

# C H E L E N K O

THE THOUSAND & ONE FACES  
OF A PATAGONIAN LAKE



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LINDE WAIDHOFER

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*Linde Waidhofer*

WESTERN EYE PRESS



## C H E L E N K O

THIS IS THE LAKE at the end of the rainbow, or maybe this is the lake where rainbows are born. Lake Chelkeno. You won't find it on any map. But it's there—really. The most beautiful lake you've never heard of. Its name is a headache. Chelkeno is an indigenous native word, said by some to mean Lake of Storms, and thought by others to be the origin of the Spanish word *chulengo*, for the newborn offspring of guanacos, those southern cousins of Andean llamas that roam the open steppes of Patagonia. But like the name Patagonia itself, the story behind the name of this lake is obscure at best.

Lake Chelkeno, *Lago Chelkeno*, is the second largest lake in South America, after Lake Titicaca between Peru and Bolivia—second only in size, not in beauty, not in drama, not in mystery. Like Titicaca, it also connects two nations, in this case, Chile and Argentina. But perhaps one should say “separates” rather than “connects,” because a stubborn history of Latin-American nationalism has kept the world more-or-less unaware of this magnificent lake. Why? Because each country has given its half of the lake a separate and resolutely patriotic name. The eastern, Argentine half is known as *Lago Buenos Aires*—what else? And the western, Chilean half is designated on official maps as *Lago*

*General Carrera*. Who was this general? Apparently a hero in Chile's struggle for independence from Spain. Here one senses the iron grip of history on South America's self-image, on its search for the present.

And what about Chelkeno? We don't know, nobody knows, if the first people, the Tehuelche natives ever called their lake “Chelkeno,” but nowadays, lots of young Patagonians do—an act of rebellion perhaps, a quixotic gesture, but one that resonates, that carries a message about seeing things as they are, and telling it like it is. We have seen maps on both sides of the border that pretend that the other guys, the other side, the other country doesn't exist. On such maps, beyond Chile there's only blank paper. Or Argentina looks across its border at emptiness. It isn't true, never was, never will be. This lake, Lake Chelkeno, is one lake, not two geopolitical fragments stitched together at the border, but one vast and beautiful lake. It dominates and defines the landscape, the climate, and the life of central and northern Patagonia. Equally important for both Argentina and Chile.

Lake Chelkeno, *Lago Chelkeno*, is a lake you can fall in love with. We have. This book is a declaration of that passion, and our way of sharing it. Join us.



*The Crystal Range behind the Isla Macias.*



*A rainbow spans the northern arm of Lake Chelanko.*



# CHELENKO

PHOTOS: LINDE WAIDHOFER

TEXT: LITO TEJADA-FLORES

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# F I R S T L I G H T



*Moonset at sunrise, looking west across the lake toward the icefield peaks.*

On Lake Chelkeno, you wake every morning to an urgent question: what next? what now? another dawn surprise? what will it do today? what will happen? which colors? which clouds? which direction to look? East into Argentina where the horizon can be a cloud-choked obstacle course for the sun to snake through, setting the sky on fire? West where pale clouds over the ice fields mirror the first light back onto the water? North where scattered showers are working on the first rainbows of the day. Another crazy unforgettable morning—



*First light on Monte San Valentín and a lone lenticular cloud over the lake.*



*First light under a tent of dark clouds, looking west.*



*A neon sunrise looking west across the lake.*

# C H E L E N K O   S K I E S



*Looking north, huge cloud fingers fill the sky.*

A big sky, impossibly big, a big canvas swept bare by the wind, scribbled on by the wind, filled with cloud messages, cloud comments, cloud manifestos, fast moving, fantastic, indecipherable—a big canvas stretched so tightly over Patagonia, over this lake, that it seems ready to burst, to tear apart . . . and sometimes it does.

*Looking north,  
a vortex of clouds  
doubled in still water.*





*Low lake level in November, looking north toward Puerto Tranquilo.*



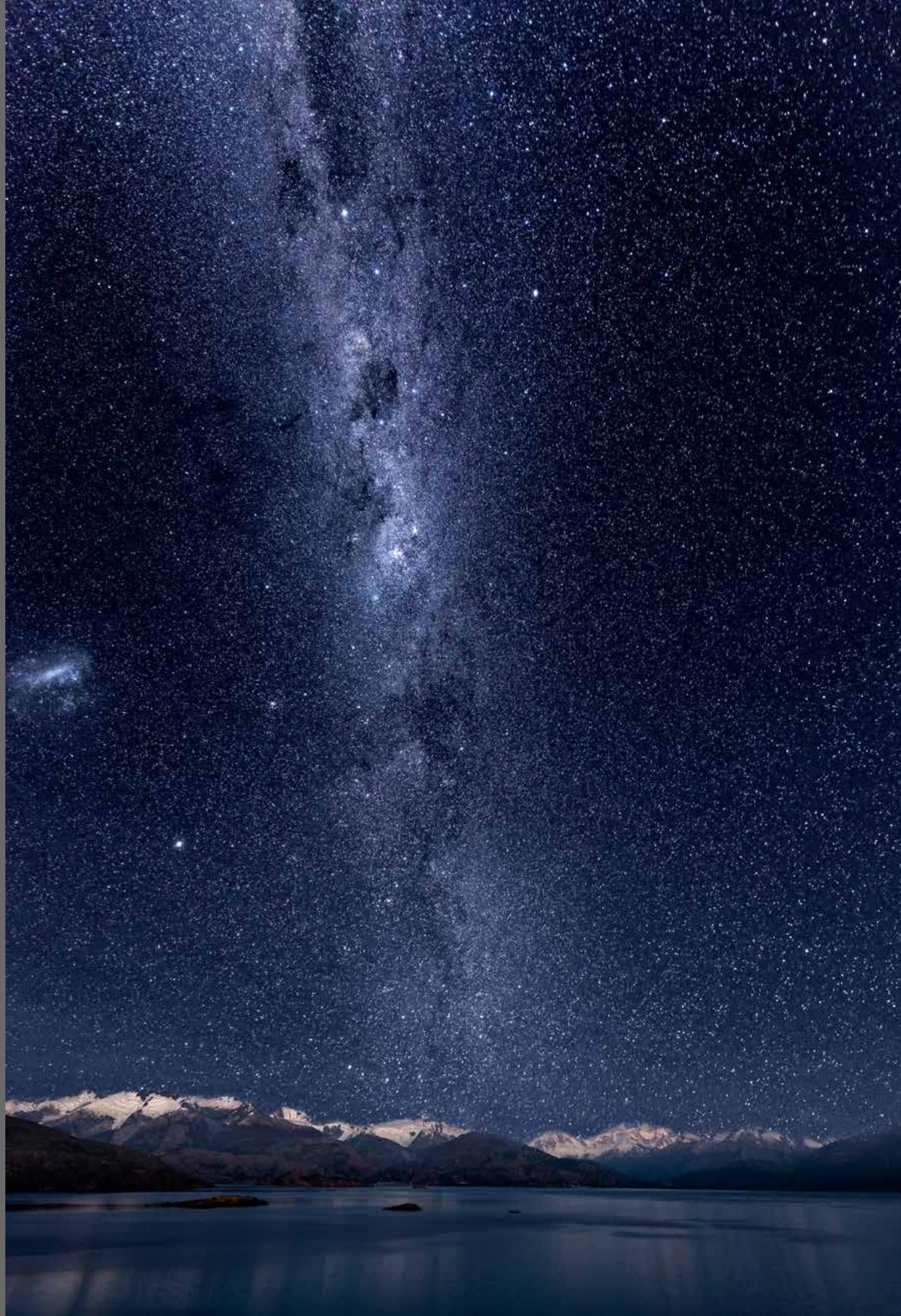
*A threatening cauliflower sky, looking northeast near Puerto Guadal.*



