



Right | A rocky moraine gives runners a stunning vantage point of Los Perros glacier.

Below | Dan Patitucci in a tug-o'-war with unyielding winds on Garner pass.



Above | Huts along the Paine Grand Circuit treat hungry runners to hot meals.

Right | The Paine River valley, once singed black by wildfire, now abounds with scarlet firebush.



Patagonian

RUGGED RUNNING THROUGH CHILE'S TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK

PASSAGE

Top Right | Janine Patitucci gets up close and personal with a Magellan penguin.

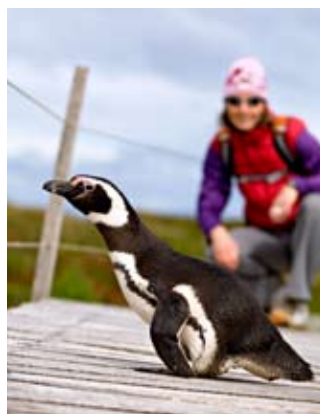
Below Left | Chilean cowboys horse-pack supplies to remote huts.

Right | Nearing the circuit's end, the author and Janine Patitucci soak up the sunshine.

Next Page Top | Dense beech-tree forests offer a welcome reprieve from frequent wind blasts.

Next Page Bottom | Lago Dickson's ice-cold water makes a refreshing footbath.

WE BEGIN A STEEP, KNEE-GRINDING DESCENT, MARVELING AT GREY GLACIER'S BRIGHT BLUE PARALLEL CREVASSES SHIMMERING IN THE MIDDAY SUN.



Clad in running tights, a light thermal top and windproof hat and gloves, I kick steps into sun-warmed snow toward Garner Pass, the most remote and treacherous section of a 100-kilometer (62-mile) circuit through Chile's Torres del Paine.

Sheer 6800-foot granite spires flanking the pass channel chilling winds from neighboring Antarctica. Despite the icy blasts, I work up a sweat, and surprisingly, my feet aren't cold even though slushy snow soaks through my running shoes.

As the ever-present Patagonian winds intensify at the pass, I urgently yank a lightweight shell jacket from my small backpack and we begin a steep, knee-grinding descent into the valley below, marveling at Grey Glacier's bright blue parallel crevasses shimmering in the midday sun. Eventually our route flat-

tens out and runs along the pristine 17-kilometer ice expanse to its jagged terminus in the milky waters of Lago Grey. Our day's destination is Refugio Grey, a quaint lodge on a small knob of land overlooking the lake dotted with floating glacial ice chunks.

A HARD DAY'S WORK

A sparse five percent of the park's 130,000 annual visitors complete the full Paine Circuit in part because of Garner Pass's difficult footing and punishing weather. Indeed, our troupe of 28 trail runners slithered and swung from tree to tree during the steep descent our guide dubbed "The Monkey Trail."

"You have to grab trees to keep from slipping in the mud and landing on your butt," said our guide Devy Reinstein.

Upon reaching the *refugio*, or hut, and

pulling off my mud-caked shoes, I flopped onto the nearest cushioned bench, satisfied with the day's 19-mile run and glad we still had two more spectacular days of trail running ahead.

California-based Andes Adventures had organized this unique five-day running tour, and our group included American, Canadian and British trail runners ranging in age from 17 to 60. I normally prefer the freedom of independent travel, but arranging a running holiday in one of South America's busiest parks, including all meals and accommodations, would have been nearly impossible. As it was, Andes Adventures had reserved the *refugio* beds two years in advance.

Patagonia is a massive and diverse wilderness region spanning the Chilean-Argentinean border, which runs along the spine of the Andes Mountains. Over

the past decade, Torres del Paine has seen a 600-percent increase in visitation, attributed in part to its surging popularity among day hikers and backpackers. Rich in scenic beauty and pristine wilderness, the park was named a World Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1978.

During the busy months of December through February, trails often become clogged with foot traffic, *refugios* are filled to capacity and camping sites overflow. Chile's Ministry of Agriculture and National Forests has struggled to keep up with the growing demand for tourist infrastructure and adequate trail maintenance.

