

U N K N O W N



P A T A G O N I A

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U N K N O W N

P A T A G O N I A

L I N D E W A I D H O F E R



U N K N O W N   P A T A G O N I A

P A L E N A & A Y S É N , C H I L E ' S S E C R E T S O U T H

L I N D E W A I D H O F E R



*Remote peak in Parque Nacional Queulat, northern Aysén.*

TEXT LITO TEJADA-FLORES

WESTERN EYE PRESS

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## SOUTH OF THE SOUTH

IN SOUTH AMERICA, 'south' is more than a direction, more than a description, more than a mere adjective. The South, the far south, the still farther and ever farther south is a mystique, a magnet and a mystery, a shorthand expression for the inexpressible, a hint, a suggestion, at times a purely imaginary place, at times a beckoning idea, at times only a hazy and romantic notion.

But, occasionally, after a long trip, a big pilgrimage through a big landscape, occasionally, after you cross a far pass to discover a hidden valley, or watch a turquoise river disappear into an unexpected gorge, or stare up at a suddenly revealed mountain range after antarctic winds have ripped back a curtain of clouds, occasionally, in those special moments, the South becomes a very real place—not merely a story.

The South is a real place. Its other name is Patagonia. Its secret name is never spelled out but slowly revealed in a fantastic collection

of fjords and forests, ice fields and icy lakes, wind-scoured skies and wind-combed steppes, a near wilderness of few people and many surprises.

This is the South, the Patagonia, that Linde Waidhofer and I fell in love with on our first trip to southern Chile in 2002. That is not too strong a way of putting it. After a month of vagabonding in central Chilean Patagonia, the region known as Aysén, we left, promising to return as soon as possible, asking ourselves why we were leaving at all, leaving the most beautiful landscape we had ever seen after an autumn of high drama ... high color, wild weather, new places, and new friends. It was easy to return every year, and each year for a longer stay, easy to start thinking of Patagonia as our second home, easy too to share our passion and to celebrate one of the last perfect places on the planet.



*Serried lenticular clouds over the steppes of the Chacabuco Valley in eastern Aysén, site of the future Patagonia National Park.*

# UNKNOWN PATAGONIA

NORTH TO SOUTH: PALENA THROUGH AYSÉN

A CONDOR'S VIEW: UNKNOWN PATAGONIA FROM ABOVE

FANTASTIC FORESTS: GREEN PATAGONIA

ROCK & ICE: THE PEAKS OF UNKNOWN PATAGONIA

TURQUOISE RIVERS & A LAKE BLUER THAN THE SKY

THE MARBLE CAVERNS OF LAGO CARRERA

DRY PATAGONIA: THE STEPPES OF EASTERN AYSÉN

WET PATAGONIA: THE COAST OF PALENA & AYSÉN

FOUR SEASONS: THOUSANDS OF COLORS

CITIZENS OF THE SOUTH, BIRDS, ANIMALS, & SETTLERS

PARADISE FOUND—OR LOST? ...



*First snow on the Jeinimeni Range above Lago Carrera and deep autumn color in the lenga forests beneath the peaks.*

## NORTH TO SOUTH

### PALENA THROUGH AYSÉN

GEOGRAPHICALLY PATAGONIA IS A PUZZLE, not to say a headache. Where does it start? Where does it end? How far does it stretch? Every definition of Patagonia has its partisans and its detractors. Peaks and glaciers are the easy part. But only a part. How can a dense green Valdivian rainforest be considered a part of Patagonia? And Patagonia is so attractive, so romantic a label, not just to foreigners but to locals on both sides of the Chilean-Argentinean border, that it sometimes seems as if communities and individuals and businesses are really stretching to claim that they, too, have a share in the Patagonian mystique.

No need to take sides. There is as much or more Patagonia on the Argentinean side of the international border as there is in southern Chile. But this book, this journey we're going to share, is about two contiguous regions in southern Chile, Palena and Aysén—Patagonia to all intents and purposes. But hardly all of it because a large part even of Chilean Patagonia lies still farther south.

The province of Palena is actually the lower half of Chile's 10th Region, also called the Region of Lakes. You can't drive there directly from the rest of Chile for just south of Puerto Montt, the national road network is cut by a grand confusion of peaks, fjords, and impassable cliffs plunging into the Pacific. Ferryboats can take you south to where topography relents and the road starts again. And then you can travel on into Aysén, Chile's 11th Region. Aysén in turn is cut off from Chile's final and more famous 12th Region, Magallanes—the very bottom of the continent—cut off this time, not by fjords but by an immense ice cap. Isolated, cut off from the rest of Chile, safe from too many people and too much progress, Palena and Aysén have remained stunningly fresh, natural, and beautiful. In a word unknown, unknown and thus unspoiled. Unknown Patagonia. The best kept secret in the South.



*An unrelentingly complex coastline is part of what has kept Unknown Patagonia unknown. Here an estuary in northern Palena.*



