

The Patagonian Adventure – two Tasmanians in South America Dec/Jan 07-08 Keith and Sib Corbett

What and where

‘Patagonia’ is the name given to the southern part of South America, actually shared between Chile and Argentina. It extends roughly from 40° to 56°S latitude, and includes the large island of Tierra del Fuego (the same size as Tasmania) at the bottom. The Andean mountains run down the western side, about 200km wide and up to 4000m high, with two small icecaps, hundreds of glaciers, and thousands of fiords and glacial valleys and lakes. The Andes and west coast are exceptionally wet – 3 to 4 metres of rainfall annually – and are mostly covered by wet forest. But there is an extreme rain shadow effect, and the eastern foothills and the 400-500km wide expanse of semi-flat pampas to the east, in Argentina, are exceptionally dry, with only 200mm of rain or less. This pampas area, which includes the eastern half of Tierra del Fuego, is covered in dry grass and low shrubs, has been developed as grazing land for several centuries, and is divided into numerous large grazing properties called ‘estancias’. It’s extremely boring country to travel through (everyone else on the bus went to sleep), and your eyes are constantly drawn to the snow-covered mountains to the west. Hence the Andes are a great tourist attraction for the local people – somewhere cool and moist and interesting to go.

The long glacial history has resulted in huge volumes of rock (hundreds of cubic km) being carved away from the mountains by ice, deposited as moraine boulders around the foothills, and then re-deposited further out by rivers as endless plains of grey pebbly gravel, which is what much of the pampas consists of.

The Argentina – Chile border follows the drainage divide (between the east-flowing Atlantic streams and west-flowing Pacific streams) down the eastern side of the Andes, and many of the highest peaks are on the border. So Chile has most of the rugged mountain country, and Argentina has a thin strip of it plus all of the dry pampas to the east. (Chile is an extraordinary shape, being over 4000km long but only 200-300 km wide). The boundary took a long time to settle, and there was some armed confrontation as recently as the 1990’s. A major consequence of the border position is that road access in Chilean Patagonia is extremely difficult, because of the rugged terrain (and we mean rugged) and numerous lakes and fiords, whereas it’s easy in Argentina on the flat open pampas. The border actually cuts across a number of the big E-W glacial lakes, which have been given different names on each side.

Why go there?

The mountains and glaciers and lakes and forests of Patagonia are world-renowned – attraction enough. Then there’s the Gondwana connection. South America was part of the great Gondwana supercontinent, along with Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Antarctica and India, not too long ago geologically speaking (a mere 150 million years), and shares with us a number of plant groups which evolved on Gondwana and were carried off on the various continents as they separated. One of the main ones is *Nothofagus* (the southern beeches) – (myrtle and ‘fagus’ in Tasmania) – a genus which is also present on the Australian mainland, NZ, New Guinea (and Antarctica before the ice came). Patagonia has about 8 species of *Nothofagus*, several of them forming their major forests (they don’t have any eucalypts), and several of them deciduous. We were keen to see these, and also things like the fire bush *Embothrium* (in the same Proteaceae family as our waratahs and grevilleas), and a number of others.

How and who with

We went with a small guided group of 8-10 run by Willis’s Walkabouts, an innovative and competent Darwin-based company I’d previously been to Africa with. We knew it was going to be fairly physical, so there was a little trepidation. We both got short haircuts (a no. 4 crew in my case) to avoid bad hair days. We flew out of Sydney on Dec 2, 2007, (12 hours late, which was not a good start for LanChile) via Auckland, and on to Santiago, the capital of Chile, where we arrived at 1 am. We only just got our muesli through Customs (they worry about raisins and their wine industry), then were put up free at a ridiculously luxurious motel for two hours sleep, before being taxied back to the airport for our flight south to **Punta Arenas**, just across the Magellan Strait from **Tierra del Fuego** (which we overflew). It was 8°, windy, and drizzling when we got off the plane, and the wind didn’t stop for the next three weeks. After some language muddles, we finally met up with some other group members, including Bruce and Jenny the Australian guides, and relaxed a little. Then the pattern of supermarket shopping for food supplies followed by a week or so in the bush began. From Punta Arenas, we were to make our way back north by buses, ferries and by foot to Santiago (2,200km) over seven weeks, stopping to do major walks at half a dozen places along the way.