*Afternoon stripes of gold.*



*Stacked lenticular clouds—  
clearing weather?  
or signs of storm?*



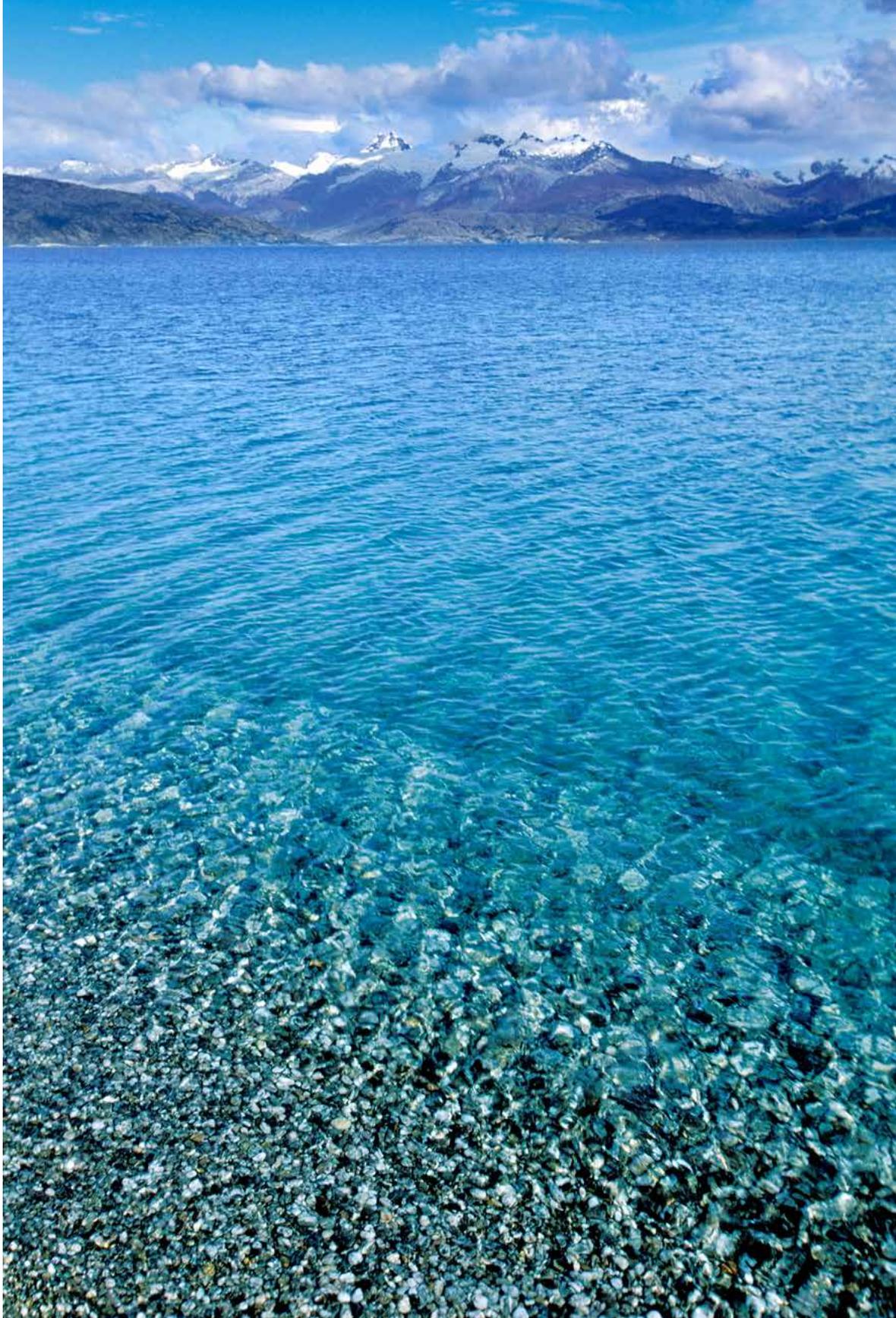
*The Milky Way  
above the Northern Ice Field  
at the west end of the lake.*