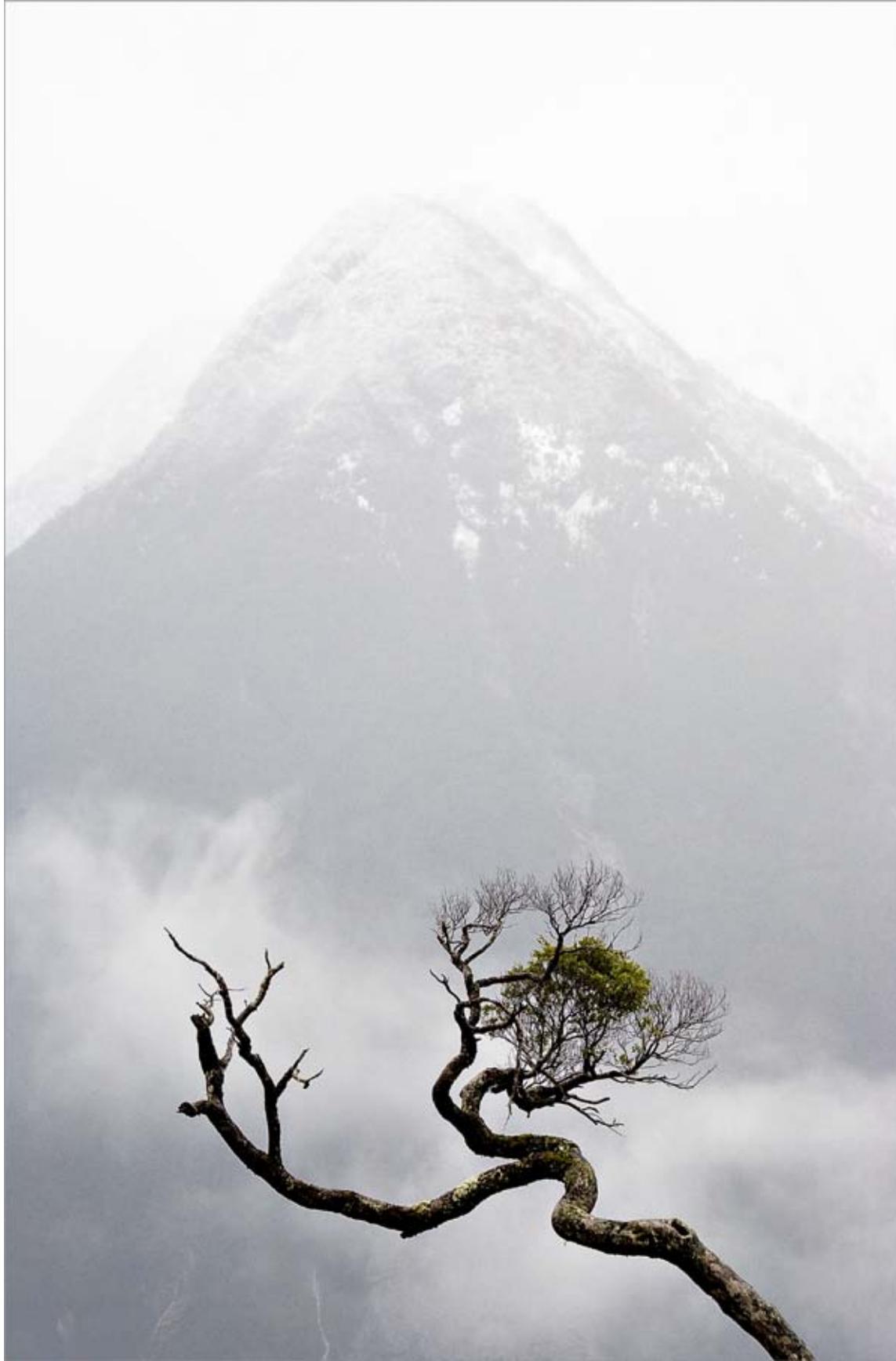
*Volcán Michinmahuida dominates the glassy waters of Fiordo Reñihué in the province of Palena. This peak is the dominant landmark rising above Parque Pumalín, a private 'national park' with full public access.*



*The turquoise waters of Palena's Río Futaleufú—a legendary destination for whitewater aficionados.*



*Ghostly coigüe trees add to the mystery of a misty mountainside in the Valdivian rainforest region of the province of Palena.*



*A 'Zen' landscape  
far from Japan—  
a nameless peak  
above a gnarled  
ñirre tree  
in Palena.*



*A crescent moon over the crags of Cerro Castillo as a storm clears.*



*Another view of Cerro Castillo, or Castle Mountain, an iconic peak in central Aysén, rising above reflections in a bend of the Río Manso or Gentle River.*



*Autumn reflections in a large pond, or mallín, along the Río Murta in Aysén.*

*Spring lupines on the shore of Lago Carrera. View to the east toward the Paso de Llaves, or Keyhole, where the lake narrows toward Argentina.*





*Peaks above the Río Leones delta and ñirre trees in their autumn finery, central Aysén.*

*A perfect lenticular cloud means high winds aloft. Distant peaks mark the edge of the Campo de Hielo Norte, or Northern Ice Field.*



## A CONDOR'S VIEW

### UNKNOWN PATAGONIA FROM ABOVE

IF PALENA AND AYSÉN contain the wildest landscapes in all of Chile, it is hardly because Chileans have been diligent in protecting them from the impact of modern industrial-scale development. It's because Chileans couldn't really get there—at least not in great numbers and never easily. This whole region is one of the most sparsely populated in all of South America. The terrain is so rugged that road-building has always been, and still is, an almost insoluble challenge. Today only one road traverses this grand landscape, north to south, the grandly named The Southern Highway, or Carretera Austral. Only the scenery is grand the road is minimalist. And although the Carretera rivals any scenic highway in the world for views, as you travel along it you can see only small slices of a vast wilderness.

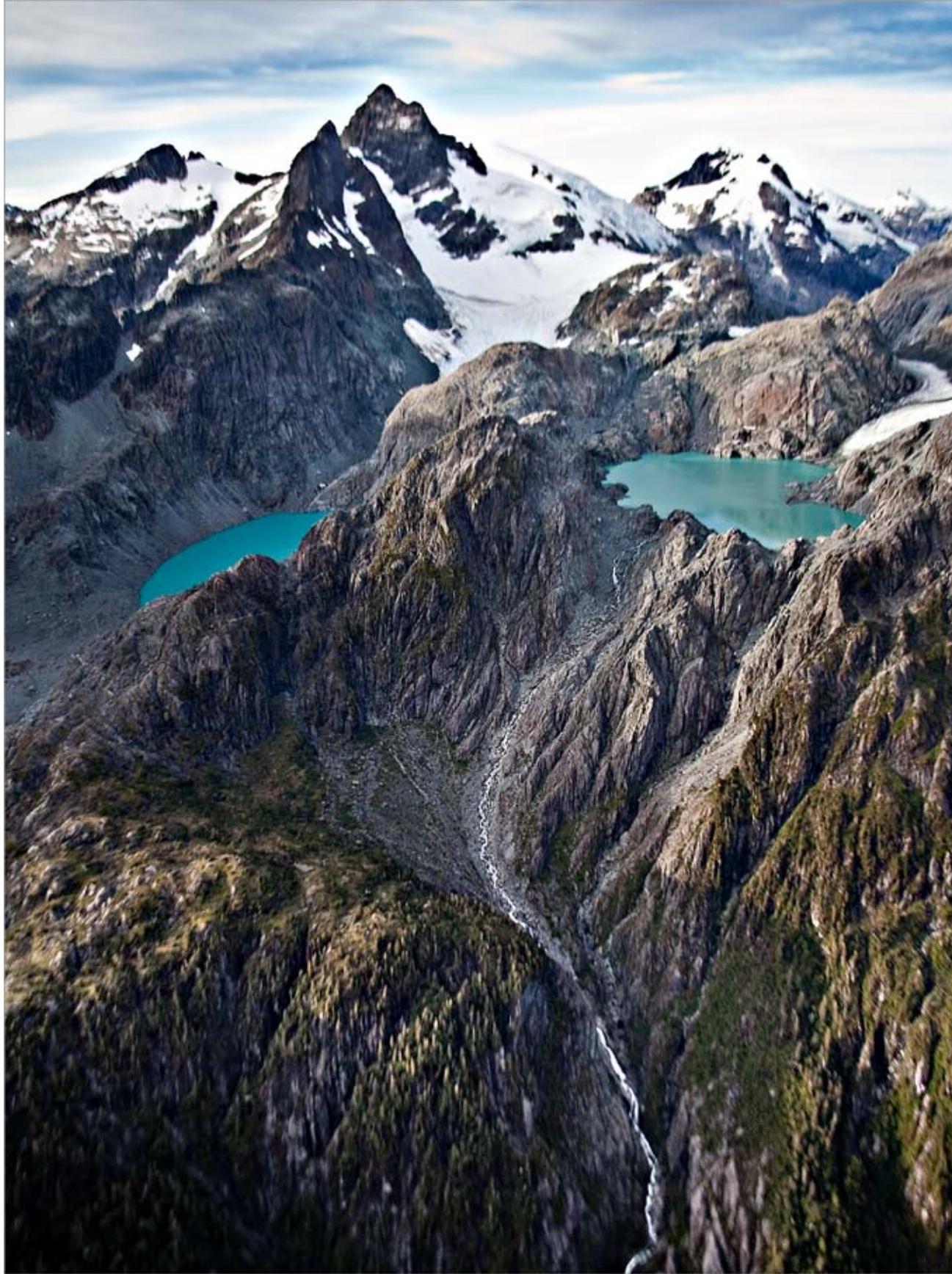
Ultimately, the best way—and sometimes the only way—to see beyond the boundaries of roads and settlements is to fly over Patagonia in a light plane, an *avioneta*. Words can't do justice to hours in the air, sharing this landscape with a few condors. But perhaps these photographs can.

