

Dust in My Pack

Ignite Your Adventurous Soul with Travelling Tales from Around Our World

By Nancy O'Hare

Excerpt from **Chapter Three: Day Hikes**

Argentina and Chile—Patagonia

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Thank you all for your unending support; I will always be grateful.

Preface

Travelling feels like part of my DNA. My father describes this call as our gypsy gene. For me, it was first ignited at the age of twelve, when I was fortunate enough to take part in a two-week field trip to Europe. Upon my return, I promptly forewarned my parents that, at some point, I would move overseas. Years later, my choice to become a chartered accountant was partially influenced by the knowledge that all companies, in all countries, need accountants. My plan slowly took shape. Since 1998, when I nabbed a transfer to Australia, my path has led me to some remarkable destinations, even though its course has not always seemed clear.

This book is a compilation of enduring memories from living on five continents and travelling across sixty-three countries. Tales range from adrenalin-inducing exploits to awe-inspiring sites. These favourite adventures are broadly grouped into chapters by type of travel experience. I have not ranked them, as to do so would diminish the very diversity and unique qualities that each imparted.

Throughout my travels, one consistent message has shone clearly. People across the globe are connected by a common quality, no matter their country of origin, economic status or religious leaning. Folks everywhere seem to have an instinct to help their families and those near to them. Compassion unites us.

This compelling pattern became visible to me as I travelled for work and on the occasional five- to twelve-month sabbatical, when I ventured through remote regions of the world. My husband and I came across so many helpful and welcoming individuals, often when least expected. For instance, a staff member at a family guesthouse in an isolated Malaysian village balanced my husband and me on the back of his motorbike for an hour-long ride to the nearest hospital to take a malaria test. Thankfully, the test came back negative. The same theme was reflected by my Omani colleagues, a mix of Sunni and Shiite Muslims, as we developed a camaraderie like that of a second family. Perhaps the clincher was in 2014, at the height of the Ebola outbreak, when our Nigerian steward used his vacation to educate every family in his home village. He walked door to door to advise people on how to protect themselves against the virus.

I have witnessed countless comparable situations. If there is one takeaway from this book, it is a call to respect people of all cultures and races. Differences are not something to be afraid of. Embrace them.

Introduction

Is your travel bug feeling dejected and faded? Have you chosen a holiday destination, but fear you might be missing out on something special? Well, in either case, this book is intended for you. I have distilled years of travelling across our globe into these accounts of my most memorable encounters. This is not a traditional travel guidebook; instead, these tales aim to relay a sense of the experience. After all, it is the memories of the people we met and our unexpected insights that stay with us long after a journey ends.

These exploits are grouped into chapters according to broad travel categories, such as boat rides or multi-day treks, and then by country. You might choose to reinspire your lust to explore by reading the book cover to cover, or you might prefer to focus on those topics or locations that appeal to your current travel quest. I have included practical guidance about each destination in every section.

I hope that this book inspires the traveller inside you.

Chapter Three: Day Hikes

Argentina and Chile—Patagonia

The Basics

Synopsis: Discover a virtual candy store for outdoor enthusiasts, dishing up an assortment of volcanic adventures, isolated islands, rugged forests and monumental peaks.

Most useful items to pack: Multiple layers of clothing to adapt to a variety of climates

For further travel information: The Lonely Planet's excellent *Trekking in the Patagonian Andes* (see [Bibliography](#)) covers multi-day treks in the region. The regular Lonely Planet country guidebooks for Chile and Argentina also cover Patagonia's trails, but in less detail.

Useful references for these hikes out of El Chaltén in South Patagonia can be found at the following links:

- Laguna Torre: elchalten.com/eng/actividades/lagunatorre.php
- Laguna de los Tres: elchalten.com/eng/actividades/lagunadelostres.php
- Lomo del Pliegue Tumbado and Laguna Toro: lonelyplanet.com/argentina/parque-nacional-los-glaciares-north/activities/hiking-trekking/lomo-del-pliegue-tumbado-laguna-toro

Our hotel in Pucón was average, so I have not mentioned it here.

In Castro, we stayed at the nature-inspired yet quirky Palafito 1326 Hotel Boutique, which can be found at palafito1326.cl.

While staying in El Chaltén, we settled into a double room with ensuite at the homey Patagonia Travellers' Hostel. Further information can be found at patagoniahostel.com.ar.

In Ushuaia, we stayed at an apartment in the superfriendly La Posta Apart Hostel. Further information can be found at lapostahostel.com.ar/en.