ANDES APPROACH

Our adventure began in Chile's southernmost city, Punta Arenas (which means "sandy point"), a port town situated on the east side of the Brunswick Peninsula, part of the long, thin country's curled tip. Just across the Magellan Strait is Tierra del Fuego, a collection of rugged islands that taper off to form Cape Horn.

Punta Arenas (population 120,000) is a contradictory mix of structures ranging from rusty corrugated-iron buildings to grandiose mansions built in the late 19th century. Back then, as the industrial age boomed and a shortcut through the Panama canal to bypass the Cape's treacherous seas had not yet been conceived, the city was one of the world's busiest shipping ports.

Devy Reinstein, our host and the founder of Andes Adventures, is a Peruvian-born American and avid trail runner. The hyperactive, super-fit 51-year-old is a former competitive marathoner (his best time is 2:28) and ultrarunner who now diverts his infectious energy into organizing unique trail-running and trekking adventures throughout Peru, Chile, Argentina and Bolivia.

What began 13 years ago as a spontaneous running holiday in Peru with a handful of California running friends has blossomed into 30 annual hiking and running tours to South America's most spectacular and historic mountain destinations. "The appeal of my trips is that anyone can do them," says Reinstein. "You don't have to be young or an ultrarunner. People of all ages and running backgrounds run with us."

From Punta Arenas, we took a six-hour, bumpy bus ride north to Torres del Paine National Park, stopping en route at a *pingueros*, or penguin rookery, to see wild Magellan penguins. Small, flightless birds waddled back and forth over the windswept ground between the ocean's edge and shallow burrows, where fuzzy penguin chicks hid from predators and the elements.

Continuing toward the Andes Mountains' jagged profile, we passed through bland rolling plains subdivided into sheep and cattle ranches or *estancias*—remnants of the once booming wool trade that made many Spanish settlers wealthy.

Reaching the Patagonian steppes that border the national park, the long drive became a wildlife safari as we spotted long-necked llama-like *guanacos* grazing on the grassy hillside and *nandus*, a member of the ostrich family, running awkwardly on spindly legs. Fleeting glimpses of Chilean flamingos' bright pink plumage and a wild fox's red coat splashed vibrant color onto the otherwise drab landscape.

THE THREE TOWERS

After passing through the park's entrance station at Laguna Amarga, we spent the night at Refugio Las Torres, a newly renovated hostel within view of the dramatic peaks for which the park is named. Refugio Las Torres is the best-equipped lodge on the circuit, complete with electricity and

hot showers. The remote *refugios* we'd stay at in the days to come would be considerably more rustic.

We awoke early the next morning for the first leg of our trail-running adventure, a 10.5-mile out-and-back jaunt up Valle Ascencio to three iconic *torres*, or towers. Devy led the way up a sustained ascent through forests of southern beech trees, beaten by unrelenting winds to grow at an odd angle. We then scrambled up a moraine of large boulders to a glacier-fed lake at the foot of Torre Central, Torre Norte and the highest of them all, 9350-foot-high Torre Sur.

That evening, after a hearty feast of grilled fish and beef, Devy painstakingly reviewed the fastpacking strategy for our four-day circumnavigation of the Paine Massif. We would run almost 20 miles a day, carrying only a change of clothes, several pairs of socks and a few other essentials. Sleeping bags, pillows and meals would all be provided at each *refugio*.

At the relaxed hour of 9 a.m., the group embarked for Refugio Dickson at an easy pace, chatting excitedly and savoring the



Geography. Torres del Paine National Park is 1127 square miles, situated on the southeastern end of Hielo Sur, Patagonia's massive southern continental icecap. Its highest point is Cerro Paine Grande, at over 9800 feet.

Getting There. Fly to Santiago from Los Angeles or Miami. Take a LAN Airlines regional flight to Punta Arenas, then drive 240 miles to the park (located 70 miles north of Puerto Natales).

Season. December through March is best for trail running, though it's best to avoid the park during January, when Chileans are on holiday. Summer temperatures range from 45 to 60 degrees.