Range after range, river after river unfold beneath the magic carpet of a two-seater *avioneta*. How many peaks? How many glaciers? How many hanging valleys? How many twisting fjords and nameless lakes that have never been visited, not even once, by settlers or explorers or the most footloose fly fisherman because even to reach many of these lakes would require a rock-climbing expedition. Even to cross from one lost green valley to another would take weeks of work with machetes or chain saws. The rugged terrain of northern Patagonia and Palena is well defended by its sheer steepness. But farther south, travel is no easier, and a light plane is once again useful to take in the real shapes and lonesome beauty of the land. Glaciers and vast ice caps throw up new obstacles to easy travel. And vastness replaces steepness as the photographer's challenge.

This is frontier flying, demanding and sometimes scary. Always thrilling.



*Probably no one has ever stood on the shore of this nameless lake, high in a zone of rocky peaks in northern Palena.*



*Unnamed lakes  
beneath unnamed  
peaks in the  
province of Palena.*

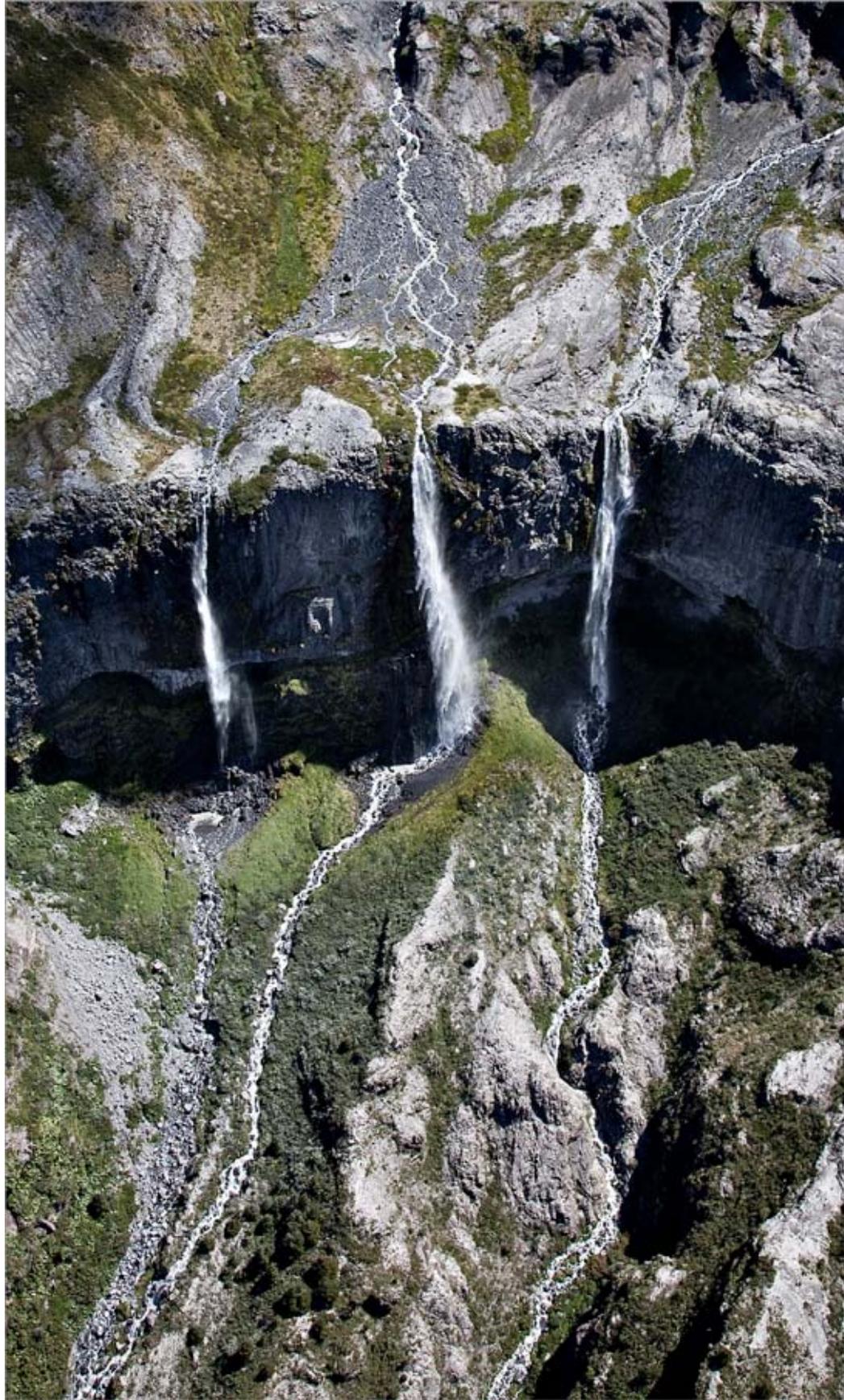


*The glaciated slopes of Volcán Michinmahuida. View south toward the symmetrical cone of Corcovado, another of Palena's volcanos, inactive for now.*



*Glacial chaos, a mix of ice and rock, covered with ash, on the slopes of Volcán Michinmahuida, Palena*

*Glacial melt creates  
hundreds of waterfalls  
every summer, on every  
peak, every volcano.*





*Another lost lake in the mountain fastness of northern Palena—ice choked, mist shrouded, inaccessible, as remote as it gets.*



*In the permanently wet province of Palena, cascadas, or waterfalls, are everywhere.*