In the mountains of Paine

First a bus trip north across the pampas to **Puerto Natales**, which is actually on the west coast but seems a long way inland because of the fiords. Then a minibus to our first trekking area, the **Towers of Paine NP**. Our first view of the Paine mountains was across one of the big 'foreland' lakes, and we were suitably impressed (pic1).

We started with a relatively gentle 3-day walk up a big wooded valley (the Pingo) on the west side of the Paine massif, which introduced us to many of the wildflowers and plants, and the very pleasant *Nothofagus pumilio* (lenga) forest. The lenga forests became a familiar friend as the trip developed. There were swathes of delicate white orchids on the forest floor in places (pic2).



1. Our first view of Torres del Paine National Park



2. Sib in the lenga forest in Pingo Valley. Note the white orchids

Many of the flowers were at their peak, and the well-named bright red firebush (*Embothrium*) was particularly impressive, showing its clear resemblance to our waratah (pic3). We also saw a couple of the wild native deer.



3. Firebush – *Embothrium coccineum*. Note similarity to waratah and protea



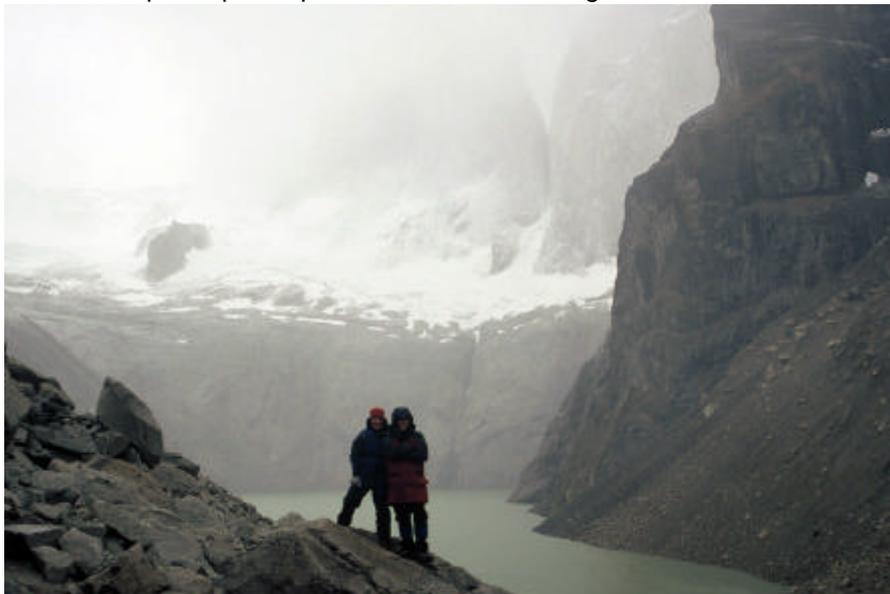
4. Keith above Lake Grey on the 'W' Track. Note Grey Glacier

granite intrusions contrasted with the grey-black sedimentary rocks above and below. There were two periods when wind gusts made it almost impossible to walk – you just had to prop, hang on to something if you could, and wait for the gust to pass. Adele was blown over and lost her pack cover and hat, and we saw day-trippers crawling on hands and knees.

Then our first ferry trip up windy Lake Grey, dodging small icebergs calved off the huge glacier at the head of the lake, and we were off on the famous 'W' track to the Towers of Paine (pic4). It was wet and cold and windy, and we had big packs, so for a while it was a matter of grit the teeth and keep going. But the sun came out, and some of the going in the foothill country was delightful. The middle arm of the 'W' took us up into a high cold valley (visible in pic1), where there were avalanches falling off the hanging glaciers, then back along the foot of the range around the "Horns of Paine". The great condors were soaring and wheeling about the heights, where the enormous sheer cliffs of the white

On the morning of day 5, at the end of the 'W', in a cold wet mist, we crested a great rocky moraine ridge and could see the fabled Towers of Paine with rain and snow swirling about them. Adele took a picture of us (pic5) in this powerful elemental place, and we were on a high - the effort had been worth it. Then it started snowing seriously, and we headed back down to camp – to pack up and head out. Our toughest walk had been accomplished fairly successfully.

