was now time to get back on our bikes and ride. We still had some 500 kms to go to get to Puerto Natales. We had spent so much time in El Chalten that we weren't going to be able to ride all of the way. The bus system in this part of Argentina is pretty good; much better than the small, infrequent, and local bus system in southern Chile. Argentina has full sized coaches with some limited room underneath for bicycles. Our plan was to ride the next stretch of 215 kms to the equally touristy town of El Calafate and then catch a bus from there to Puerto Natales.

We left town the following morning and headed out of town and up a hill to the beginning of the Argentine Pampas. The view back to El Chalten from here was outstanding!



We didn't get very far. I noticed that Osa's back tire didn't look right. We stopped to take a look and discovered that the sidewall on the tire was failing. Riding into uninhabited country on that tire was not a good idea so we headed back into town to look for a replacement. That didn't work out as there are no bike shops in El Chalten. There are a few bike rental places but they had only 26 inch wheeled mountain bikes and we needed a 700c tire. We were told that there were a couple of bike shops in El Calafate. So we went to the bus station and were lucky enough to get on a bus almost right away. In a few hours we were in El Calafate and had found a replacement tire. Now the question was what to do about the next leg of the trip. Since Osa was still sick I suggested that we stay in El Calafate for a couple of days and then take another bus to Puerto Natales. For me the major goal had been to ride the

Carretara Austral and then get to El Chalten and experience the magnificent mountains there. I was happy and fulfilled. On the other hand we were both keen to experience riding through the Pampas. I let Osa make the decision. Her choice was to ride on to Puerto Natales so that's what we did.

The Pampas

There was a music festival going on in El Calafate. There were people everywhere and the campgrounds were very crowded. The campground that we did manage to get into had several groups of cycle tourists including, of course, the German girls. They had now teamed up with Francisco, a Chilean lad. I helped him with a problem that he was having with his front derailleur. In the morning we found an excellent bakery where we had second breakfast and then headed out of town.

We hadn't yet experienced the Pampas because of the tire failure so now we found out what that countryside is really about. It is all grassland. The only trees are the very few that have been planted around estancias. The estancias themselves are few and very far between. Many have been abandoned. There is very little water, lots of wind, hot summers and horrendous winters. This part of Argentina is too harsh for successful ranching. It is too harsh for successful anything judging by the lack of habitation. However it is very beautiful country that is filled with wildlife. There are almost no animals in Chile despite the lush landscape. Here the landscape is much more arid but it is filled with animals. We saw lots of Guanacos (an antelope like critter similar to an alpaca), Rheas (a flightless bird about the size of a turkey), rabbits, and foxes. Overhead there were quite a few Condors keeping an eye out for their next meal.

We cycled on a beautiful paved road for 42 kms to the one and only stream of the day. We had lunch here and then cycled on into an increasingly hot afternoon. There was a very long hill to ride up and at the top of that we got hit by the wind. Fortunately we had the wind at our back for most of the next stretch. We fairly flew along and got to the only possible campsite after a 96 km day from El Calafate. This was our greatest distance in one day for the entire trip. At this point there is a fork in the road and an Argentine road worker maintenance station. This is a very well known spot among the cycle tourers because you can camp here, there is some shelter from the wind, and they have a large tank of potable water that they freely share. Without this singular and very gracious spot cycling through this country would be an enormous challenge. Of course we camped here and an hour or so later we were joined by Jenny, Nikki, and Francisco. A couple from Hungary (or maybe it was Bulgaria) showed up a little later. A young couple from Argentina then walked in. They were on the way to the music festival when their car broke down somewhere nearby. The road workers went out and towed their car into the compound and then gave them a place to stay for the night inside the building. They shared their sandwiches with us and we had a nice little international party.

By now it was evening and the wind was howling. Osa and I made a plan to get a very early start the next day thinking that the wind would stop overnight and then build the next day the same as it had been doing most days. The German girls and Francisco weren't keen on this idea; they don't like early starts. So in the morning Osa and I were up before dawn and made a hasty breakfast and got going. The early morning was indeed calm. We had a lovely first 20 kms on some decent unpaved road as the sun came up and cast long shadows of our bikes and bodies out over the empty land. We were now on a gravel road. The fork in the road where we camped the last night had presented a dilemma. The

beautiful paved road went on to the southeast to an intersection some 70 kms further on. From there another paved road went west to a junction with another AGVP road worker station where we could camp. This option was about 140 kms in total, much further than we had yet ridden in a day. Doing it in 2 days would be reasonable but we didn't have the time for that due to our ferry reservation. The other option was a cutoff road of half that distance. It was ripio and reportedly quite bad. That's the way we went and it was actually quite nice for the first 20 kms. At that point there was an abandoned estancia next to a stream. In two days on the Pampas we had now seen 2 small streams. After that point the road gradually worsened until it could be fairly described as horrible. And the wind gradually picked up. The scenery and wildlife made up for it to some extent. There were lots of Guanacos and Rheas, and a fox or two. In the distance to the west were the Andes. We eventually got views in the far distance of the Torres del Paine group. Later we came to a very unexpected wetland that had a flock of flamingos. Not long after that we got to the road junction with the other AGVP station. By this time the wind was very strong and we were pretty beat up. This AGVP station was a bit more run down than the first one. They said we could camp or they could let us stay in a trailer with some beds in it for a few pesos. We opted for that as the camping didn't seem very sheltered. There was a very small store here also that sold almost nothing except for cookies and coke.