The Experience

The Patagonia region is absolutely mammoth, with over one million square kilometres covering both Argentina's and Chile's southern reaches. The entire expanse is stunning; volcanic peaks, sharp rocky pitches and chunky glacier ice masses extend across its land. This may be one of those treasured destinations that entice you back for more, a sweet treat for outdoor aficionados. Between its scenic backdrop, its boutique lodge accommodations, a temperate climate, robust local wines and amicable people, each visit can offer something new and spectacular. Like a puzzle, its picturesque persona will emerge piece by piece to enlighten your spirit.

From north to south, Patagonia is arranged into five subregions: the Araucanía, Lakes District, Central Patagonia, Southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. The descriptions below follow this division, except for Central Patagonia. For this section we chose not to hike and instead drifted aboard the *Evangelistas* ferry, as described in [Chapter One](#). Based on my personal experience, the more southerly locales seemed to offer more challenging hikes and dramatic scenery relative to their northern brethren. However, all the hikes we tackled are described below to provide a full account and to better differentiate the various locations.

While there are many multi-day treks on offer, my exploits in Patagonia were restricted to day hikes. After ten months and numerous multi-day expeditions, a warm shower and comfy bed post-hike took precedence during our Patagonia travels. Perhaps I was getting soft, but nevertheless, the day hikes were captivating. And, I must admit, a locally brewed pint at the end of the trail was equally gratifying.

The Araucanía—Parque Nacional Villarrica

Southeast of Chile's capital, Santiago, lies Pucón, at the southern frontier of the Araucanía region. This community nestles in the land of volcanoes; some still seethe with noxious gases while others have long lain dormant, capped by rock and crusted with snow. Reaching Pucón required a dreaded eleven-hour overnight bus ride. Oh, how we had tried to avoid such unpleasanties. However, we caved at the reputedly comfortable and expeditious Chilean buses. After we had settled into snug recliners and munched on the mandatory road-trip snack, sleep intermittently took hold. The ride was blissfully uneventful beyond random streetside lights that blinked into the darkened bus and our occasional repositioning of ourselves in search of comfort.

After an initial reconnaissance of the town, some seed of familiarity gnawed at the back of my sleepy mind. It was not long before the resemblance darted to the surface. This tiny hiking mecca that attracted thousands of tourists was a mirror image of Banff, Canada, except located in the Southern Hemisphere. Its foundation of tour offerings, adrenalin-sport excursions, souvenir markets and perky serving staff inside timber-adorned cafés mimicked that mountainous northern town. Swap the pine-clad volcanoes for the evergreen-cloaked Rocky Mountains and their similarity was uncanny.

Our principal goal here was to hike Volcán Villarrica. Although I am not typically a fan of excursion outings, attempting to climb its smouldering pinnacle independently would have been foolish. It is one of only five volcanoes worldwide with an active lava lake in its crater, so unless a climber is an accredited and experienced member of a mountaineering club, it is mandatory to have a certified guide who is recognized by the Corporación Nacional Forestal, the Chilean forestry service.¹ Guide knowledge is important not only on the hill, but before the trek even starts. Depending upon the winds, the sulphur content can weigh so heavily that tours may be cancelled due to health concerns. Villarrica's latest relatively major eruption occurred in March 2015. Locals were evacuated to escape the ash and lava that gushed out of its cone and sprayed up to one thousand metres vertically.² Reuters published some spectacular photos taken by Cristóbal Saavedra of this eruption.³

The hike itself was not particularly demanding, in part due to the aid of a chairlift, which knocked approximately 1,600 metres from the initial incline. Couple this with the near-lethargic pace set by the guides and the climb could be considered effortless by those in decent shape. This made it an easy warm-up for the rest of Patagonia's more challenging tracks. Unlike volcano hikes in Central America, which traverse straight up the slope, this pathway was crammed full of switchbacks. Although easier on the legs, these bends could get congested by groups on their descent or just clogged with other climbers ascending at varying speeds.

¹ <http://www.summitpost.org/villarrica-volcano/151480>

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-31708312>

³ reuters.com/news/picture/sleeping-volcano-awakens?articleId=UKRTSDQ6Q

Reaching the summit was less a moment to savour than one to merely endure. Even on a moderately calm day such as ours, fumes swirled in thick plumes around the cone's cavity. After the quintessential photo and a rapid wince at the pungent air, we were inspired to swiftly retreat below to fresher air. This anticlimax led nicely into the most entertaining part of the day—the descent. With helmets strapped on tight and ice picks in their ready position to act as brakes, we rode trusty plastic discs along snow channels. It was a little like a huge outdoor waterslide without the water but with all the twists. The only challenge was to set oneself down, ever so glamorously, onto one of these bright little spheres while holding legs and feet well above the ground. This was the perfect opportunity to benefit from countless Pilates core manoeuvres, my go-to exercise for compact hotel rooms.