Fresh snow blanketed the huge ridges as we walked out, with waterfalls tumbling out of the clouds down the great slopes. Wild country indeed – but almost unbelievably we shared the track with dozens of poorly dressed day-trippers coming up from the big motels at the foot of the range, where they bus them in by the hundreds from the nearby towns for day trips. We tried to ignore them, shivering in their jeans and flimsy jackets.



5. At the Towers of Paine – just seen in the mist

Moreno Glacier and Mt Fitzroy

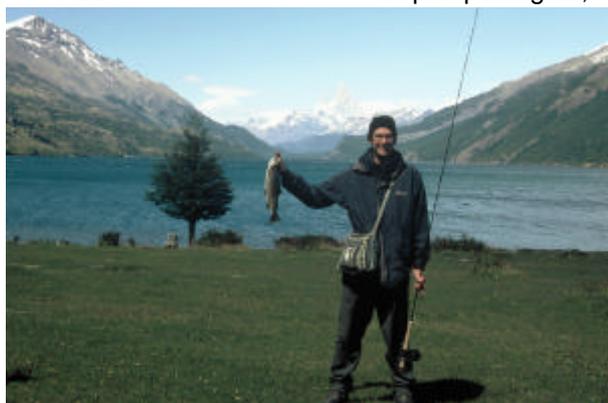
After a long river and ferry trip back to Puerto Natales, with a lunch stopover at an idyllic estancia homestead, we farewelled the rather nice port town and bused across the border to **El**



Calafate in Argentina. From here we took a day trip to the spectacular **Perito Moreno Glacier**, a jagged river of ice coming off the ice sheet and extending out across a big lake, which it divides in half. It has a 60m-high ice face which dwarfs the tour boat and spectators (pic6), and drops occasional blocks of ice with a big splash. It has to be one of the greatest natural viewpoints in the world, and is very popular.

6. Perito Moreno Glacier and friends – a fantastic lookout point

Then it was on north over the pampas again, around the ends of two of the big glacial lakes (~100 km long)



which project out eastwards from the mountains, to the touristy village of **Chalten**, at the foot of the soaring **Mt Fitzroy**. This sheer granite peak projects like a spear point to 4,000m, and is surrounded by a group of smaller spires, including the famous **Cerro Torre**. We day-walked in the foothills for two days, recovering from stomach upsets. Then we bused a bit further north, to the end of the road, and ferried up a lake to a border post – where we admired a young fly fisherman with a nice rainbow trout he'd just caught for breakfast, in front of the lake and Mt Fitzroy (pic 7).

7. Young fisherman with rainbow trout, in front of Mt Fitzroy and 'Desert Lake'

From here we walked across the border, back into Chile, to an old farmhouse with some bedrooms to let, and an old Fergie tractor, beside the next big lake. Which is called Lake O'Higgins in Chile (after a famous general of Irish extraction who helped liberate Chile from Spain in 1818) and Lake San Martin in Argentina. Some wildflowers here included a large yellow orchid (pic8), one of a number of big chunky orchids which delighted us.



8. Yellow orchid – *Gavilea lutea*

The Carretera Austral, Mt San Lorenzo and Pumalin Park

Then another ferry up a long arm of L. O'Higgins, and we joined our guide Nicholas La Penna (a handsome lively enigmatic American with a mysterious past, who would not be photographed) in his minibus for the traverse of the Great Southern Highway - the **Carretera Austral**. This recently completed (sort of) half-sealed road runs for about 1,000km N-S, linking a series of towns and small settlements, through rugged mountains, valleys and passes. It reminded us of the Gordon Road in SW Tas, only much more rugged and a lot longer.

From the town of **Cochrane** we detoured into **Mt San Lorenzo**, on the border, for a 3-day Xmas hike. This involved an initial 17km walk along a hot dusty gravel road (the bus couldn't get across the river at the start), which the Corbetts hated – we hadn't gone to Patagonia to walk on b..... roads...grumble.....grumble. The rough road led to a delightful farmhouse in a high glacial valley, hemmed in by huge moraine ridges. Our hosts Luis and Lucy showed us their sheep flock (pic9), and we camped in their backyard. Christmas Day was a



9. Luis and Lucy with the sheep, on the farm under Mt San Lorenzo. The bag contains salt, which she's used to attract the sheep

delightful walk up a parallel valley to the lake at the foot of the 3700m San Lorenzo, through a mixture of open paddocks and shady lenga forests, and through an impressively ice-scoured gorge, then back to the farm. Our late (as usual) vegetarian (as usual – there was one, only one, vegetarian in the group, but guess what?) Xmas dinner consisted of polenta (which I now know is a corn-based mush) with egg plant and spinach, with Xmas cake to follow. Hmmmm...never had one quite like that before. Back along the same road the next day, to be picked up by the minibus, and a late (11pm) dinner – thankfully of steak and mashed potato - at a motel some 150 km further north. Diary says a long day.

