

Global Spring Break – Boliving it Up!

Hola!

In this, my third tri-mester of my “World PHD” I just got back from ten days spent traipsing the alto plano here in Bolivia; sort of a “spring break” from travels. The goal was to work the camera more than the legs, but that doesn’t work so well here, where you might climb 200m just to get a cup of coffee.

Since January 31, I have been working on my last group of ‘classes’; submersion in a different language. Sure, technically all my travels involve trying to interpret the world of languages, but South America is and has been purely “Espanol”. So back in India I started using a language app called “Duo-Lingo” to learn Spanish. I’m a wiz at the app, but getting off the plane and actually having to use it is/was/always will be a struggle. After six weeks here, it’s getting better, but it’s quite humbling..

Patagonian Dreams

Of Boots and Beer

Coyhaique, Chile – As a traveler, you fill your days, weeks and months with the “new”; camera at the ready, gear in an eternal state of being packed and/or unpacked. Your mind constantly set in “problem solving” mode as you try to negotiate the words and ways of the lands swirling around you. But if you’re lucky, occasionally you’ll get a whiff of “home cooking” when you travel. For me these familiar winds took the form of Trekker Jim and Dave”O” who flew down to meet me here in Coyhaique.

Two weeks of consistent faces and a common past came at the right time for me in my travels. I have just finished eight months of roaming away from my shire; four months in the vast open plains, and four months crammed in the planes, trains, and tuk-tuks of south-east Asia.

Touching down in Chile marked my first retraced steps on this journey, having trampled Patagonia back in 2012, when I was younger and less traveled. The constant flurry of activity surrounding me left little time to ponder destinations, so once I confirmed my lengthy flight from Kuala Lumpur to Coyhaique, I left the planning up to my cohorts and re-entered the flurry.

To get to Coyhaique required three segments, of almost equal length; a 14hr flight from Kuala Lumpur to London (purported to be the longest segment for British Airways), a lengthy layover along the Thames, then a 13.5hr flight from Heathrow to Santiago. I don't count the little travel nuggets between Santiago and Coyhaique, just as you wouldn't count the change found under couch cushions as income.

I arrived two days before my friends, and a cursory search of TTD's (Things To Do) delivered a gem; a day tour down to Lago Tranquillo where I would have the chance to photograph the marble caves which dot the coastline. The weather was great, the caves were better, yet I was somehow expecting more of a focus on them and less on the food. As it turned out, my time within the caves was brief, probably twenty minutes, but I've learned to work fast and by the time the bus pulled away from the shore, I had over six-hundred images in the camera.

Jim and Dave-O arrived the following day just in time for dinner. I hadn't seen Jim since we shared a last ice-cream cone in Stockholm in the middle of August. For Dave-O it was back in late May. Seeing Dave-O also literally carried more weight; he was bringing me a new pair of hiking boots after mine apparently walked away back in Mongolia. He did not disappoint and I still owe him one for the road-side delivery. Many stories filled all voids throughout that night and the following day as we awaited the fourth member of our Patagonian "ride-share"; Marcello Kuntsmann, a Chileno that Jim had befriended on a previous tour of Torres del Paine, Chile. Dave-O had hiked with him during their return tramp of 2013. By mid-afternoon we had collected Marcello and were rolling down the road towards new adventures.

Our first "port of call" was Lago Tranquillo, about four hours away. The weather, while not sunny, was still dry and we shared a quiet night of cooking out and camping. I had suggested that a return to the nearby marble caves would be worthwhile, since this formation isn't currently found anywhere else in the world. The addition of Marcello had so many benefits for us, besides cutting the cost of car rental; he was an eager translator for our many exploits. Somehow our car developed a flat overnight, so the trip to the caves gave our repair guy a few hours to get our tire sorted out.

Dream #1 Marble Caves of Tranquillo

I was really hoping that my second photographic "bite" of the marble caves would be a longer, more controlled affair. With Marcello's help, we were able to secure an early boat with only the four of us as

passengers. The boatmen also seemed to understand our needs and waited for a consensus “let’s go” before gunning the outboard.

The caves didn’t disappoint and all four of us were clicking away for well over an hour. Our return to land was quickly followed by lunch, a quartette of ridiculously large hamburgers at a local diner with views overlooking the lake. The repaired tire was returned under the trunk and we were on our way.

It was generally understood that each of us would “claim” a destination. For me, it was those marble caves. I couldn’t have been happier to get those shots, considering the remoteness of the location, so I became a content back-seat passenger with new boots.

Dream #2: Parque de Patagonia

The next adventure would be Jim’s. From Lago Tranquillo, the road devolved to a gravel wash for the next four hours as we sought out the newest National Park in the area; Parque de Patagonia; the end-product of a bold ambitious plan, by a bold ambitious man, Doug Tompkins; founder of North Face outdoor gear.