As it was just a few days before Christmas, this outing's charming snowy atmosphere and lighthearted fun were fitting. The destination is best suited for an easy vacation, but is squarely on the tourist track. Thus, we were keen to move farther south towards more remote territory and autonomous travels.

Lakes District—Parque Nacional Chiloé

Parque Nacional Chiloé comprises much of the northwestern rim of Isla Grande de Chiloé (“Greater Island of Chiloé”), the second-largest island in South America. Few visitors appeared to have made the short ferry voyage to its northern shore, even over the Christmas holiday season. In fact, streets were stealthily quiet, with only a few essential shops open to patrons. True to its reputation, the island offered an authentic depiction of Chile's coastal settlements, untainted by foreign travellers or touristic whims.

Perhaps more renowned than the hiking trails were the aged wooden churches, which have been recognized by UNESCO as “a successful fusion of indigenous and European culture.”⁴ In fact, one of these designated architectural delights was situated in Castro, our local base town. Picture a typical Catholic church layout, but with the entire structure ensconced in wood panelling: the walls, ceiling, pews, altar, arches, pillars and every nook. Even in this festive season, not a single green bough or piece of silver tinsel distracted from the ever-so-thorough wooden veneer. Personally, I found that a glimpse at just a couple of the sixteen churches of Chiloé specifically recognized by UNESCO was ample to satisfy my curiosity.

The trails were calling much louder. But where were they? After a seventy-five-minute bus ride across the island to the ranger station, which clearly denoted the park's entrance, we vigorously started out on a nearby trail. Initially, it meandered along a wooded pathway, but soon the landscape opened onto coastal vistas and scattered Huilliche indigenous communities. The water was steely grey, bordered by a dark taupe sandy beach and windblown dunes. Greenish-yellow tufts of grass grew in clumps out of the sand as if trying to hold it from blowing away. Blades of grass shot straight up from the silty cliff edges. Overall, the shoreline looked as if it had recently received a giant buzz cut.

Due either to the continuous winds or to a lack of local interest, any sense of a pathway disappeared soon after we entered the grasslands. Beyond a few indifferent cows chewing on the sinewy grass, there were no locals or other walkers from whom to ask directions. So our intrepid hike turned into

⁴ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/971>

a casual stroll. We eventually came across a road that took us over a deserted bridge to a few similarly quiet buildings. All in all, the scenery was rugged, but the hiking was short lived.

Southern Patagonia—Fitz Roy Range of Parque Nacional Los Glaciares

For those in pursuit of the perfect wilderness setting, the Cerro Torre of the Fitz Roy Range may just tick all the desired boxes. Behold vistas of mountain peaks that look more like switchblades, lakes the colour of blue opals and glacier fields that creep ever so close to the hiking trail. The nearest town is El Chaltén, a jewel in itself that amplified this near perfect locale. As a baby of a city—the town was founded only in 1985—its streets were like ribbons caught between two boulder-like hills on either side. Quaint lodging, a malty *cervecería*, or microbrewery, and a divine artisanal pizzeria ensured that the day's end was just as anticipated as the hikes themselves. In keeping with these impeccable amenities, even the trailheads were conveniently located within walking distance of the town centre. Both day trails and multi-day tracks with campgrounds en route started from the town, saving the hassle of coordinating drop-off or pickup transport. I would surely return to this undeniably worthy destination.

Our first hike was to Laguna Torre, twenty-four kilometres round trip. Its pinnacle was at the Mirador Maestri lookout point with views over the Cordón Adela range and down onto Glacier Torre's gritty arm of ice. Another stunning viewpoint, at Mirador Laguna Torre, afforded a panoramic vista of Cerro Torre's slivery points among a wider snowy range perched above the chilly Laguna Torre. Only the enormous horseflies that took pleasure in hurtling themselves at our necks could distract us. At least they stayed to the lower elevations, near where the trail followed the Río Fitz Roy bank and temperatures were warmer. This hike reached a net elevation gain of two hundred metres.