*Not all Patagonian volcanos are inactive. Volcán Chaitén, a relatively small volcano in Palena, which had not erupted for 9,000 years, came to life in 2008 and covered the coastal town of Chaitén, its entire waterfront, and bay in mud and ash. Chaitén's 4,000 inhabitants were evacuated. In Patagonia, nature holds all the cards.*

*Looking down  
on the smoking  
cinder cone of  
Volcán Chaitén.*





*The Río Murta meanders below Cofré Pass in central Aysén.*



*Lago Cochrane  
with Cerro San  
Lorenzo towering  
behind, southern  
Aysén.*



*The very summit of Unknown Patagonia is Cerro San Valentín, highest peak in all of Patagonia. This peak dominates the landscape of central Aysén, rising some 13,000 feet above the blue waters of Lago Carrera. The glaciers on its western flank are part of the vast Northern Ice Field and eventually drop all the way to the Pacific.*



*A small corner of the 'other' ice cap, the Campo de Hielo Sur, or Southern Ice Field.  
This immense plateau of ice lies partly in the southernmost 12th Region and partly in Aysén.*

*Cerro San Lorenzo, the second highest peak in Patagonia on the border with Argentina in southern Aysén. This giant is more than a single summit—an entire range of needles and satellite peaks crowd around it.*





*The end of the Carretera Austral—Villa O'Higgins and Lago O'Higgins, the last town and last lake in southern Aysén; beyond this point a wilderness of fjords, mountains, and ice separates Aysén from Magallanes, Chile's southernmost region.*

## FANTASTIC FORESTS

### GREEN PATAGONIA

JUST BELOW THE CREST of the Queulat Pass, or Portezuelo Queulat, where The Carretera Austral is only a steep and narrow gravel road barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass each other, there is a small wooden sign marking the start of a sketchy path The Enchanted Forest Trail, el Sendero del Bosque Encantado. It's not a misnomer—every bend in this trail reveals another surreal scene: green on green on green, twisted trees covered solid with a layer of smaller green plants and climbing vines, covered and re-covered by moss, more different greens than you've ever seen. But the 'enchanted forest' label could apply to thousands of hectares of native forests stretching from the deep fjords of northern Palena to the giant ice fields that separate Aysén from Chile's southernmost region, Magallanes, in the far south.

Did I say native forests? Only in small patches does one see lines of planted pines—a serious environmental mistake dreamed up by absentee government foresters who have never walked these steep

southern slopes. Chile is not exempt from the errors of industrial forestry. But the native forests have a presence and power that totally capture you. In northern Palena, giant *alerces*, over one hundred feet high and centuries old, lord it over white-blossomed *ulmo* trees. In much of Aysén, the dense forests of *nothofagus* beech trees cover the landscape from ridgetop to riverbank and back up. All southern beeches are not created equal. *Coigües*, tall, gaunt, and sometimes ghostly are evergreen giants; the other beeches explode into autumn colors, then fade into winter monochrome. *Lengas* paint timberline from a deep brick red to pure maroon in April and May, while *ñirre* exhibit a rainbow of color from yellow through orange through saturated reds in the same grove, sometimes on the same tree, the same branch. And everywhere, ivy and bamboo punctuate these southern forests, too dense to hike through, too fantastic ever to forget.



*Alerce trees, immense native cypresses of the far south. Parque Pumalin, Palena.*



*Alerces, a kind of cypress, are the largest and the oldest trees in South America.  
Today they are protected from logging but their numbers have been seriously reduced.*

*Roughly one-third of the remaining alerce stands have been protected in Parque Pumalin in northern Palena province*





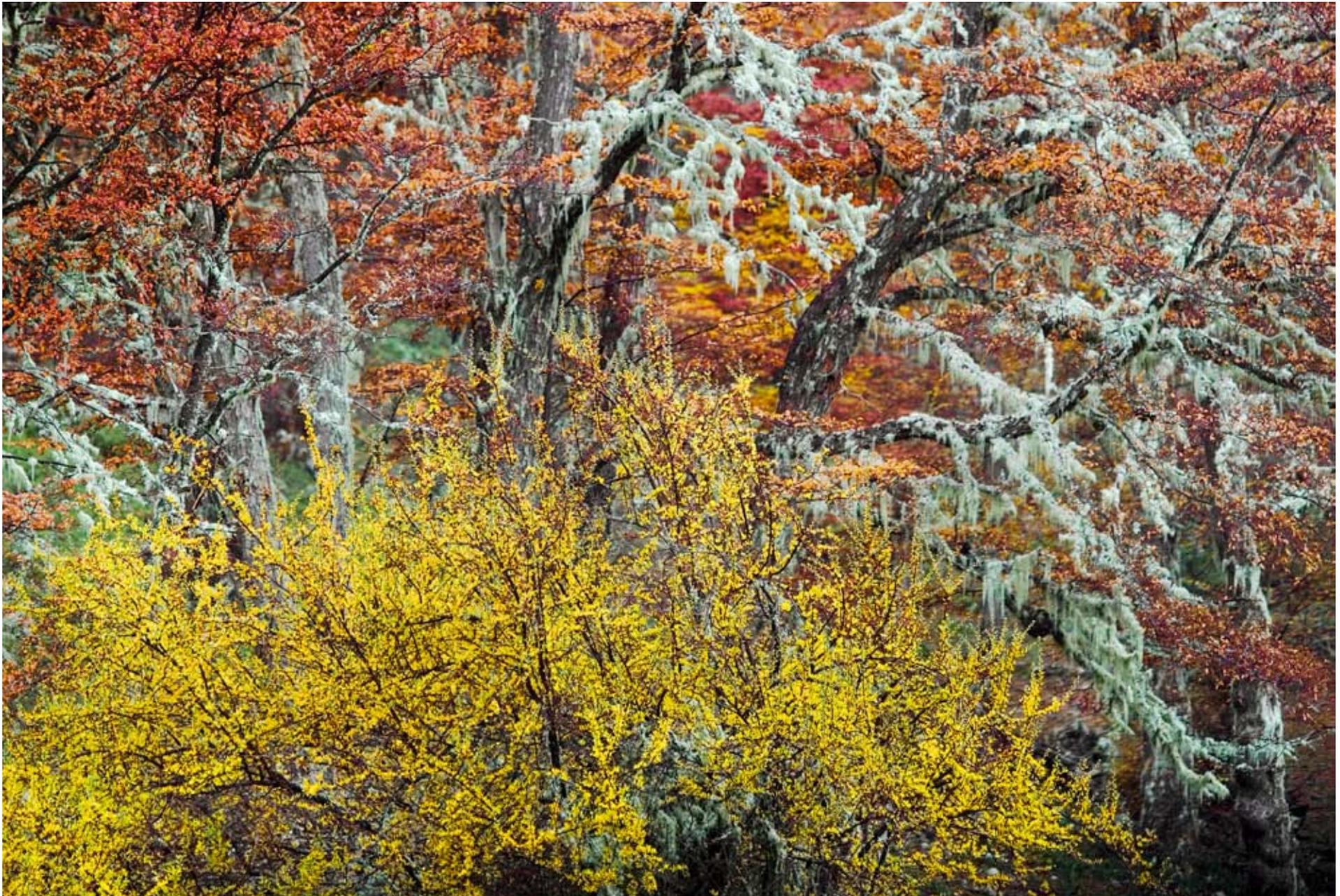
*The Enchanted Forest  
or Bosque Encantado,  
Parque Nacional Queulat,  
northern Aysén.*