# C H E L E N K O   W A T E R S



*The delta where río Leones empties into Lake Chelkeno.*

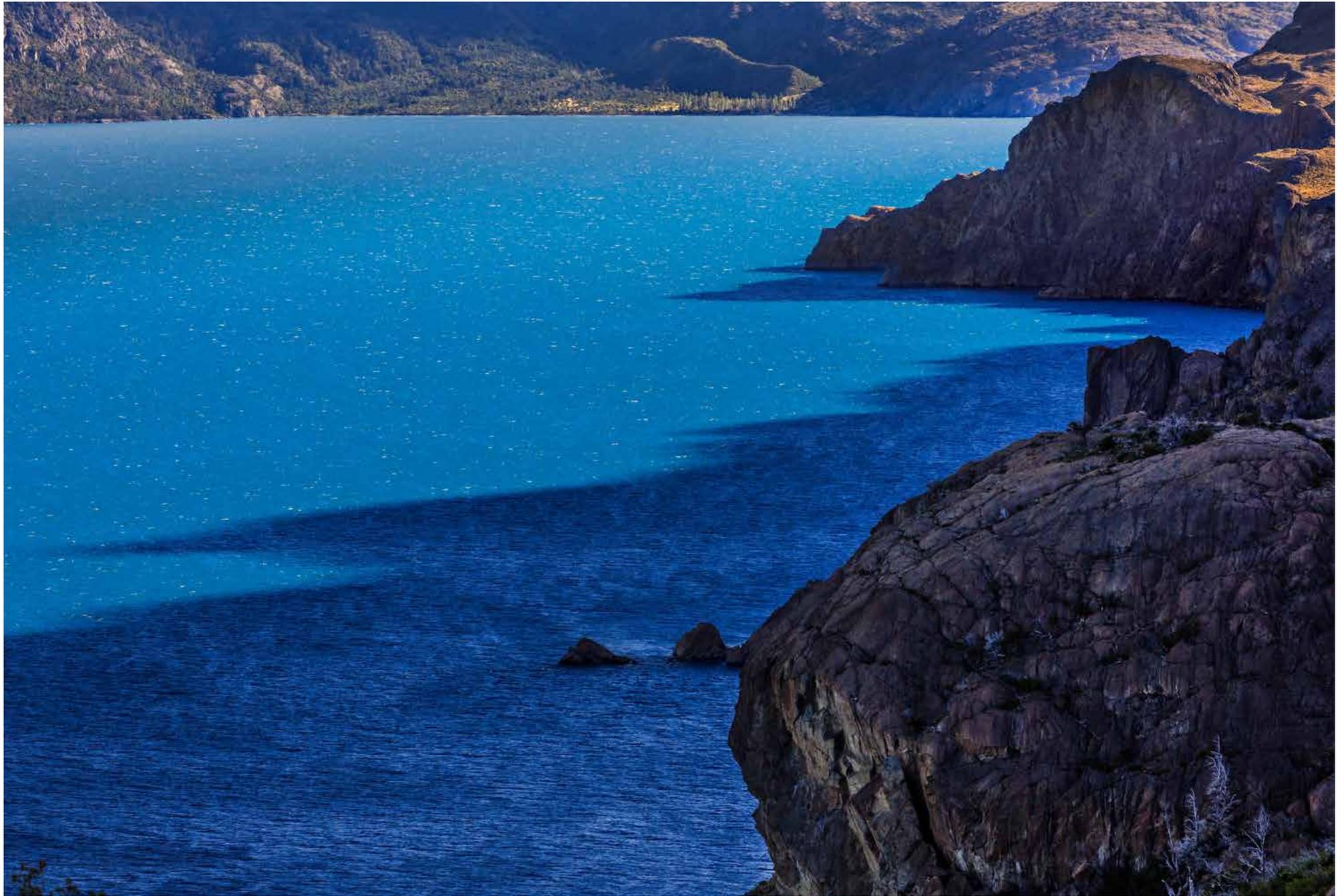
Even bluer than it looks, even purer than it tastes, even deeper than we imagine, the lake is a story in turquoise that never ends, that goes on and on. At least we hope it will. Apocryphal stories too: a lab report that claimed “This water is too pure to drink.” A lake that defies common sense: too beautiful to be one-hundred-percent natural, except it is. Too blue to believe the evidence of our cameras, and our eyes. Too cold to swim in most of the year. Cold with the breath of glaciers and the chill of melting ice. Crystal clear, unpolluted, unspoiled.



*Looking north  
just below  
Mesa Cosmelli.*



*As smooth as glass, a peaceful afternoon near Puerto Guadal.*



*Deeper blue, and the first whitecaps, near the “Keyhole” or Paso de las Llaves.*



*Chelenko water— pure, clear, transparent.*





*Shallower water near the Chile-Argentina border on the northern shore.*

# A L O N G   T H E   S H O R E

*Andesite beaches, washed and shaped by the waves.*



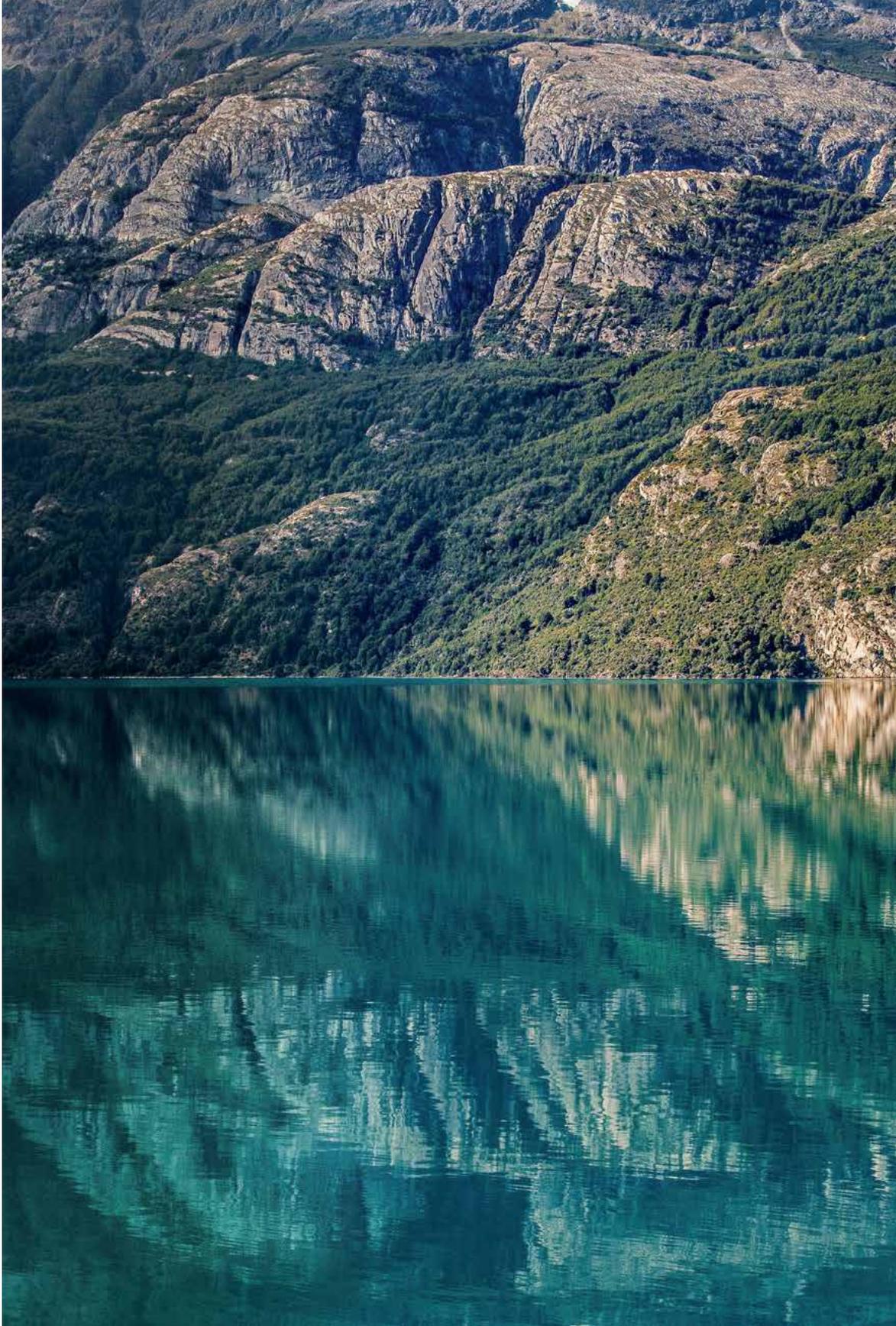
A hundred different shorelines, from breathtaking, plunging cliffs to gentle beaches and everything in between: bays, coves, inlets, spurs of rock, points and peninsulas, peaks rising straight out of the water. Rivers braid down twisting canyons, tumble over cascades, spread out into tangled deltas, wet fingers reaching for the lake. The waves have been busy for so long, centuries, millennia, armed with handfuls of gravel to grind and carve and sculpt this shoreline into surreal rock beaches, hollowed like the scales of a dragon, with narrow clefts, and overhanging walls.