Guides. Andes Adventures is the only outfitter offering guided running tours of Torres del Paine and many other South American national parks. Included in the packages are ground transportation, hotels, huts, meals, park fees and English-speaking guides. The next Patagonia Running Adventure is scheduled for January 3-17, 2008, and includes the Torres del Paine tour (800-289-9470, info@andesadventures.com, www.andesadventures.com). Andes Adventures welcomes healthy adult runners of all ages, and recommends participants be able to comfortably run 10 to 15 miles in rolling terrain.

Visas. Visitors must have a passport and pay a \$100 reciprocity fee (\$132 for Canadians) to Chilean immigration.

warm sunshine and pastoral setting. Steve Kipisz, 44, of Plano, Texas, ran alongside Jon Kimura, a 26-year old software engineer from Cupertino, California, and Stevie Matthews, a 55-year old British woman who has run marathons on all seven continents.

The motley trio had forged a tight friendship during a previous Andes Adventures trip to Peru. "I met Jon and Stevie at the Inca Trail marathon in June 2005," said Steve. "We had so much fun that the three of us signed up for this trip together."

As everyone settled into their own pace and the group spread out along the trail, the landscape's remoteness sank in. We soaked up vibrant views, punctuated by scarlet-red flowering bushes covering hillsides that had been charred black by an accidental wildfire years before. While traversing one of many stream crossings, I mis-stepped and landed on my side in icy-cold water. Embarrassed, I quickly glanced around, relieved no one had witnessed my clumsiness.

Throughout the day we encountered only a handful of backpackers (in stark contrast to the previous day's hiker-choked trail in Valle Ascencio) and a few *gauchos*, or Chilean cowboys, who still use Valle Encantado's lush pastures to graze cattle herds. The *gauchos* also horse-pack supplies into the park's *refugios* that are inaccessible by boat or road.

Eventually we reached Refugio Dickson, a charming two-story hut sporting a bright red exterior and blue alumi-

num roof, situated on an idyllic grassy peninsula jutting out into Lago Dickson. Runners trickled in throughout the afternoon, welcomed by a spread of rice, beef, hot soup and boiled vegetables. The feast was prepared by a jovial kitchen staff—three large *hombres* with thick dark hair and beards and wide smiles—who sang along to Chilean pop tunes on the radio while they worked.

A group of trail-running friends from the United States who call themselves "The Over-50 Club" usually congregated at Oregon's Hood-to-Coast Relay or the Grand Canyon for a rim-to-rim-to-rim trail run, and added this exotic holiday to their calendars as a special treat. Liz Kellogg, her sister Jane Kellogg and Dot Helling are serious ultrarunners, with races such as the Vermont 100 and Western States 100 on their resumes. "We like to run ultras, but this kind of trip isn't competitive at all," said Liz. "We're here to enjoy the social aspect, and sightsee."

Along with Betty Wagner, Bob Mow and Kamm Prongay, from Portland, Oregon, the fun-loving gang talked and laughed their way around Torres del Paine. "This isn't the kind of experience you want to rush," explained Dot. "There's too much beauty here, you gotta slow down and take it in."

After dinner, Devy reviewed the next day's 19-mile stage, which was the most difficult and longest, beginning at Dickson and going over Garner Pass to



Refugio Grey. He would employ experienced guides to ensure the group's safe passage through the circuit's more challenging portions.

Said one guide, Nelson Oyarzo, from nearby Puerto Natales, who has hiked the trail 10 times, "It usually takes nine days to hike this circuit with clients, but with you runners, we see it all in just five days, and best of all, we don't carry large packs!"

"Tomorrow will be a long day, but it is also the most rewarding," Devy promised. "And you are lucky you don't have to cross the river." Until this year, accessing Garner Pass from the Dickson side, as we would, involved a mandatory waist- to chest-deep river crossing. The new trail avoided this unpleasant proposition, however, it did entail navigating the "the muddy section"—a ludicrous maze of shoe-sucking mud and tree roots. We tried to avoid completely submerging our feet in the soggy quagmire for as long as possible, but everyone eventually gave up and delighted in becoming completely grubby.