*Green on top of green on top of green along the Enchanted Forest Trail,  
el Sendero del Bosque Encantado, in Parque Nacional Queulat, northern Aysén.*



*Tall coigües near the summit of Queulat Pass. Of the three species of Patagonian beech trees, coigües are they only evergreens.*



*A mixed forest of lenga and ñirre. A sort of Spanish moss called Barba de Viejo, or Old Man's Beard, is found everywhere in these forests.*



*Barba de Viejo, Old Man's Beard, wraps a barber-pole design around lenga trunks in the native forests of southern Aysén.*



*Waiting for first snow. Lenga trees on Portezuelo Ibáñez, at 3,675 feet above sea level, the highest pass on the Carretera Austral, or Southern Highway—the main and in many places only road through Unknown Patagonia.*

## ROCK & ICE

### THE PEAKS OF UNKNOWN PATAGONIA

IT'S HARD TO TALK OF PATAGONIA without talking about mountains. Impossible to think of Patagonia without thinking of mountains. The mountains are the Andes, the backbone of a continent. But the Patagonian Andes are different. Not the high-altitude Andean giants nearer the Equator, but giants in their own right. In Peru, 20,000-foot summits are a dime a dozen; in Patagonia a 10,000-foot peak is enormous because it rises from near sea level. And some peaks in the far south do rise straight out of the sea. A handful of Patagonian peaks dwarfs everything, and every summit in sight. Cerro San Valentín in the heart of Aysén and Cerro San Lorenzo on the border with Argentina are the two highest, the grandest of these grand peaks, high points of a whole massif, crowded and defended by satellite summits overlooking immense ice caps.

As much or more than the peaks, ice fields, *campos de hielo*, define Patagonia's mountainscapes. These ice fields are much bigger

than simple glaciers: they are whole families of glaciers, communities of glaciers, glaciers to the horizon and beyond. Glacial tongues snake out of these immense ice sheets, dropping and twisting down rocky channels into lost lakes. The 1,500 square miles of the Northern Ice Field is a mostly unseen presence behind screens of big peaks. That's where the weather comes from. When Patagonian winds shift into high gear, they pick up clouds of moisture vapor, monster storms, from these vast plains of ice. The ice fields are the biggest players in Unknown Patagonia's strange geography. Often out of sight from the valley bottoms, they are always there, close and far at the same time.

Even the smaller ranges are well defended. Nameless rock towers wait for a new generation of climbers to discover them, discover routes to their bases, discover routes up their flanks, rediscover the magic of unfamiliar peaks.



*Frosted peaks in Parque Nacional Queulat, just north of Queulat Pass, northern Aysén.*



*One of the outlying needles, or agujas,  
of the San Lorenzo massif,  
until now unclimbed and unnamed.*

*The same satellite spire of Cerro San Lorenzo in a clearing storm.*



*Dawn drama—first light on Cerro San Valentín and its smaller neighboring peak, el Escudo de Plata, or Silver Shield.*





*El Fiero, the Fierce One, smallest peak of the San Valentín group at the west end of Lago Carrera, in late autumn.*



*A rock pyramid above the Río Cisnes,  
or River of Swans, below Queulat Pass.*

*Todo cambia, everything changes—  
the same rock pyramid in winter.*





*Not the biggest, but certainly one of the most spectacular peaks in Aysén,  
Cerro Castillo, Castle Mountain, on a clear autumn day.*

*Cerro Castillo, Castle Mountain, shrouded in storm clouds.*



# TURQUOISE RIVERS

## & A LAKE

## BLUER THAN THE SKY

THE FABLED PATAGONIA of mountain-climbing magazines is dry and wind-scoured. But the unknown heart of Chilean Patagonia is all about water: rivers, dozens of rivers; and lakes, dozens of lakes, maybe hundreds if you count each *mallín*, or pond.

Each river has its own color, usually a heartbreak shade of turquoise. For these rivers are glacier-fed, and they carry a subtle freight of glacial till ground much, much finer than that found in the glacier-fed rivers in the Northern Hemisphere. This water is not milky with glacial sediment but crystal clear, yet colored a breathtaking blue by microscopic sediments in permanent suspension. Photographs of these turquoise rivers and lakes are often met with suspicion or outright disbelief. “You must have photoshopped that color.” Not true. In fact the photographer’s temptation is always to mute the color in hope that it will seem more believable. Seeing is believing, and we’ve seen the most intensely colored rivers and lakes in the world. In Patagonia.

Everyone has a favorite Patagonian lake. Lago Carrera is ours. It’s

the jewel of Aysén, a lake bluer than the sky, bigger than the map, longer than the road, and wider than the lenses of our cameras. Too big to fit on one page of praise, in one paragraph of crazy over-the-top adjectives, although it deserves every one. Lago Carrera is short for Lago General Carrera, which is the name Chileans give to their western half of a vast lake that spans the Andes and whose eastern, Argentinean, portion is known as Lago Buenos Aires. One wonders if such stubbornly national names are really necessary. Apparently the first people, the Mapuche Indians, who lived in the area before Europeans arrived, called it lake Chelenko or something similar. *Chelenko* is the Mapuche word for newborn *guanacos* (the southernmost members of the *llama* family, endemic to Patagonia).

All hyperbole aside, this is really a giant lake, the second largest lake in South America, after Lake Titicaca on the border between Peru and Bolivia. And its size is hardly why we love it. Lago Carrera is simply the most intensely and beautifully colored lake we’ve ever seen.