*The western end of the lake, in springtime.*

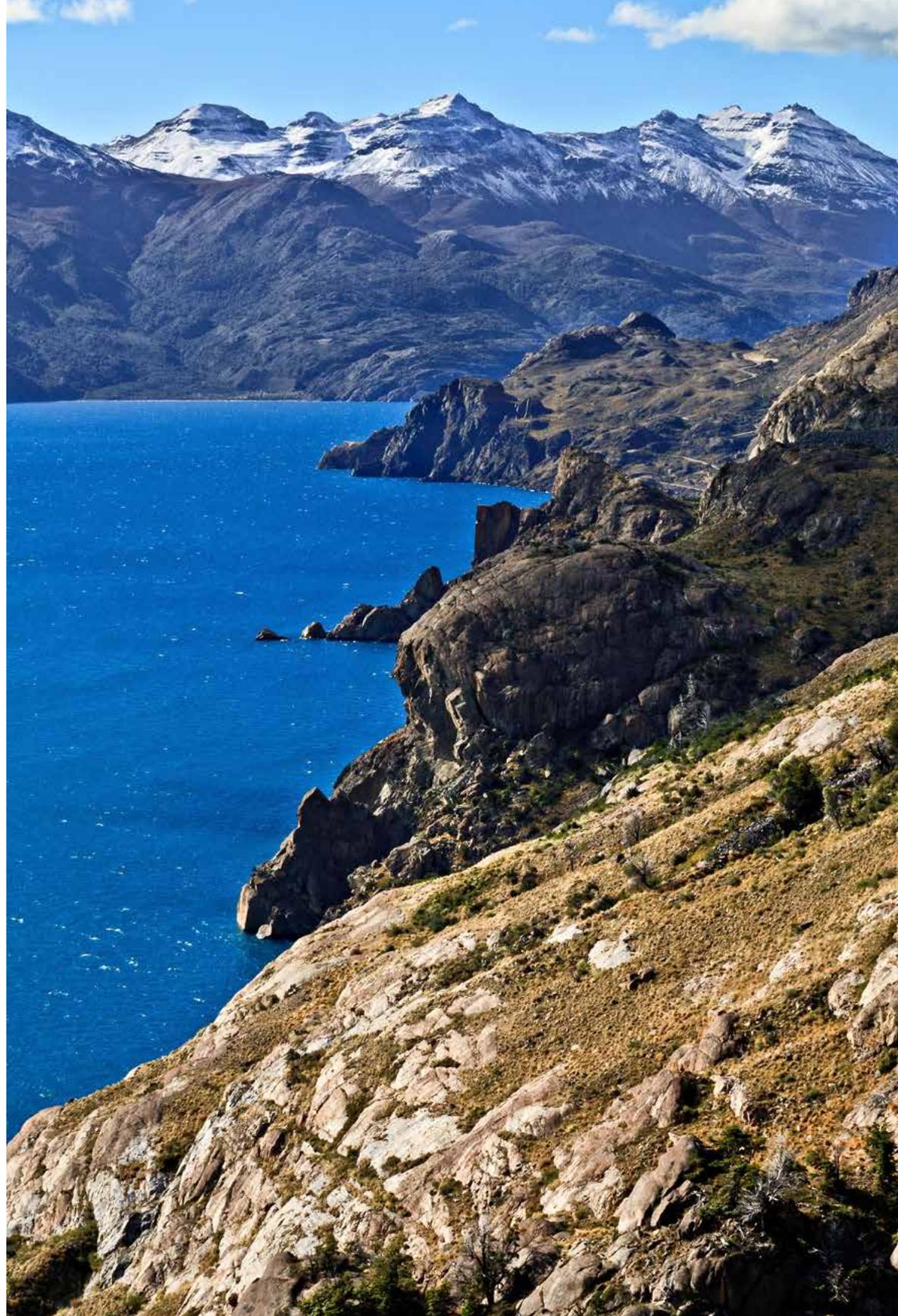


*Blossoms of the notro, or ciruelillo, also called Chilean Firebush, on the southwest shore of the lake.*



*Reflected cliffs just east of Bahía Murta  
on the northern arm of  
Lake Chelenko.*

*Leaving Mallin Grande  
on the south shore  
heading east toward  
Chile Chico and Argentina.*



*Springtime lupin in Puerto Guadal,  
looking northeast toward  
the Crystal Range.*





*A tributary stream, the small río Maqui, tumbles into the lake from the south.*

*Complex textures—  
an andesite beach near the río Maqui,  
looking north toward peaks  
above the Exploradores valley.*





*Andesite sculpture, water, wind, and waves at work.*



*Andesite cliffs on  
the south shore  
of the lake.*



*Perfect calm, perfect reflections, between Puerto Guadal and Mallín Grande on the south shore.*

# M I D D A Y



Sleeping in the sun, lake Chelenko looks so very innocent, so calm and glassy. A secret blue world, far from the madding crowd. An invitation to drift and dream, to lie on the grass and count clouds. Such a lake, one thinks, could never sink a boat, but it has, more than once. When the wind dies to a gentle breeze, an all-embracing Andean silence holds everything and everyone in suspense, motionless. Time stops. Will it ever start to move again? Will we?



*The Isla Macias, with peaks of the Crystal Range behind.*



*Wave after wave of blue.*



*Blue or turquoise? Or both? Always changing.*



*Midday light washes the highest peaks in Patagonia: Monte San Valentín and its satellite summits.*



*Cerro Castillo, a midday silhouette seen from a boat crossing the lake, from Chile Chico north to Puerto Ibáñez.*

# A R O U N D   T H E   L A K E



*Looking north, past the Isla Macias to the rocky bluffs east of Puerto Tranquilo.*



How long would it take to walk around this lake? Ride a horse around it? And don't even think of driving. Roads, mostly built in the 90s, now follow the shore in some areas, clinging to steep slabby precipices—mostly on the southern, Chilean bank of the lake—then flee inland. At each of the four points of the compass you find far more than four flavors of landscape around this giant lake. A constantly shifting backdrop of mountains, forests, steppe and pampa. Endless and flat to the east, steep glacial walls to the west, pointed rock towers to the north, lenga covered hills to the south, so varied, so untamed that, no, you probably couldn't walk around this lake if you tried. Or ever drive a flock of sheep from one end of the lake to the other, as the first settlers used to do.