Driving, driving, through **Coihaique** for a night, then west into the higher mountains and increasingly wet forests towards the coast. We crossed a pass at 500m altitude (I double checked it with the guide), but there were glaciers melting and avalanching not far above the road (this is the same altitude as Fern Tree!). Then down through dense wet rainforest with ferns and creepers and a giant rhubarb-like *Gunnera (tinctoria)* 2m high with leaves a metre across. And our first encounter with the dreaded 'bamboo' (actually a cane) which grows in dense thickets to 5m high and collapses over roads and tracks. We were to see it in many places from here on, and it didn't get any more likeable. We camped at Quelat NP in wet forest, with views up a lake to a hanging glacier and waterfalls – and it rained steadily most of the night.

On again through more wet forest in big glacial valleys (they're **all** glacial valleys) with some big lakes, and finally to the town of **Chaiten** on the west coast. This was Nicholas's home town, he'd been telling us about it for four days. Well...it's ok. Some quick shopping, then on a bit further into **Pumalin Park** – made famous by American millionaire Doug Tompkins. He bought up land here in 1990 (having sold his 'Esprit' and 'North Face' outdoor gear companies) and quietly expanded to form a large private park. Against considerable opposition initially, including from the gov't – who is this rich yankee so and so, buying up all this land, dividing Chile in two? There is much less opposition now, as the conservation values, and the employment opportunities, become more obvious. The Patagonian equivalent of our Dick Smith, perhaps. Only richer.

It was raining at our campsite, but each site had its own little shelter shed, and we could see why. Next morning it was still raining, but we did a forest loop walk to see our first **Alerces** (*Fitzroya cupressoides*) which

is what we'd come to see. They're magnificent conifers, much like our King Billy pines, with soft reddish bark festooned with a bright red flowering creeper in some cases. A second loop we did with Nicholas, into a grove of the biggest of the Alerces, including one which is 4m in diameter (pic10) and thought to be about 3,500 years old. We were quite moved and very impressed by these ancients – which once grew in Tasmania (from the fossil record), but died out – perhaps it got too dry.



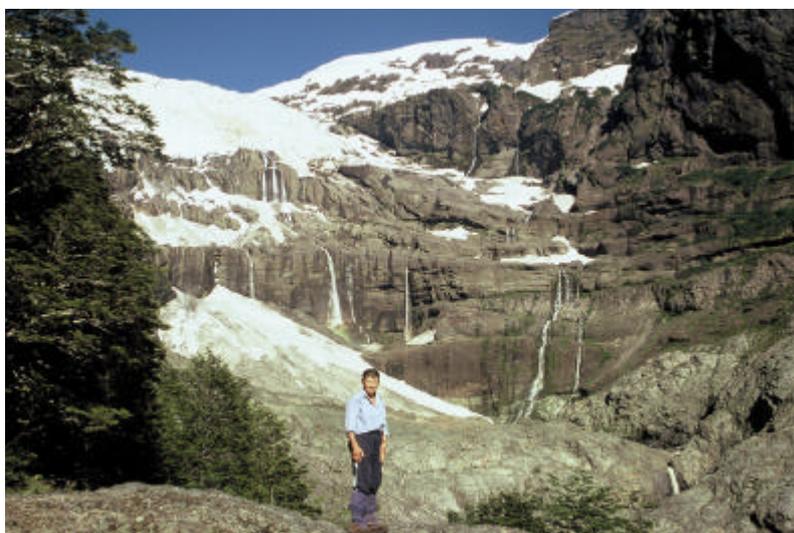
Then back to Chaiten via a west coast beach – grey sand like the grey gravel we'd seen everywhere in Patagonia – there's not a good white quartz deposit anywhere. Our ferry to Puerto Montt had been delayed for 12 hours by weather (it was coming up from Puerto Natales), so we spent a night in another 'motel' and made an early start next day.