*Unearthly blue—rapids at the start of the Río Baker near the town of Puerto Bertrand, Aysén*



*Along the Río Baker below Lago Bertrand. On its journey to the Pacific, the Baker becomes the largest volume river in Chile making it an irresistible target for those who see profit rather than beauty in its turquoise water.*



*The Río Baker  
at its confluence  
with the small  
and muddy Río  
Chacabuco.*



*The sublime water of the Río Baker, the most important and iconic of many rivers in Aysén*

*White on blue: the rapids at the start of the Río Baker,*





*Pure power—the salto or falls at la Confluencia, where the Río Baker joins with the Río Nef.*



*Lago Carrera. Its full name is Lago General Carrera, but locals are beginning to call it Lago Chelenko, the indigenous name.*

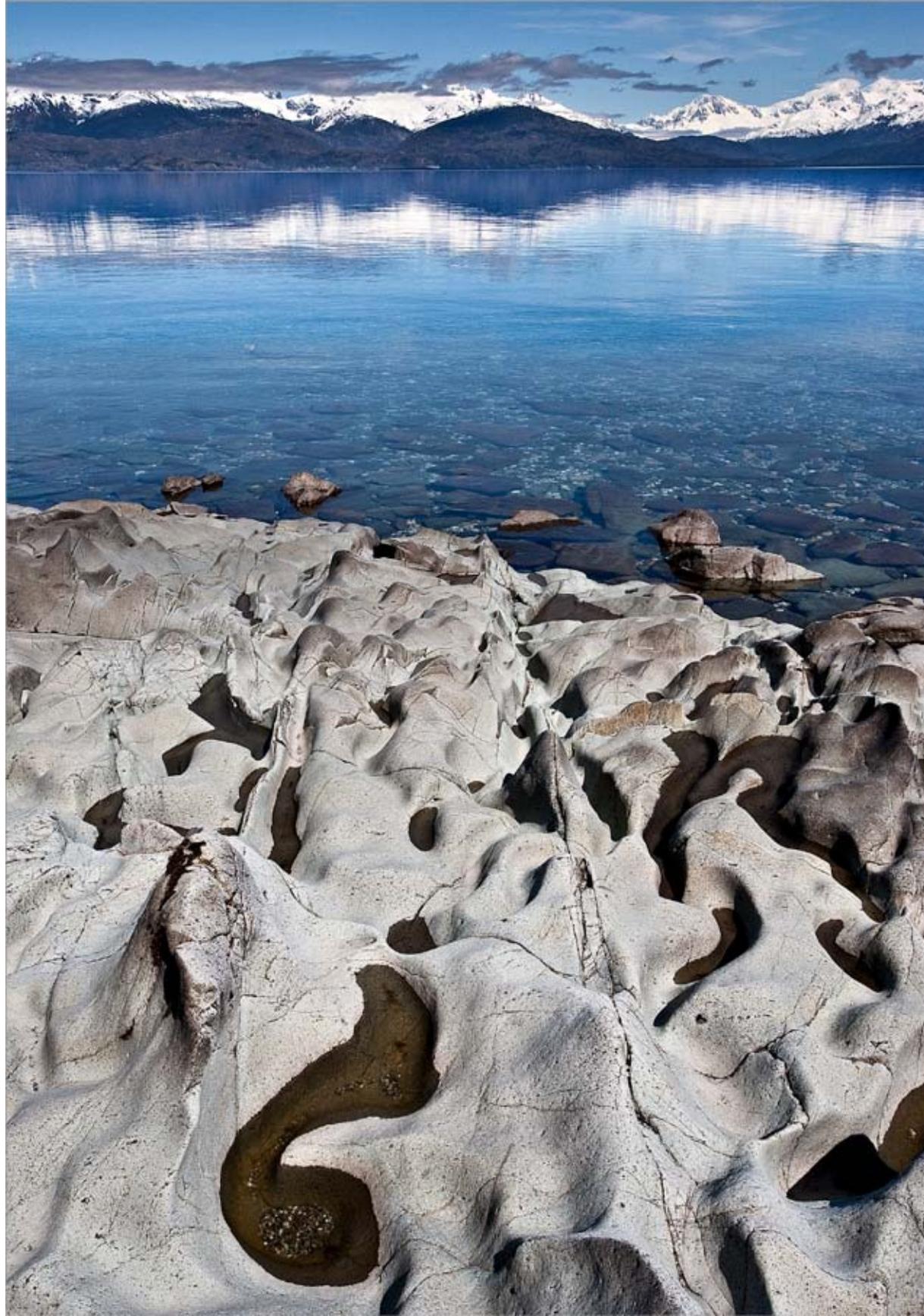


*Even on a stormy day, Lago Carrera, in the heart of Aysén, is always bluer than the sky.*



*Looking across  
Lago Carrera from  
Puerto Guadal  
toward the peaks of  
the Cordón Cristal.*

*Lago Carrera,  
looking west  
toward the  
San Valentín  
group of peaks.*



*Building storm over Lago Carrera*





*A windless afternoon turns Lago Carrera into a mirror.*



*Foxtail grasses overlooking the Paso de Llaves, or Keyhole, the narrowest spot on the Lago Carrera.*



*Late afternoon reflections on Lago Carrera: the Cordón Cristal, or Crystal Range, and Isla Macías.*

# THE MARBLE CAVERNS OF LAGO CARRERA

THE BLUE LIGHT that seems to rise from the waters of Lago Carrera never disappoints, but it is at its very strangest inside the marble caverns eroded by wave action over centuries at the base of steep cliffs and stone stacks near the lake's western end. The rock here is real marble. And locals know the most prominent of these improbable formations as la Catedral de Mármol and la Capilla de Mármol the Marble Cathedral and the Marble Chapel. And there are multiple caves in the lakeside cliffs that have no name at all.

An improbable vein of marble runs north to south, clear across the western end of this giant lake. The rock is a swirling mix of shades of white and gray. The marble appears near the semi-abandoned mining town of Puerto Sanchez on the northern shore; forms the low cliffs that encircle a large island, Isla Panicini; then surfaces as a large peninsula beside the port town of Puerto Tranquilo; and finally reappears in a few small caves on the southern shore of the lake near

Puerto Guadal. Why marble? Why here and nowhere else along the lake? Questions we put to all our geologist friends—questions they haven't yet answered.

At Bahía Mansa, Gentle Bay, a few miles east of Puerto Tranquilo, a desperately steep dirt road winds down to a hidden boat landing. A frontier post between reality and unreality. Ten minutes later your small boat enters a private universe, a private world of sculpted marble and haunting blue light.

Your gaze doesn't stop, doesn't even pause, at the lake's surface, but dives beneath the water like the marble cliffs themselves, plunging down into a blue clarity, 20 feet, 30 feet, more, each fissure, each detail of the rock still crystal-clear under the water. An impossible lake filled with impossible blue light. Without the photographs as evidence you might think it was only a dream. It wasn't, but it is.