*From the south shore, near the “Keyhole” east of Mallin Grande.*



*The Jeinimeni Range on the south shore of Lake Chelenko, looking east.*



*Blazing autumn reds of the lenga forests above Mallin Colorado at the western end of the lake.*



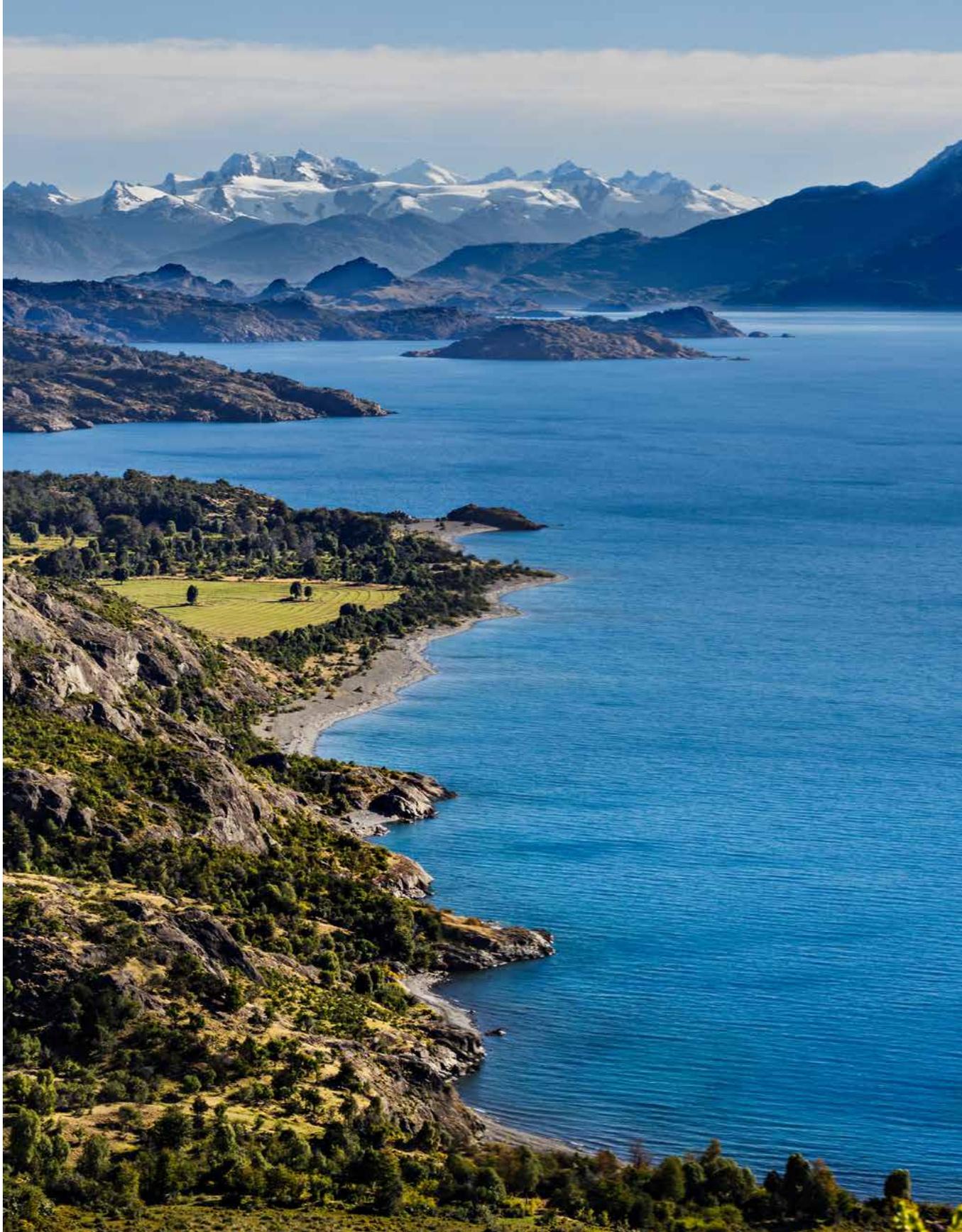
*Eroded buttes on the northern shore of the lake.*



*A different shore, this time on the Isla Macias.*



*A necklace of clouds decorates the rocky peaks of the Jeinimeni Range, on the south shore of the lake.*



*Looking west-northwest, along the rocky coves near Mallín Grande on the south shore of the lake.*



*Along the eastern, Argentine half of the lake, the terrain is flatter and more open, and the views stretch out forever.*



*Arid bluffs on the northern shore of the lake, near Puerto Ibáñez.*



*Puerto Ibáñez on the northern shore, very close to the Argentine border, with Cerro Castillo rising behind.*



*Evening light gilds the northern shore of the lake, just below and east of the Crystal Range.*



*Autumn on a lakeside mesa, halfway between Puerto Guadal and Mallín Grande on the southern shore.*



*A tiny island, much of the year a peninsula, near Puerto Tranquilo on the northwestern shore of Lake Chelelnko.*



*Looking east toward the “Keyhole” and Argentina, from the northwest shore of the lake.*



*The falls of the río Ibáñez near Levicán on the north shore.*



*The Cascada Maqui, or falls of the rio Maqui, on the southwest shore of the lake.*



*Just across the border into Argentina on the north shore of Lake Chelanko.*

# S U R R O U N D E D   B Y   S U M M I T S



*Looking north past islands and peninsulas near Mallin Grande.*

Shoulder to shoulder, row on row, these ranks of peaks loom above the lake like so many guardians of snow and ice and rock. And what, exactly, could they be guarding, this endless picket fence of peaks? Certainly they have kept the modern world at bay, for a while, for a few generations. Such isolation is more a gift than a misfortune. These sternly protective mountains have done their part. Maybe we can keep it going—