10. Standing in front of a 4m-wide Alerce (*Fitzroya*), possibly 3500 years old, in a very wet forest in Pumalin Park

Puerto Montt, Mt Tronador and Bariloche

The 12 hour ferry trip was fairly boring – the coasts to E and W are too distant for views. It was New Years Eve when we arrived in the scruffy port city of **Puerto Montt** (150,000, like Launceston), too late to do any of the necessary shopping for our next walk. And we discovered that everything is closed on New Years Day, so more frustration. We did our shopping, finally, on 2nd Jan, and Sib found some nice alpaca sweaters for the kids. Two new people joined the group here, Ken (retired teacher) and Patricia (architect).

Finally we were moving east, past Lake Llanquihue (still don't know how to pronounce that) and onto a big ferry up a big lake past a big volcano (Osorno) to a big touristy chalet. With some difficulty Bruce negotiated a bus to take us the next 27km road trip across the border - better than walking say we. All the buses are run by the same company that runs the ferry and the chalet, but we were an unbooked gaggle of bushwalkers and didn't fit their schedule – except at a price of \$75A each – ouch!. The trip took us north of **Mt Tronador**, a huge volcano. The name means Mt Thunder, for the noise of the avalanches coming off the many melting glaciers, and we were to hear this thunder regularly over the next few days. The bus landed us across the border at an Argentina border post, but they wouldn't let us in, the Customs agent wasn't there or something, confusion reigned, but they were adamant, so we boarded the bus again and were dropped off 5km back down the road, just over the border. At a disused and locked up old refugio, where we camped in the forest – and had another late dinner. Not happy Bruce. The bus picked us up again at midday next day (as promised, thankfully) and delivered us back to the border post, where the same guy as yesterday happily processed us through!



11. Sib at glacial headwall under Mt Tronador, on way to 'Pass of the Clouds'

But there was another snag – the **Pass of the Clouds**, where we were heading, was still officially closed after the winter snowfalls, and we'd have to hire a guide if we wanted to walk through. Which we did – so Vincent joined us, for a hefty \$30 per day each (ouch again) - and we eventually hoisted packs and set off up the big forested valley. Over lots of fallen trees, which were a pain, but after 5 hours we arrived at a spectacular campsite in forest under a huge glacial headwall with glaciers and numerous waterfalls (pic11). Vincent warned us that tomorrow would be a big day, and he was so right. A climb of 700m to the

pass to start with, zigzagging up through bamboo and fallen trees, then over the pass – some snow patches but no hassles – then a long descent through more bamboo and lots of big fallen trees (not yet cleared, hence the closure), then a long section along the valley, with a long gravel road section at the end. We staggered into **Pampa Linda** camp (lots of other tourists) at 8pm, after 11 hours. And yes- another late vegetarian dinner as reward.

Sib and I had a restful next day, while most of the others headed off for a very long climb/day walk – which seemed a bit foolish to us, but then we're older than them. Next day was memorably pleasant, as we headed to a high lake in the foothills on our own – a big climb past a lookout point (pic12) but then open lenga forest and high meadows to a lovely tranquil lake with a wide sandy beach. We enjoyed our own company for a change. The river we had to wade through in the morning was 15cm higher and going faster in the late afternoon due to the melting ice in the glaciers – and still very cold.

On our last day here, we walked 6km up the road to the foot of Mt Tronador, to see the extraordinary '**Black Glacier**' – a dark remnant of old ice extending a km or so along the side of a milky lake thickly strewn with dirty icebergs. The explanatory sign says it formed by reconstitution of avalanche ice falling from the hanging glaciers



12. Keith at lookout point above glacial valleys coming from Mt Tronador

above, and there's a cone of such avalanche ice sitting on the upper end of the black glacier. But that didn't gel with me – the glacier is striped throughout with dark bands like volcanic dust, suggesting it's been there a long time, through many volcanic eruptions, whereas the avalanche ice is white and pristine. The black glacier surface looked like the accumulated remains of all that insoluble dust left as the upper levels of the ice melted away. So I figured out, later, that the Black Glacier must be the remnant of the main old valley glacier which has been there a long time, but has shrunk down until it's just a narrow strip along the shady side of the valley. But it was a strange bleak place. We walked on up a parallel valley to a great rocky headwall, with lots of waterfalls coming down from the melting ice high up. The occasional rumble of an unseen avalanche was followed some seconds later by a spray of small chunks of ice out of the main waterfall.