*Real marble is relatively rare in nature, but the combination of marble and turquoise water is rarer still.  
And sculptured marble caverns filled with blue water are totally unique.  
The water did it, hollowing out caverns and rooms in lakeside cliffs as stormy waves ground gravel against the rock.*



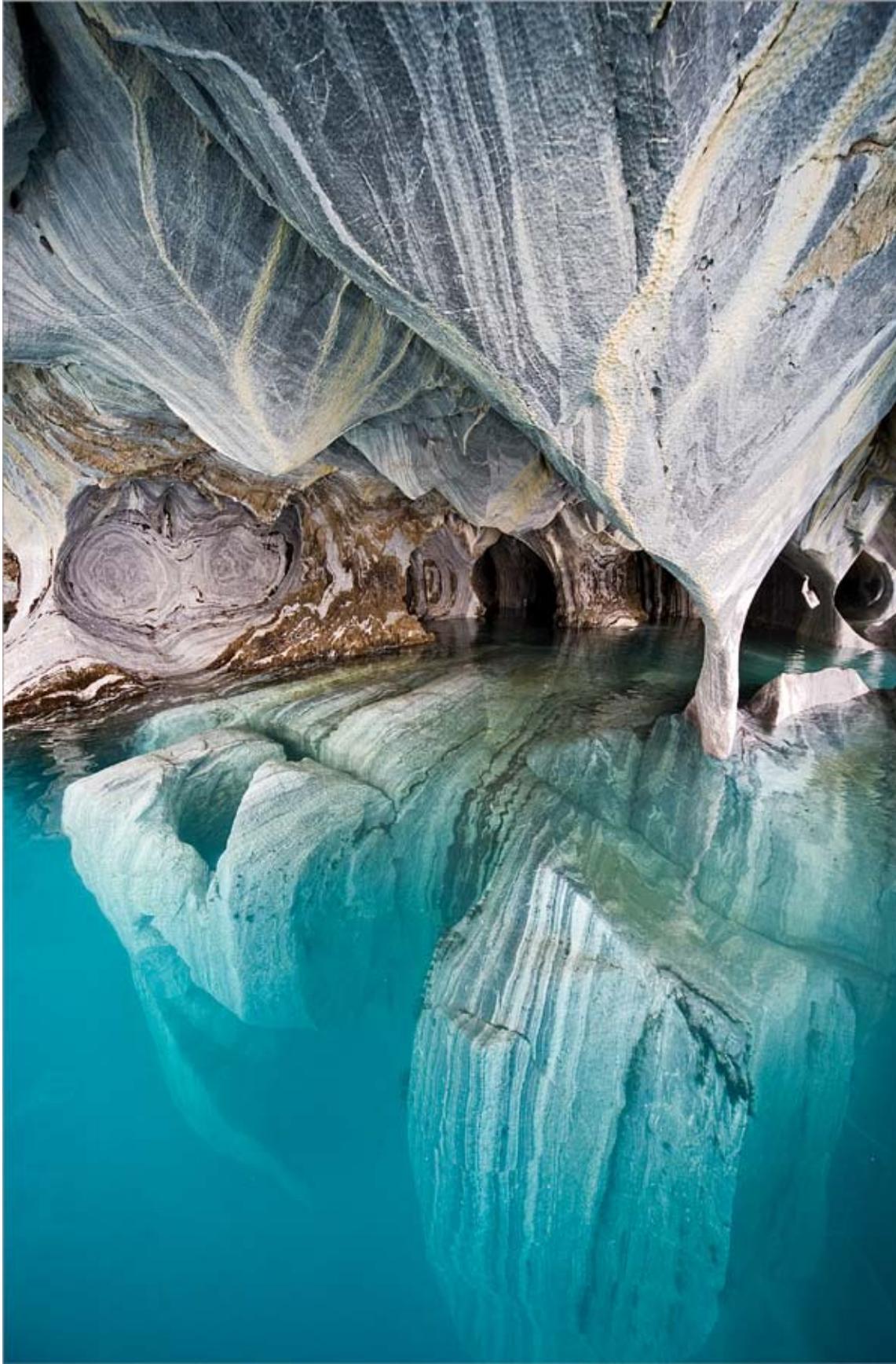
*Inside the marble caverns  
of Lago Carrera near the  
town of Puerto Tranquilo.*



*Looking out at Isla Macías from inside la Capilla de Mármol, or Marble Chapel.*

*Transparent water  
and shining stone  
in the Marble  
Caverns.*





*As much marble  
below the water  
as above.*

*In la Catedral  
de Mármol, or  
Marble Cathedral,  
Puerto Tranquilo,  
Lago Carrera.*



*Sculptured marble  
pillars on  
Isla Panicini,  
Lago Carrera.*





*Formations inside la Catedral de Mármol,  
the Marble Cathedral, near Puerto Tranquilo, Lago Carrera, Aysén.*

*Another wet passage from  
one cavern to anohter,  
Catedral de Mármol,  
the Marble Cathedral.*



## DRY PATAGONIA

### THE STEPPES OF EASTERN AYSÉN

THIS IS THE OTHER PATAGONIA, the one that sheep-herders and gauchos know and sing about. Fingers of the eastern steppes of Argentinean Patagonia that push across the border to capture whole watersheds on the western, Chilean, side. The steppes of eastern Aysén are vast semi-arid valleys, a sharp and prickly landscape covered with bushes that grab you and stab you, *coirón* bunchgrass and spiky *calafate* plants, round pillows of *neneo* that look innocent and hide thousands of thorns, valleys forever stark, never lush. Where the sky is full of fast-moving clouds that seldom bring much rain. Where trees are short, almost stunted, always wind-swept, and the scattered beech forests are open and easy to walk through. Where the

valley bottoms are wide savannahs, and lines of sight extend for miles and miles, only stopping when they run into a snow-capped peak on a far horizon.

This steppe country has its own minimalist beauty—ridge lines patrolled by condors and eagles, *guanacos* taking dust baths on dusty plains or standing sentinel on lonely crags, pumas whose presence you can feel although you're not likely to ever see one. A landscape to explore on horseback, a landscape where Patagonian winds live up to their reputation, a landscape that completes the wild variety, the crazy-quilt patchwork of life zones that make Unknown Patagonia so hard to describe, so easy to love.



*Fast-moving clouds, spiky dwarf trees, semi-arid grasslands—the real Patagonian steppe.*



*Wide open spaces and wild weather: steppes, savannahs and grasslands. This open landscape seems empty; it isn't. The future Patagonia National Park being created in and around the Chacabuco Valley in southern Aysén has surprising biodiversity. This valley was once the heart of a vast Patagonian estancia, or sheep ranch, and is only now recovering from generations of overgrazing.*



*Guanacos, the southernmost cousins of Andean llamas, newly welcomed in Valle Chacabuco.*



*Autumn tones color the meadows in the Chacabuco Valley as the first snow reclaims the summits.*



*While herds of guanacos, from a few dozen to a few hundred, graze on bunchgrass and thornbushes, a sentinel, poised above the grazing band, always keeps a lookout for pumas.*

## WET PATAGONIA

### THE COAST OF PALENA & AYSÉN

WHERE ELSE does the climate change so dramatically in such a short distance? Like Chile, Chilean Patagonia is narrow, a ribbon of land unrolled between the Andes and the sea.