*The Contreras Range at sunset.*



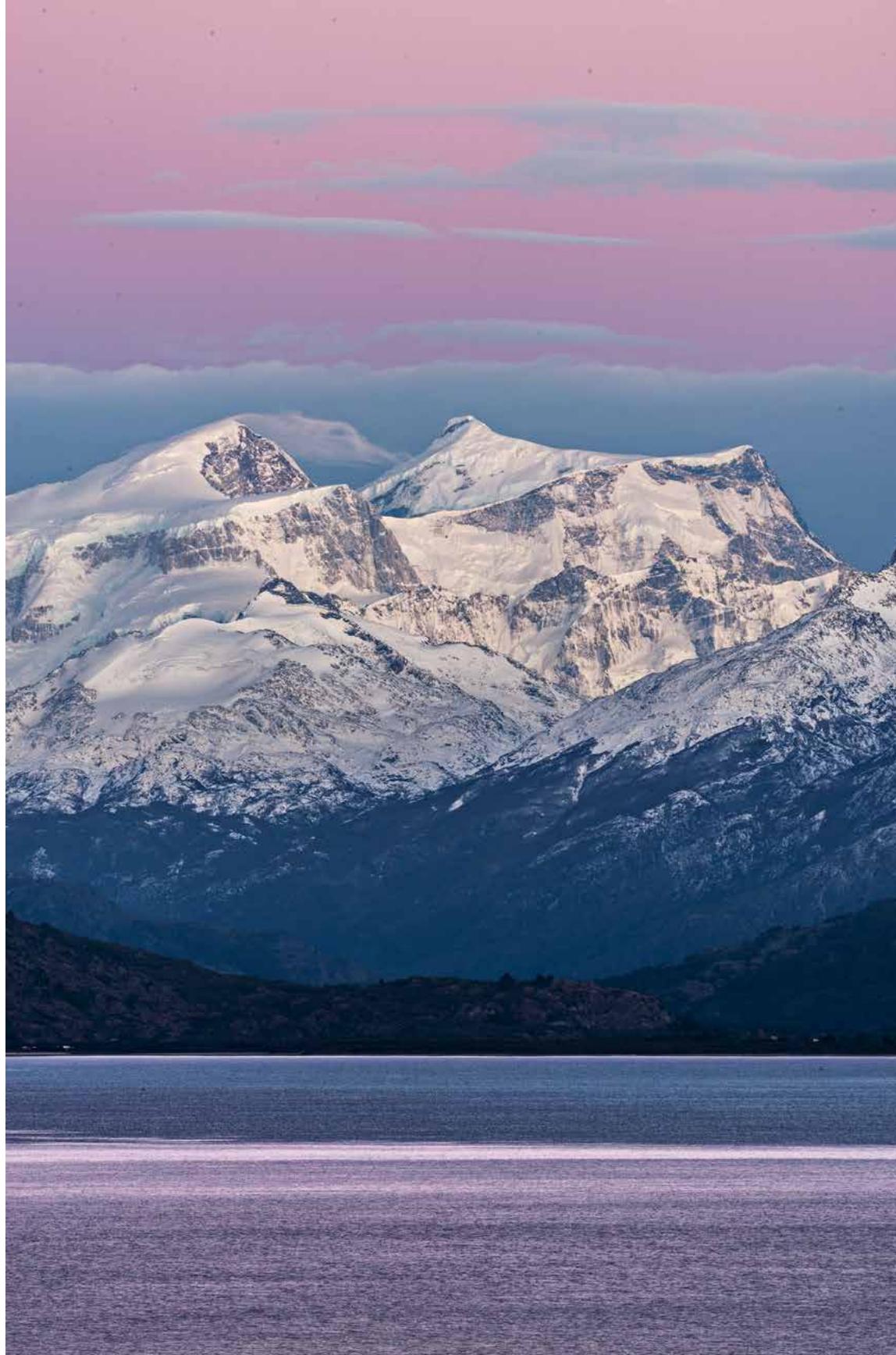
*The Jeinimeni Range in spring.*



*The Jeinimeni Range in late autumn.*



*El Pirámide, the pyramid, above Chile Chico.*



*Monte San Valentín, the highest summit in Patagonia at the west end of the lake.*