Along this tale there will be a few instances where I will implore you to remember something (while inevitably forgetting where you left the car keys to make room for this memory). Here is the first:

REMEMBER: The Estancia Valle Chacabuco

OK, “estancia” is a Spanish word for ranch. A big ranch. THIS ranch totaled 650,000 acres in the Chacabuco Valley north of Lago Tranquillo. A large estancia for raising cattle and sheep, with high fences built to keep the guanaco’s out. Sidebar: a guanaco has the body of a deer and the head and neck of a camel...and it can jump. So there’s this big valley owned by a single ranch. Local meat prices plummet, the ranch is in trouble and Doug Tompkins and his conservation group are able to buy this huge parcel and return it to the people of Chile as a National Park. The guanaco’s who had been kept out for so long, would be offered a free buffet of all the valley had to offer.

OK, so by late afternoon we had entered the park. As the park has really only been opened to the public since 2015, there were few cars in the parking lot by the visitor center (still unfinished). But we toured

the lodge (US\$500 a night, 16 beds) and found there were two campgrounds and two trails built. One campground had hot showers for 7,500 CLP (about \$12 per person) and the other campsite was free (about \$0 per person). We were tired, and a hot shower seemed like the move, so we pitched up. There were outdoor lean-to's for cooking shelter, but their two open sides proved challenging to inhabit with swirling winds. And no cell-phone coverage.

The next day we moved on to the free campsite, about 17 miles away. This literally opened up the length and breathe of the valley to us...It was a magnificent thing. The few guanaco's we saw on the drive in, were suddenly everywhere. We often stopped to avoid hitting them, but eventually we stopped to take their pictures. It took well over an hour to drive those 17 miles...many shutter clicks.

The free campsite was great as well; adding an enclosed "camp building" with rooms for cooking, which were equipped with electrical outlets. Critical things for those using gadgets. We camped and took a two hour hike away from the campgrounds. At this point there was mostly scrub-grass, but eventually we found a newly constructed bridge over rapidly moving water...but then we found dinner.

The following day we returned to the main lodge with a notion to hike the "main trail"; 17km of unknown terrain, but definitely a big "up" at the start. This was Jimmy's dream, so we laced up the boots and extended our poles and set off. For me, this would not only test the fit of the new boots but give me a status report on how the body was doing after so much travel and my occasional lapses in daily medication .

It was steep, and seemingly unrelenting for the first two hours, but eventually the "up" turned to "flat" which seemed to please us all. The "official" map provided by the lodge, looked more like one of those placemats to keep the kids occupied; lots of squiggly topographic lines which could be colored in with crayons (not supplied). The top view melded into a slow relentless down, that stretched for almost 10 miles. The joy of the summit eventually replaced by each of us going into "auto-pilot"; mentally going to our "happy place" for a vacation from the tedium. But imagine that; you're in a remote part of Chile, hiking in a new park and you have to create a diversion to reach the car. There were some stunning overlooks, but when your feet hurt, the camera stays packed.

Eventually the mountain spit us out back at a car park; but we had left our car at the lodge, about two kilometers away. Since this was Jimmy's dream, he offered to go retrieve the car while the rest of us retrieved our senses. Many exhausted comments were exchanged, but the most memorable was "my

check engine light started blinking about the 8-mile mark...odd since I wasn't even driving" .. Twenty kilometers in about seven hours. Time for dinner.

Since the prospect of another freeze-dried dinner was quickly vetoed, we drove directly into Cochrane, the nearest town to the park, about twenty-five miles away. Being Sunday night, SuperBowl Sunday, we were hoping for a Chilean sportsbar with the game on, but the closest we got was Dave-O noticing a townie watching the game on his seventy-inch flatscreen. We pondered just standing in front of the house to catch the game, but eventually fell into a school bus. Most of the restaurants in town were shuttered on Sunday nights, but a vintage school bus was retrofitted as a diner and the blinking "abierto" sign let us know it was still opened. There were two sandwiches made, and two orders of hot-dogs and fries dished out. My beard and our conversations drew plenty of attention that night. We would pitch tents in this grassy backyard campground and eventually found a "cervesaria" for a round of beers before bed time. A day well spent.

Four Days Down – Two Dreams Fulfilled.

After a scattered repacking and a refueling, (us and the car) we planned to drive back thru the park to the border with Argentina. A few stops for guanaco and landscape photos and we were at the border by about noon...but that's as far as we would progress that day. Turns out there's a bit of paperwork involved with taking a rental car across an international border. Our paperwork said "no", as did the pleasant border agent. Back to the lodge to try and call the rental car company to no avail; then back to Cochrane where cell-phone coverage was restored and Marcello was able to contact a motivated employee to email us an international contract.