We packed up camp in the afternoon, then boarded a small bus with a group of young Germans, and headed off east through forests and then cleared land to **Bariloche** – a small touristy city beside a big lake. There was a day to shop and relax here – we walked around the waterfront in rain and wind, watched some windsurfers and kitesurfers hurtle out to 'sea' in a gale, strolled through the imposing 1947 cathedral, which is surprisingly daubed with graffiti outside. There was steak and salmon and such carnivorous delights to be had for dinner. Next day a big bus took us NW back across the border into Chile, over a snow-covered pass where we all shivered because the heating wasn't working.

Osorno, Talca and the Condor Circuit

Down through wet forests and out into farming country of the **Central Valley**, to the city of **Osorno** – where we spent a few hours shopping before boarding a night bus which took us comfortably, and mostly asleep, up the main highway for 600km to **Talca**. We disembarked at 5.30, in the dark, and three taxis appeared from somewhere to take us to our hostel. Where we roused a confused young man who finally got us booked in. An hour's sleep, some breakfast, then we shopped and packed for the coming 10-day trek on the **Condor Circuit** – a volcanic part of the Andes at 34°S – much warmer and drier than any of the previous walking areas – and not really in Patagonia any more. The extra trekkers joined us – Bruce's nephew and 3 young friends, and two Chilean ladies who'd done the circuit before. It was to be a big group – 16 walkers, plus two horse people. Our local guide Leonardo also joined us, brown and fit looking, with only broken English.

Two yellow minibuses took us east towards the mountains for nearly 3 hours, on rough dusty gravel roads in the latter part, to a ranger base in forest. Here we met the horses and chief wrangler Hilario and lady friend. They took our big packs, stuffed them in pink bags, and loaded them on the horses – 3 packs each. They were to follow us all around the circuit. We set off walking, in open forest, on an incredibly dusty track. The fine volcanic dust rose and hung suspended with every step, and there was no avoiding it. It was not very pleasant

walking – luckily no-one had asthma. After 2 hours or so, we arrived at a lookout point above a big river valley, with two volcanoes in the distance and a lot of fairly bare volcanic terrain in between. After a long descent with many switchbacks we emerged onto the gravelly river flats at 7pm. The horses caught up with us here, and tents were pitched around about. We found a pleasant spot in a forest patch near a basalt cliff, had a swim and wash in the Rio Claro, and finished dinner by 10.30. This was the first of 10 clear sunny days – not the Patagonian weather we'd been used to.

Walking by 8.30, firstly down the river bed, then up a side valley beside an enormous flow of black blocky lava. We rested at a small Parks refugio with a fruitful plum tree and a very talkative young trainee ranger, then followed a long hot slog up the side of the lava flow, with no shade, until we crossed a saddle to find a strange blue lagoon in a small flat valley – with cows grazing. Everyone had a dip, it was so hot. Further along the valley we got our first taste of the dreaded **pumice** – fine loose ashy white material from a 1923 eruption, like loose sand or soft snow to walk in, which still blankets most of the countryside. We got to know this stuff very well. We crossed the corner of the blocky lava flow, walking on loose pumice which covers the flow except for the larger blocks which project out of it – a very unusual terrain. Then, with considerable relief, we entered a green valley with cows, sheep and horses grazing, amidst pumice-covered foothills leading up to the big volcano (**Descabazardo**, meaning the Decapitated One) which reared above us. The campsite is beside several fast-flowing creeks issuing out of hot springs, and we pitched tents on the grassy areas around the creeks (although Leonardo tried to persuade us to stay off the grass – it's private land here, and the farmer, who was in residence in a rock shelter over the main creek, likes his animals to be able to get all the grass). But the alternative was hard gravel, and we were all pretty grumpy after a hard day. A soak in the rock-lined 'bath' at the hot pool proved very relaxing and improved our mood.

Bruce was determined to climb the volcano tomorrow, 2000 m, with Leonardo and Ken, but the rest of us didn't want to, and were planning something easier – except we wouldn't have a guide. The Corbetts volunteered to lead a walk across to Lake Caracol 7-8km away.