Several hours later Jenny, Nikki, and Francisco arrived. They looked badly beaten up. Their strategy of getting late starts did not work in their favor this day. They had spent the entire day battling an increasingly strong headwind. There was no trailer available for them so they pitched their tents in some shrubs out back. That night we lay in the trailer and listened to the wind as it steadily increased. At times it would shake the trailer. It sounded like jet airplanes were buzzing the place. The wind kept me awake. I kept waiting for it to calm down like it had most other nights in Argentina. But it just kept getting stronger. After a sleepless night we got our usual early start. While Osa made breakfast I went for a short test ride to see how difficult the riding would be. I rode about 100 meters and turned around. Riding into that wind was not possible. I estimated it at a steady 70 kms an hour. Staying where we were was also not an option. We needed to get to Puerto Natales, about 120 kms away, for our ferry in the evening of the next day. So we loaded up and rode out to the junction and tried to hitchhike. There would be a car, bus, or pickup truck every 15 minutes or so. The buses wouldn't stop and the cars had no room. Our best hope was for a friendly pickup to stop for us but that never happened. In between vehicles we cowered in a ditch. Just standing on the side of the road was too extreme. The ditch was dry and deep enough to provide shelter. You know that things are a bit out of control when your world constricts to hiding in a ditch! During this entire time we saw Nikki once emerge and go across the road for some cookies. I think that they were waiting for us to get a ride before trying their luck. Having five cyclists hitching in that spot would have been hopeless. We never saw them again.

After three and a half hours of this a very small car stopped and offered to take one of us. We debated about this and decided that I should go with this fellow simply because my Spanish is very basic. Osa has much better Spanish and she would be better able to explain the situation to the next motorist that stopped. We weren't worried about safety. We had long ago learned that this part of the world is very safe from a personal standpoint. We didn't want to split up but saw no other option. Anyway that never became an issue. Another car came along and the driver of the first car flagged it down and talked that driver into helping us as well. We broke down the two bikes and stuffed them into the two cars and were finally on our way. These amazing gentlemen delivered us to the coal mining town of Rio Turbio about 90 kms further along. They let us out in the central plaza of a pretty bleak town. Now we were only about 30 kms from our destination and the wind was not nearly so bad here. We were in the lee of the Andes with the mountains acting to block some of the wind. We put the bikes together and cycled up to Paso Dorotea where we checked out of Argentina and back into Chile. Then we rolled down the hill into Puerto Natales.

Mission accomplished.

Aftermath

We got a room in a hospedaje and spent the next day in Puerto Natales. In the late evening we boarded the ferry where we shared a cabin with an American couple. The ferry sailed very early the next morning. For three days and four nights it sailed (actually it motored) through the Chilean fjords. It was absolutely stunning. So much amazing country with absolutely no one living there, at least in the south. There was one settlement and that was it. The first day was rainy and depressing but after that the sun came out and the weather was fabulous. At one point we went by a really cool shipwreck. This had been a freighter loaded with sugar from Brazil. The crew had a scheme to sell the load of sugar in Buenos Aires which they did. Then they went around the bottom of South America and planned to wreck the ship on a submerged rock and then get the insurance money. They also did that but to their dismay the boat didn't sink. It happened that there was already a wreck there and so their boat settled on top of the previous boat and was left high and dry. The plan was foiled, the empty hold was discovered, and the perps all went to jail.



We sailed through brilliantly clear waters, were accompanied by dolphins, and saw whales spouting in the Gulf of Corcovado. I saw a Black Browed Albatross, a new bird for me. In the morning of the fourth day we arrived at Puerto Montt and then cycled back to our starting point in Puerto Varas. We still had most of a week left before flying home. Osa was still sick but was also still keen to see more of this amazing area. We hatched a loose plan to cycle to Bariloche in Argentina and then take a series of ferries and remote roads back to Puerto Varas from there. We started this tour but it turned out to be too ambitious so we modified the plan into a pleasant cycle tour around Lago Llanquihue. One night during that trip Osa bolted upright gasping for air. She was choking and couldn't breathe. I tried to do the Heimlich maneuver on her. Fortunately she started breathing again. This was enough to finally convince her to see a doctor so in the morning we found a small hospital in the next village. By this time the Covid-19 pandemic was becoming a known problem even in such a remote place. Out came the face masks and protective gowns. This was really just a nursing station so the attendant phoned a doctor for consultation. They determined that it likely wasn't Covid-19 because Osa did not have a fever. She was given an asthma inhaler and some pills and we went on our way.

We finished our circuit of the lake and the next day we were on a plane back to Canada. This was about a week before the Canadian border was closed to all international travel. Osa still was having trouble when we got home so we went to see the doctor again. The first walkin clinic that we went to flat out refused to see us due to Covid-19 panic. We went to another walkin clinic which also threw us out but

told us to call them. They then set up a room in the back and brought Osa in through the back door and did a nasal swab and told us to go home and isolate to wait for the results which would be ready in 2-4 days. No attempt was made to help her with her breathing problem which had now been going on for at least three weeks. After 9 days we had no results and no answer at the phone number that we had been given to call for results. Osa finally went home to Kaslo. On day 10 she finally got her results which were negative for Covid-19. My guess is that it was a form of contagious bronchitis.

It's now a month and a half since we got back. Osa is healthy again and the world is a changed place. The memories of the trials and tribulations of the journey have gone where those kinds of memories usually go. What is left is the good memories of an amazing trip to a fabulous part of the world. As soon as the world returns to normal I want to go back to do that trip to Bariloche, to visit the island of Chiloe, and to get up into the high desert in the north of Chile. I wonder if Osa will forget about the pain of traveling this way and join me then?