While waiting for Marcello to complete his rental-car "contract magic", we three fell into an adjoining watering hole for a bit of a comiseratory beverage. I came across a beer called "D'Olbek" which came in a fruity variety which reminded me of the lambic beers of Belgium.

The Second memory Point:

REMEMBER: D'Olbek Beer, fruity and tastes Belgian

By the time we had the corrected contract, it was pushing 5pm, and we opted for dinner in town, visiting a few places closed the night before. There were suddenly a large group of diners to chose fom,

but we returned to the school bus for another round of sandwiches; endearing us to the matron/cook. She and I had several translated flirtations, and as usual, she had the best and last word: “you don’t know the chicha you’re drinking with” ...tru dat.

Back to the free campground for an abbreviated respite (in by midnight, out by 8am). Back to the border, crossing this time into Argentina. Twenty kilometers in, and another flat. Same rear-right tire, but this time it was our spare. Yet another stop for a tire repair but we were on our way.

Dream #3 Mount Fitz Roy

This would be for Marcello. Jimmy and I had each done this hike previously, but while I usually balk at retracing boot-prints, this park was well worthy of a redux. It’s just stunningly beautiful. The rental suffered no further breakdowns as we drove to the nearby hamlet of El Chalten. When I had last left this area, there was still construction debris in the streets and the town was still trying to find itself. Well it’s all grown up now. While certain benchmarks remain, there’s at least twenty new places to tempt the budget. We set up camp and planned out our three day assault on the nearby mount.

The weather wasn’t all that cooperative, but it never truly rained on us. Drizzled several times, but no rain, which was great because in my attempt to cut weight I had inadvertently left my backpack rain-cover in the car. I had a bit of difficulty with the initial “up” into the park, but eventually found my rhythm. I ended up bringing up the rear of the hikers, and along with Marcello we ended up meeting many characters along the way. Two French girls who just started calling out “Santa, Santa....it’s US”. For a split second I thought I had met them on a previous continent, but they were just so happy to see the beard...aren’t we all.

The big pay-off on Fitz Roy is to be at the base of these towers, on a cloudless night. You hike up at about 4am to be in front of the spires with camera in hand. You capture the first rays of light on the towers....it’s impressive. I was fortunate enough to pull this off last time, but this time I DID get up at 4am, but I stuck my hand out of the tent and pulled back a wet hand...rain...and then rolled over and went back to sleep.

Dream #4 Dave-O’s Porto Moreno Glacier

Returning to El Chalten, we showered and reloaded the car, aiming at El Calafate for a quick trip out to the Porto Moreno Glacier the following day. Again, for Jimmy and I, this was a known place. So Dave-O and Marcello boarded a boat and took a tour, leaving Jimmy and I to tread the metal walkways across from the glacier's face. Again many clicks on the partly sunny day.

From El Calafate, we made our final push south to revisit Torres Del Paine, the large and wonderful park which dominates Patagonia trekking. There are new regulations in the park and even finding camping was eventually ruled impossible. After a night at a hotel, we did a day tour of the park under mostly cloudy skies before driving back to another familiar haunt; Puerto Natales.

We would spend two nights at a hostel that also happened to be an advertising client of Marcello's. Eating and walking the streets of a familiar town gave us all time to reflect on how this town has also changed in the intervening years. For me I noticed the sidewalks were all freshly poured and even. My last visit was five years ago and I recalled the "trekking" one had to do to get downtown, negotiating broken or missing sidewalk. There's literally a new mayor in town, who's secured some major funding to ensure Puerto Natales is a fitting departure point for Patagonian travelers.

We would leave Marcello in Natales, as we three gringo's headed back north to Coyhaique and our flights out. Three days spent with fewer gravel roads and more reminiscence than new adventures.

Repacking my backpacks while draining a few beers, I looked back on the two weeks just passed and realized how great it was to travel with four like-minded adventurers. Each the same; but different. I surely "blew my budget" for these two weeks, but eventually there will have to be a reckoning of the numbers but sometimes the added elements are definitely worth the price paid and this is one of those times.

As I write this it's been pouring all day in Puerto Varas and I would really love to go for another small hike, but it's my fingers that will get the workout today. Packing a car with trekkers is a lot like making a cake from memory. It can be hard to do if you don't have the right ingredients, but boy, if you get it right, the results are fantastic.

Thank you Jimmy, Dave-O and Marcello for adding ingredients into my Patagonian Travel "cake". The pictures could never capture all the good times we shared.

PS. But what about those things I had you remember?