Arising at first light and grabbing an early breakfast of toast and instant coffee, the junior guides, Mauricio and Pablo, headed out early, speeding ahead to mark the trail with fluorescent blazes. At each day's midpoint, the two would set out a variety of bars, trail mix, chocolate and energy drink, and serve up cups of hot soup. After the last runner had passed, they would quickly clean up and zoom down the trail again, beating everyone to the next *refugio*.

CLOSED CIRCUIT

Day four was a relatively easy run of 9.5 miles along a rolling trail contouring Lago Nordenskjold's pebbly shoreline on one side, with the Cuernos del Paine—jagged gothic turrets of sedimentary black shale—on the other. Strong winds periodically parted the mist to reveal brief glimpses of the towering *cuernos*. Thus far we had encountered relatively little rain, but today the skies opened up. The soggy conditions did little to damp-

en our spirits, however, as the evolving scenery and unique trail obstacles, such as ladders and rope bridges, kept the run fun and engaging.



Top Left | Janine Patitucci glides along Paso Los Cuernos trail above Lago Nordenskjold.

Above | A tri-lingual menu at a makeshift cafe offers international visitors a selection of Chilean fare.

Left | Runners reach Refugio Dickson after running 19 miles along the pastoral Paine River valley.

Top | Runners steadily ascend through a misty morning to Los Perros glacier.

Bottom | The author takes a break overlooking massive Grey Glacier's abrupt terminus in Lago Grey.

Far Right | The steady ascent up Valle Ascencio leads to three distinct granite towers rising from the Paine massif.



together. “We consider these group trips a holiday,” explained Julie. “We travel a lot on our own, but on these tours don’t have to have to worry about logistics and can just enjoy running trails.”

That night at dinner at Refugio Los Cuernos, Julie and Brian set the evening’s celebratory mood by ordering several bottles of Chilean red wine. Everyone toasted the near-completion of our running odyssey. Crammed side-by-side at an elongated dining table, we savored our last meal on the trail, swapping stories with an international mix of hikers envious of our simple, lightweight travel style.

The next morning we hit the trail at 6 a.m. for a rolling three-hour run back to Refugio Las Torres in time for breakfast. This last section, along delightfully smooth, easy trails past a chain of small lakes, was a relief after the previous two

days’ taxing terrain.

During the drive back to Puerto Natales, we stopped at the Argentinean border where the group was split into those flying back to the U.S. the next day and those continuing on to Los Glaciares National Park and Tierra del Fuego. Those going to Argentina would spend the next few days running trails with views of Patagonia’s most notorious peaks, Fitz Roy and Cerro Torre, before continuing on to Ushuaia and Buenos Aires.

“What Julie and I love best about trail running is that it takes us to the most beautiful places,” said Brian on the drive. Indeed, long before this trip was over, many members of the group were already planning the next one.

Elinor Fish is the Associate Editor of Trail Runner.

THE LONG, THIN COUNTRY, AT A GLANCE

LOCATION

Southern South America, bordering the South Pacific Ocean, between Argentina and Peru

POPULATION

16 million, almost half of which lives around the country’s capital, Santiago.

SIZE

Chile has 2700 miles of coastline, but is never more than 221 miles wide. Chile also lays claim to almost a half-million square miles (9 percent) of Antarctica and includes Easter Island.

GEOGRAPHY

The Andes Mountains run along the country’s entire length and is home to some of the world’s highest active volcanoes. The Atacama Desert in the north is one of the world’s driest regions.

CURRENCY

Chilean pesos. \$1 USD equals 540 Chilean pesos.

LANGUAGE

Primarily Spanish, though native languages include Mapudungun (from Mapuche) and Rapa Nui (from Easter Island).

GOVERNMENT

Democracy. A three-year-old Marxist government was overthrown in 1973 by a dictatorial military regime led by Augusto Pinochet, who ruled until a freely elected president was installed in 1990.

RELIGION

Roman Catholic 89%, Protestant 11%

MAIN INDUSTRIES

The primary export is copper, followed by agricultural exports (fish, fruits, paper and pulp, chemicals and wine), mostly to the U.S. and Japan.