13. Approaching Lake Caracol, in a landscape of white pumice and black lava

The volcano group headed off at 6.45 am – Bruce, Leonardo, the three boys, and the two Chilean ladies. The Corbetts plus 3 women headed off for the lake. White pumice sand and jagged black rocks made a somewhat hellish landscape, but the going wasn't too bad. Horse traffic through the soft pumice had made the track fairly



14. Wildflowers and greenery are a welcome sight on the Condor Circuit

reconnaissance. The return journey was quite pleasant, and we arrived at camp not long before Bruce and the boys returned from a successful (but very tiring) summit trip. Another late dinner.

clear. We passed another green oasis around some springs, with cattle grazing the slopes, then climbed and plodded across an undulating lava plateau until we could see the lake (pic 13). It was a strange bare white world, with not a blade of green to be seen. A cliff gave us some shade at the lake, which was rimmed by the contour lines of higher levels. It had been formed when a thick lava flow spilled out of a nearby crater and flowed across the river valley, effectively damming it off and ponding the lake. There was no obvious outflow – it must seep into the lava. But it was quite deep and very swimmable. A horseman appeared in the distance by the lake, and rode past – it was "Farmer Brown" on

It was now 15 January. We broke camp, left Hilario to load the horses, and headed off east across the slopes, into a long valley and then up the zigzags on a long pumice-covered slope. It was monotonous slogging walking, stepping in the footsteps of the person in front, trying not to slide too much. Leonardo set a slow but steady pace. It was hot, and Patricia wilted at the back, and got further behind. When she finally caught up she was heat-stressed and unlikely to make the full distance.

A solution was found - she was allowed to ride one of the horses when they caught us up. Hilario gave up his mount, and walked at the head of the line of horses for the rest of the day – a considerable sacrifice, we felt. The track flattened and we crossed a pass with patches of dusty old ice only just distinguishable from the white pumice (except that it was rock hard and cold), and a creek line choked with pumice so that the water has disappeared. Then a slow descent down pumice-covered slopes to a pleasant surprise. At the foot of the slope was a small rushing clear cold creek coming down a small valley, and the gravelly valley bottom was covered with green grass and masses of bright red and yellow flowers. It was wonderfully cool on the eyes, and the bright colours (mainly *Mimulus* and *Calceolaria*) so very cheerful (pic14). With spirits lifted, we pressed on down more pumice slopes with some rocky sections, until at 7.30 we reached camp on a lovely flat terrace covered in a green sward with lots of flowers, beside a rushing small river. Our tent site had its own little creek coming out of the pumice, and a flower bed. Dinner at 10.15. I asked about staying on here for a day to do some exploring – we could see flower-covered terraces and small tempting waterfalls going up the sides of the gorge – but was overruled.

A short horse ride got us across the river next morning, and we continued down the valley to a rather grotty thermal springs area beside the river, with smelly sulfur fumes, then a long long climb up more pumice slopes. There was a welcome stop at a clear cold creek, and a view stop to look down into the main river valley, also partly filled by enormous recent lava flows. Finally we reached a high pass, and watched as Hilario and the horses made their way up through the pumice (pic 15). We were very glad to be here, and noted thankfully that the pumice was thinning out and becoming patchy – we wouldn't miss it. (I later suggested to Leonardo that he re-name the walk the 'Pumice Circuit', and he seemed quite taken with the idea).



15. Hilario brings up the horse team through the pumice

A flattish rocky section followed, then a descent to a wide terrace with a blue lake ('Laguna las Animas') and another pleasant green sward for camping. We had our own little creek and flower bed again. A walk around the lake, which is moraine-dammed but has a sandy shore all round, produced some great photos of sunset reflections and a family of swimming ducks. The evening was cool to cold, as usual, as we were at 2300m. Dinner was a bit earlier – 10pm.