REMEMBER: The Estancia Valle Chacabuco

REMEMBER: D'Olbek Beer, fruity and tastes Belgian

So here's the rest of the story:

Entering Coyhaique, we stayed at a new hostel in town open only since August. While we were checking in, I noticed an advertising card posted to the wall by the door for D'Olbek beer. Being a lifelong (or 2 week) fan of this brew, I was surprised to find it was actually brewed in Coyhaique. The card mentioned brewery tours and I quickly got a consensus on making this a "trek" for our last day in town.

Venturing a few kilometers down the hill we found the brewery and an affable tour host named Charlie, sporting a cropped white beard. The "plant" as it was, was not large, fitting in a large outbuilding on the property, along with a house and cervesaria.

Charlie spoke very little English but Jim acted as translator and Dave-O and I knew beer so we were set. Charlie explained that he was the owner and chief brewmaster for D'Olbek; Charlie D'Olbek. His father emigrated from Belgium and the Belgian variety is a tribute to him. The label on the bottles featured a white bearded man in different comical poses. I had Jim ask if the man on the bottle was Charlie; it was. The tour was interesting, if only because it was so small. Four or five women in a room applying labels to freshly filled bottles and a few maintenance men milling about.

Eventually we retire to the cervesaria on the premises for a bit of a tasting. It was here that Charlie related a fascinating tale. D'Olbek beer has only existed since 2004. Before then, Charlie worked as an animal handler at a large estancia in Chacabuco. In 2004 an American, Doug Thompkins.... I interrupted the tale to say, "Wait a minute, are you talking about Parque de Patagonia?" Si...Charlie had worked at the ranch that Doug Thompkins bought... So had that ranch not been sold there wouldn't be D'Olbek beer. Charlie pointed out several hats mounted on the wall; he wore these hats on the ranch. There were also photos of the ranch workers and even feathers and photos from their "pet" condor, also named Charlie.

The coincidences; finding D'Olbek beer after touring the park, then the card at the hostel telling us of the brewery where we find the former ranch manager turned brewmaster by the creation of the park.

It was an amazing trip indeed.

Retracing steps in Chile, Argentina and Bolivia has been interesting. My line about "never retracing steps" holds true; the weather was SO much better the first time, but I've gotten my shots.

Here in Bolivia, my "break" took me to ToroToro National Park, where you take guided hikes into the scrubland and mountains to view dinosaur footprints and some amazing geological upheavals. From Dinosaurs, it was a 16hr bus ride over to Tupiza to revisit the Alto-Plano and Uyuni salt flats, but in the reverse order from last time. I was matched up with two Argentino's and a Frenchman who spoke better Spanish than French. It was bumping along the unpaved roads of Bolivia that I became more fluent in Spanish and reached a good place when thinking about all that I've seen and done in the preceding nine months.

My hopes were to arrive at the Uyuni salt flats by the 12th, for the full moon. My dream was to be out in the salt around 2am to capture the lighting. Well there's been a lot of rain in Bolivia and our driver warned us that we'd have a better chance touring the salt flat in a boat than a car. I took the warning seriously and invested a sleepless night on the 10th climbing a hill to capture the full moon and even some stars under very odd lighting. The shots look like they were taken at sunset, until you notice the field of stars visible towards the top of every image.

True to form, the salt flats were more like Salt Lake. We still got out for the sunrise, and later I took an impromptu tour of sunset to complete my 'day of salt'. We even stayed at a salt hotel, where, you guessed it, everything except the toilet was made of salt.

I'm still not convinced that I can comfortably "go back"; retracing my steps has never left me as satisfied as exploring somewhere new; but I made my peace with this.

As we near the Ides of March, I'm within about ten weeks of rejoining most of you in America. I do think of being home more and more each day. There's a house and a cat called "The Dude" that I wouldn't mind seeing again.

I sent almost 40,000 images home with Jim, and he reports that they arrived safely. Once my “Bolivian Break” is over, it’s onto Peru, Ecuador and Colombia..

Some Odds and Ends:

No Pretzels in South America

In Argentina there’s a town called “28th of November”

Southern Argentina doesn’t really take credit cards.

Ushuaia, Argentina is on an island, trust me

The Chilean guanaco has a deer’s body and a camel head and neck grafted on. They can jump

Potato chips are outrageously expensive in Patagonia

In Puerto Natales, Chile there’s a dish called Chipanga de los hot dogs – raising the profile of the simple hot dog to new heights. All this scrap meats, hotdogs, chicken, pork, sirloin, pickles, onions and peppers buried under a gastronomic avalanche of french fries.

Astral lager, served in fine and not so fine cervesarias throughout Patagonia could actually be the literal “nectar of the gods”. But in an area known for their meats, Patagonia hot dogs look and taste like pink fungus.

Bolivians (and subsequently I) love popcorn and french fries

All Bolivian dogs and many Bolivians have short legs

There’s a saying here in Bolivia that translates roughly to “the slowest llama makes the best tasting lunch”. I’ve had the llama, and it is good.