On our second day, we awoke to raindrops and an overcast sky. Half-grudgingly, we pulled on rain gear and extra layers so as not to lose a precious hiking day. It was well worth the initial discomfort, as the rain stopped early in our walk. The views on this track were surreal; forests of driftwood lay shrivelled along sandy banks, and it seemed that mountain and desert had morphed into some new entity. Farther along, the crystal-clear waters of Laguna de los Tres glowed in vivid shades of turquoise, in blunt contrast to the rusty-tinged layers of rock that rose in elongated streaks above the lake. Soon we came across yet another startling blue lagoon, Laguna Sucia, which was situated high on a precipice beyond Laguna de los Tres. This hike covered an elevation gain of seven hundred metres.

As our time in El Chaltén came to an end, we were both energized and saddened to arrive at our final day's hike. This ramble took us to the eastern face of Loma del Pliegue Tumbado. It was the steepest climb of the three, rising approximately eight hundred metres above El Chaltén. Rocky scree covered much of the terrain at the higher levels. The tough slog paid off. We enjoyed great views overlooking our first day's hike. The Glacier Torre jutted like a thumb below the impressive Cerro Torre and Fitz Roy peaks. The thought of a dark pint and savoury pizza back in the cozy pizzeria fuelled our return journey.

Tierra del Fuego—Parque Nacional Tierra del Fuego

Our final hiking experience in Patagonia was in the far south Parque Nacional Tierra del Fuego ("Land of Fire"). This region earned its fearsome name when the famed Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan caught sight of numerous fires when cruising the shoreline. Fearing the

unknown, which is an unusual trait for an explorer, Magellan concluded that the locals must be planning an ambush on his fleet. In fact, the native Yamana people were actually just trying to stay warm. They were not fond of clothing and instead lathered oils, often from seal blubber, onto their skin. The grease nicely absorbed any warmth radiating from nearby bonfires to keep their bodies toasty.

Luckily for us it was late January with moderate temperatures quite amenable for hiking. The first trail that we tackled was the Costera route along the ocean's shoreline. Its reputation as a popular pathway to observe the local birds was true. Upland geese poked around the lake's edge, nuzzling between tiny white wildflowers and stringy turf. Their whitish-grey colouring was in bold contrast to the aquamarine waters and lush green vegetation. Even rabbits frolicked in a meadow before ducking out of sight. Of most interest to watch was a young chimango caracara falcon. He was preoccupied in finding some tasty seafood delight left hidden under the stones at low tide. This was far easier than spying live prey from high above and attempting a precision dive on fledgling wings. From his screeching, the adolescent must have still associated these shrill sounds with the delivery of food. Either that or it was an effective method to hurry prying visitors along and out of his hunting grounds.

In the second part of our visit to the Parque Nacional Tierra del Fuego, we proceeded to its Lapataia Bay area. Lapataia Bay looked comparable to some of New Zealand's lush coastal landscapes, perhaps because both lands sit at similar southern latitudes, within ten degrees of one another. We started along Paseo de la Isla, which led through the Cormoranes Archipelago and then cut onto a second path that led us to Laguna Negra. This was a modest lake, but with a unique ambience, as it was encircled by a woolly bog in shades of amber and olive. The last trail led us up to Mirador Lapataia, which offered panoramic views over Lapataia Bay. The blues of the water and greens from the lenga forests were vibrant. Lengas are a rugged variety of beech with dark burly bark and unruly leaves, which are often covered in a patchwork of gauzy moss. The entire hike was exceptionally bewitching and just made us happy to be alive in such an invigorating and healthy environment, like swallowing a large dose of vitamin C.

There were not many other people on the trails, so we could savour this setting in its tranquil natural state. Getting there and away was also quite convenient. Local buses connected the nearby town of Ushuaia to the park by a fairly direct twelve-kilometre ride. Ushuaia possessed a quirky charm but without a typical seaport's rough atmosphere. Cute cafés, meandering seaside sidewalks and well-thought-out accommodation options made this friendly centre an excellent base.

About the Author

For twenty years, Nancy O'Hare coupled her love of diverse cultures with a career in finance; she has been based in Nigeria, Oman, Switzerland, Australia and Canada—plus completed a couple of short stints in Qatar and Ecuador. Between work assignments, O'Hare and her husband have taken multiple around-the-world trips for months at a time, covering all seven continents. They gravitate towards hidden gems tucked away from the crowds and aimed to see the essence of a place.

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Smashwords Author Interview: <https://www.smashwords.com/interview/NancyOHare>

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