A leisurely start by 10 next morning was soon followed by a steep rocky descent into a big valley with patches of stunted beech forest, and eventually to Leonardo's proposed camp area at the mouth of a side valley. But it was hot and there was no shade here, so Bruce insisted (bless his heart) that we go on across the valley to a patch of tall forest. Leonardo relented (it's the same problem- his choice was in the Park, but the better area is on private land). After crossing the wide gravelly valley in the heat, we entered a delightful tall forest of deciduous beech (*N. obliqua*), and set up camp in the very welcome shade, ready for a rest day. Dinner was preceded by an entrée of roasted goat meat prepared by Hilario (he'd been carrying it around under his saddle for several days), which we enjoyed - a robust gamy flavour, but very welcome. Then polenta and mush at 9.30. Oh well. A wonderfully restful rest day followed. The three boys went off on horses with Leonardo in the afternoon, to a shop (and pub?) about 10km away, arriving back at 10pm by moonlight with tales of horrific gorges and scrabbling horses and near-death experiences, all told with gales of laughter. Adrian and Christine also left the group this day, walking out to the ranger base and catching a bus back to Talca, in order to get to Santiago for an extra couple of days – or something.

Next day began with another climb up to a ridge top, where there were sweeping views of much of the circuit, including the two volcanoes. We followed the ridge for a considerable distance, through bouldery moraines mainly, then finally descended via a grassy terrace to a larger terrace with grassy patches surrounded by low lenga bush. It was a pleasant camp, in an amphitheatre of lava cliffs, but without shade. It was already

occupied by a shepherd and his family – about 6 people – with their dogs and horses, most of them living in a rocky lean-to behind two large boulders. We were surprised to see them all race off on their horses at 8 pm, and soon after heard yells and whistles as they rounded up a large herd of goats and sheep and brought them back across the rocky ground towards camp. The sheep (suffolks we think) separated themselves off, but the goats kept coming, through the camp, over the boulders, and into a fenced enclosure in the nearby bushes. A precaution against rustlers and pumas we were told!

One more long day's walk. Down the side valley, past some pleasant grassy areas fringed by tallish forest, and into a wide, partly forested valley. We crossed our Day 1 in-bound track, and had lunch beside a creek in which several other people were swimming. Then another steep climb, up out of the forest, past a distinctive black outcrop which we named Grommet Rock (after Wallace's mate – the significance was lost on Leonardo), and onto an undulating high plateau. Our objective was a flat rocky terrace on the east edge of the plateau, where a columnar-jointed volcanic flow had been smoothed off by ice to form a strange tiled-looking area. Some notoriety had been achieved because von Daniken or some other pseudo-science writer had speculated that it was a landing strip constructed for alien space ships! Anyway, the views were good. We made our way to the other end of the plateau, along and over a big moraine, then dropped down steeply to a hidden lake ('Laguna del Alta' = High Tarn) in rugged surrounds reminiscent of the West Coast Range. Quite a few other campers were already present, but we were able to set up on our own grassy area beside some bushes near the lake shore. Swimming in the cool water followed, as the horses arrived to join us. A very pleasant friendly place.

Next day, our last in the bush, Sib and I did some exploring while the others were packing up, and visited a couple of delightful small tarns just down the valley behind a rocky ridge. Nobody else seems to go off-track in this country (except to go to the toilet), so we had the place to ourselves. Then it was back up the hill with the group, and a final view over the circuit country and the now-distant volcanoes (pic16), lots of group photos, some genuine emotions – it had been quite an experience, this Condor Circuit. Back at the ranger base, Hilario was farewelled (after many pictures of the handsome guy with the spurs, and some pictures of the horses) and paid for his services (100,000 pesos each = \$250A). The minibus shredded a tyre on the return trip to **Talca**, where the hostel put on a wonderful meat-rich nosh-up after we'd washed the dust off.



16. The group gathers for a final view of the volcanoes on the Condor Circuit

January 22, our last day in South America. A flurry of packing to begin with, then a 3-hour bus trip through rich farmland (maize, grapes, apples, potatoes, lots of poplar hedges) with many towns, into **Santiago**. There was time for a few hours sight-seeing, then back to the hostel, where Adrian and Christine rejoined the group. After a beer or two, we bid farewell to everyone and departed for our flight home at 8.30. But LanChile did it again, and we sat around in the airport for 5 hours, trying to sleep, until they solved a nosewheel problem (nobody had a pump) and finally took us off at 3.30am.

In retrospect, a wonderful trip and great adventure. Quite strenuous – I was surprised to find that I'd lost 6.5kg when I got home, but quite chuffed at the leaner fitter frame. Sib lost about 4kg. We will miss the lenga forests, the firebush, the orchids, the amazing mountains, the icy water, the rumbling avalanches, the 'fresh' wind in our faces. But perhaps not the pumice or the polenta so much.