*El Fiero, the fierce one, above the extreme western end of Lake Chelenko.*

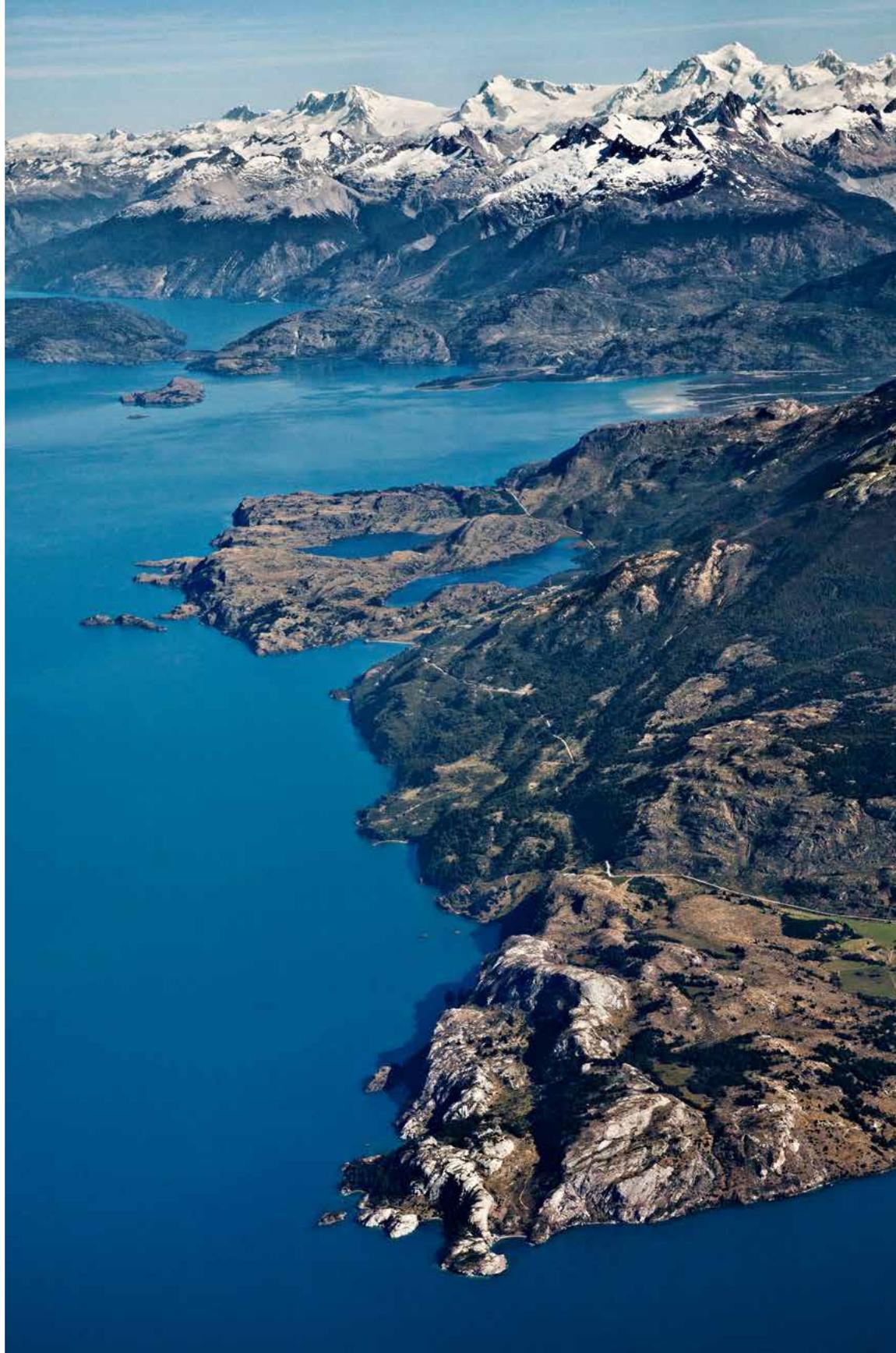
## A M A R B L E F A N T A S Y



*In the "Marble Cathedral" near Puerto Tranquilo.*

The strangest, and most beautiful of all the strange and beautiful faces of lake Chelkeno are the surreal marble formations that rise out of the turquoise water in a ragged north-south line, from Puerto Sanchez to Puerto Tranquilo to Puerto Guadal. These impossible marble formations exert a magnetic pull on visitors to Lake Chelkeno. The "Marble Cathedral," the "Marble Chapel" and all the rest are quite simply treasures, and the Chilean government has recognized this by designating the marble formations near Puerto Tranquilo as "Nature Sanctuaries." They are beyond beautiful.

*A peninsula of marble rock near Puerto Tranquilo on the north shore of the lake. This is where the most spectacular marble formations are found.*





*In the "Marble Cathedral" near Puerto Tranquilo.*



*In the "Marble Cathedral."*



*A marble formation on the Isla Panicini.*



*Marble formations near Puerto Tranquilo.*



*The "Marble Cathedral" seen from within the "Marble Chapel" near Puerto Tranquilo.*



*Inside the "Marble Cathedral."*



*Marble formations on the Isla Panicini near Puerto Sanchez.*

# A F T E R N O O N S T O R M S

Lake of many moods, many tempers, windless breathless mornings, clear as a bell, giving way without warning to immense charcoal-grey clouds, fierce winds, angry skies reflected in angry water. Storms fill the sky to overflowing, then spill over onto the lake. We spot whitecaps in the distance, miles away, heading straight toward us, ever closer. *Look out!* In ten minutes, it will be raining, spitting, howling, but only wind and waves, and driving sleet, never lightning. Mercurial weather—that can clear as fast as it builds.



*Storms play with this lake, sweep across it, hide all the peaks, all the landmarks, create their own geography, their own topography without names or compass points. Let's just look...*











# C H E L E N K O   S U N S E T



*It is no surprise that the most extravagant displays of sunset color on Lake Chelkeno take place at the west end of the lake, looking out at the rim of glaciers and snowy peaks that mark the edge of the Northern Ice Field.*

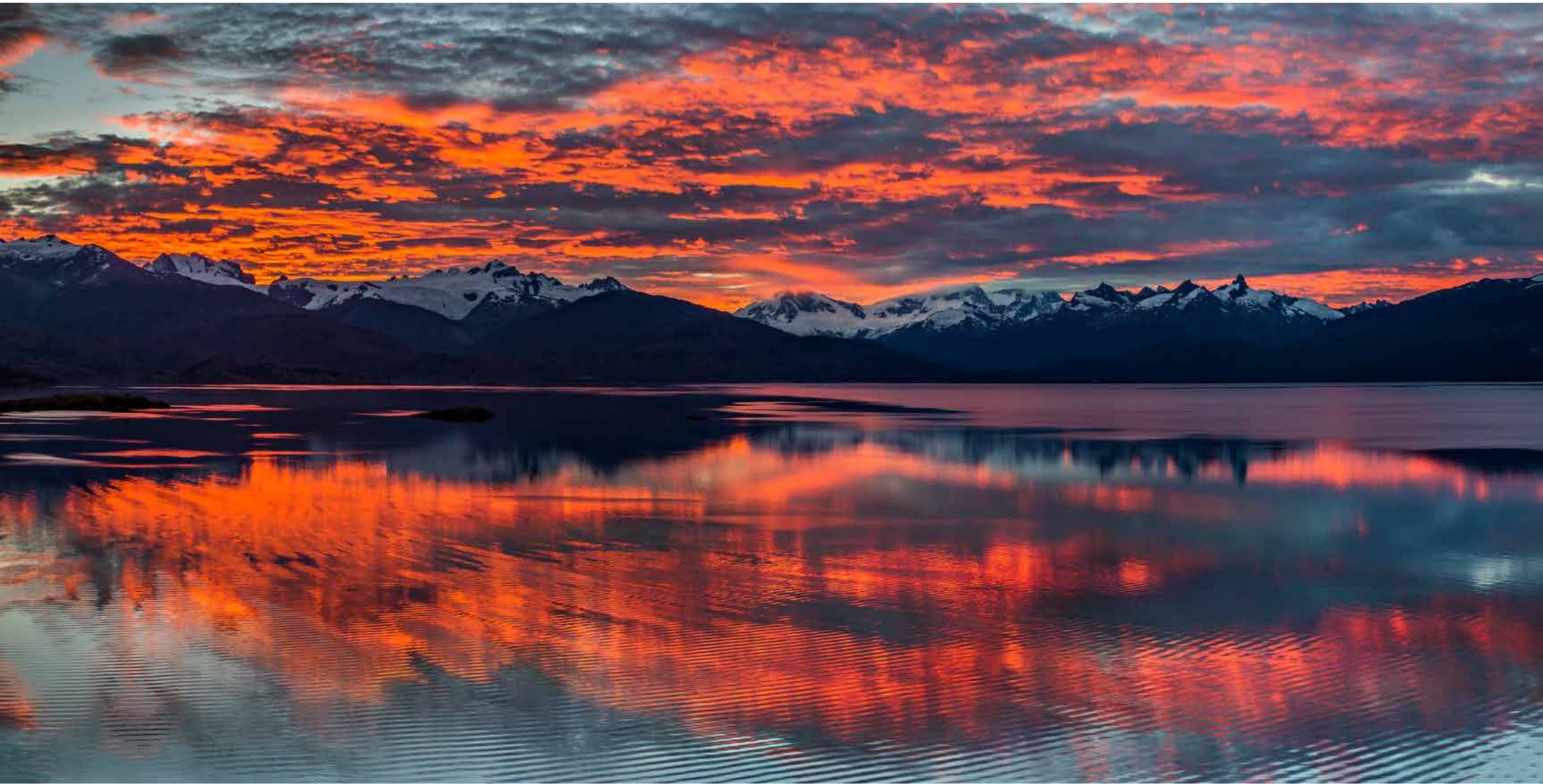
It's been a long day. They always are on Lake Chelkeno, long and full, full of surprises. Exhausted by so much beauty, you want to stop, sit down, sip a pisco sour while the ice-field peaks to the west throw their long shadows out across the water. Not tonight. It isn't over till it's over, and the show, this light show of the far south gains strength, momentum, and even more color after the sun disappears over the horizon. Chelkeno sunsets are an unearned bonus that the lake grants us, night after night. Standing on a bluff overlooking the lake, eyes wide, mouth open, but at a loss for words, you wait for night, hoping it will never arrive. Hoping this lake is forever.















## AFTERWORD

HOW LUCKY WE ARE to have stumbled upon this lake, this place at this time, when the loudest sound is often the wind, when you can still look across so much pure clean water, west and east, for miles and miles and see no lights—no lights, no boats, no resorts, no jet skis, no fish farms. Only silence, only beauty.

Beauty is always enough. But often it seems as though there is not enough beauty to go around in this confusing modern world we have made, where too few have too much, and too many don't have what they really need. We all need beauty, whether we know it or not. This lake, Lake Chelenko, gives it away. And we didn't even have to earn it. Although we may yet.

We need the beauty, the mystery and calm that this lake offers so freely, and we also need

water. All people, all communities and societies, all countries need water. *Agua es vida*, water is life, teaches Monseñor Luis Infanti, the Bishop of Aysen, a leading Chilean advocate for restoring the public water rights that were privatized and lost during the Pinochet dictatorship. And he's right. But in some circles water means both money and power, electrical power and political power, code words for greed and growth. Code words for trouble.

The waters of Lake Chelenko are precious, as is the lake itself, its surroundings and its whole watershed, its strange ever-changing light and wild weather, and the sparkling necklace of peaks and glaciers that surround it. We have never seen another lake quite like this one. So special, so worth protecting.

Chelenko, the lake where rainbows are born.



# C H E L E N K O

## THE THOUSAND & ONE FACES OF A PATAGONIAN LAKE

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text ©2014 Lito Tejada-Flores

All the photos without exception were made from the shores, or the nearby slopes of this marvellous Patagonian lake that we and many others call *Lago Chelkeno*, but which appears on the maps of Chile and Argentina as *Lago General Carrera* or *Lago Buenos Aires* respectively, or from a light plane above the lake.

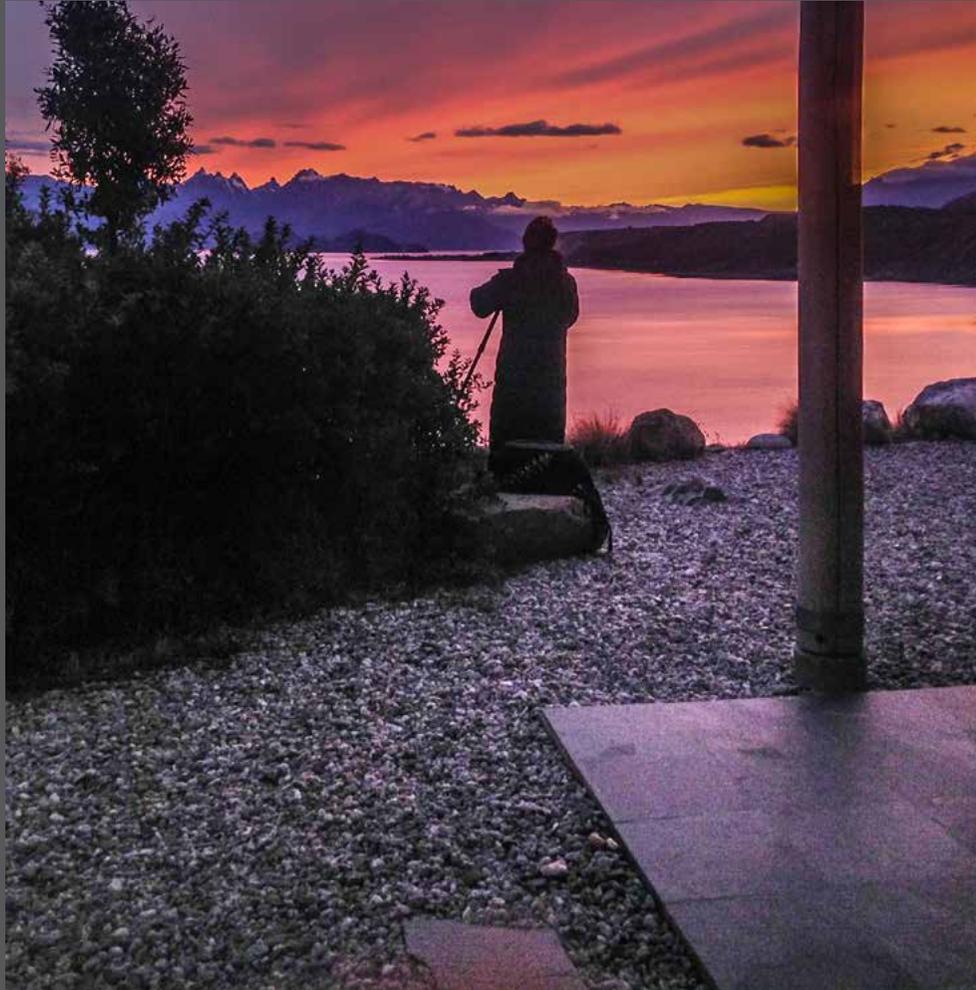
This electronic or eBook edition of *Chelkeno, The Thousand & One Faces of a Patagonian Lake*, is available online, free of cost, from

[www.WesternEyePress.com](http://www.WesternEyePress.com)

in both English, and Spanish versions. A deluxe bilingual ink-on-paper edition is also in preparation.

Handsome archival fine-art photographic prints, made by the photographer, are also available from her own web site, [www.WesternEye.com](http://www.WesternEye.com)

For the past decade Linde has spent roughly six months of every year on *Lago Chelkeno*. From the house she and her husband, Lito Tejada-Flores, built on a marble bluff near Puerto Guadal, Linde has explored almost every corner of this unique lake, always with her cameras at the ready, always waking before the southern sunrise in the hopes of one more spectacular dawn, always waiting patiently to catch the last glowing embers of the long austral day. There is no other lake like *Lago Chelkeno*. They say there is no place like home. And this is home.



*Linde Waidhofer at work.*

## ENVOI

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Linde welcomes your feedback on this, and her other electronic photo books. She finds it an exciting, ongoing challenge to adapt her photographic work to emerging digital media. You can write Linde at

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