As one travels west toward the coast from the relatively dry frontier with Argentina, it seems each mile brings more clouds, more rain. With each mile, Patagonia turns greener, wetter. In Palena, along the coast, 20 feet of rain a year is not unusual. A real rain forest, but a temperate rain forest. Cool and misty. The perfect nursery for giant trees.

But as intriguingly different as the coast of Palena and Aysén is from the interior, it is even less well known, less visited. The coast of Unknown Patagonia is even more unknown than the rest of Patagonia. Even harder to get to. Even harder to grasp. This southern coastline is a wilderness confusion of islands, fjords, and channels that makes

southeast Alaska look open and friendly by comparison.

Every now and then a narrow road snakes down to a small port, a fishing village on the coast. But for the most part, this complex coastline is empty of people, yet full of non-human life. Whales breed here, sea lions roar with no one to hear them, hundreds of islands wait for the first sea kayakers to camp overnight on their rocky headlands.

One inland marine passage, among countless others, leads tourist catamarans to Laguna San Rafael, where a giant arm of the Northern Ice Field drops into the salty Pacific water. Icebergs calve off and drift away, and the tourists too drift off, sipping Pisco sours in glasses filled with thousand-year ice. And an hour later, the coast is as empty, as mysterious, as far away from people and their passions as ever, as it has been for thousands of year. Wet Patagonia. Empty Patagonia. Full Patagonia.



*Fiordo Puyuhuapi, a tranquil arm of the Pacific, far from the open sea, in northern Aysén.*



*A sea lion colony on the coast of Palena.*



*Fjords have always been obvious entries to the interior of Unknown Patagonia.  
Today the pristine environment of many coastal fjords is threatened by all-too-careless salmon farming.*



*The Northern Ice Field drops into the sheltered water of Laguna San Rafael, not really a lagoon or lake but a sheltered branch of the Pacific.*

*Icebergs in Laguna San Rafael beneath unnamed coastal peaks.*



## FOUR SEASONS

## THOUSANDS OF COLORS

THE AUSTRAL YEAR TURNS on an antarctic axis of wild weather and changing light, turns and turns—sometimes it spins out of control. “*Las cuatro estaciones en un solo día*,” (all four seasons in one day), the locals say. And it’s almost true. Some days it’s literally true.

Skies full of fast-moving clouds, short showers, and long rainbows, but no lightning, never any thunder.

Tree-covered hillsides, bright red in spring with *notro* blossoms, multi-hued red in autumn as the leaves of native beech forests slip toward the hottest end of the spectrum.

Meadows choked with wildflowers, color conquering central Patagonia in waves. First the purple of early lupine. Suddenly the valley floors near Coyhaique and Mañihuales turn solid purple-violet.

Then the orange of the *Michay* bushes. Carpets of yellow *dientes de leones*, dandelions, spread out below the peaks, and soon after a second season of yellow—woody yellow lupine head-high. And always the ubiquitous red-blossoming trees, *notros* or *ciruelillos*, Chilean fire bush, blooming month after month.

And just when nothing new seems possible, after a long summer of spiky thorny bushes, *calafate*, *pimpinelas*, and endless forest greens, autumn’s festival of change kicks into gear: *ñirre* and *lenga* leaves, starting slow, building momentum, smoldering into flames, finally going nuts, off the charts. Not simple red like New England maples, not pure gold like Rocky Mountain aspens, but the full spectrum. All the warmest of warm colors, a rainbow of yellows, oranges, reds, even purples. Colors to warm the heart. The strongest colors of the South.



*Retamo, or  
Scotch Broom,  
and chocho, or  
lupine, in the  
Mañihuales  
Valley.*



*The full spectrum of color in the chochos, or lupine, on the shores of Lago Carrera, near the village of Puerto Guadal, with the Crystal Range in the background.*

*Woody yellow lupine near Puerto Tranquilo. Looking up the northern arm of the lake toward Bahía Murta.*





*Chilean fire bush, or notro—sometimes a bush, sometimes a tree, always bright red.  
Looking east across Lago Carrera past Isla Macías toward Argentina.*



*The red hues of autumn in Aysén, a rainbow of ñirre leaves mixed with “old man’s beard,” the hanging moss of Patagonian forests.*



*Multicolored ñirre  
on the Ibáñez Pass,  
in late April,  
high autumn in  
central Aysén.*



*An explosion of color in the mixed ñirre and lenga forests on the Cofré Pass, central Aysén.*



*Ñirre trees in autumn beside the calm waters of a mallín, the local name for a typical sinkhole pond.*



*White lichen  
on a forest  
floor where ash  
once fell from  
the eruption of  
Volcán Hudson.*

*Limestone towers in  
the lenga forests on  
the Portezuelo Ibáñez,  
or Ibáñez Pass, Aysén.*



*Autumn álamos near Puerto Ibáñez. These Lombardy poplars were widely planted by the early settlers in Aysén.*





*Lenga trees in late autumn push their deep red color all the way up to timberline above the north shore of Lago Carrera.*



*First snow, last color, in the ñirre forests near Cerro Castillo, Aysén.*

# CITIZENS OF THE SOUTH

## BIRDS, ANIMALS & SETTLERS

UNKNOWN PATAGONIA is landscape writ large. A photographer friend describing his first visit to central Chilean Patagonia told us: “It seemed to me the way the world must have looked the day after creation.” And it’s true. This Patagonian landscape is vast and varied, pure and mysterious, and although it isn’t full of houses and cities, isn’t crisscrossed by motorways, it isn’t empty either. This is a populated landscape. A landscape full of locals. Although most locals aren’t people. We are a minority species in Patagonia.

The real citizens of the South are its birds, its creatures. They were here first. We hope they’ll always be here.

The feathered citizens of the South are an unlikely mix. Condors, of course, symbolize the Andes, but flocks of flamingos seem almost out of character, although they too are natives. The smallest owl in the world, the *chuncho*, hangs out in Patagonia, and one of the shyest and showiest of birds, the Magellanic woodpecker with its flame-red head. There are seabirds, blown inland by fierce winds; and there are songbirds like the *chucáo*, who hides in the underbrush at your feet

and whose cascade of notes is the most beautiful sound of the South.

There are few large mammals here. The *guanacos*, southernmost member of the *llama* family (technically the South American *camelids*) are ubiquitous on the steppelands of eastern Aysén. Much rarer is the Chilean deer, the *huemul*. Despite its emblematic presence on the Chilean national coat of arms, the *huemul* is threatened and endangered; fewer than 3,000 remain. And there are critters that aren’t found anywhere else—like the mountain *vizcacha*, a furry cliff dweller that looks like a cross between a rabbit and a marmot.

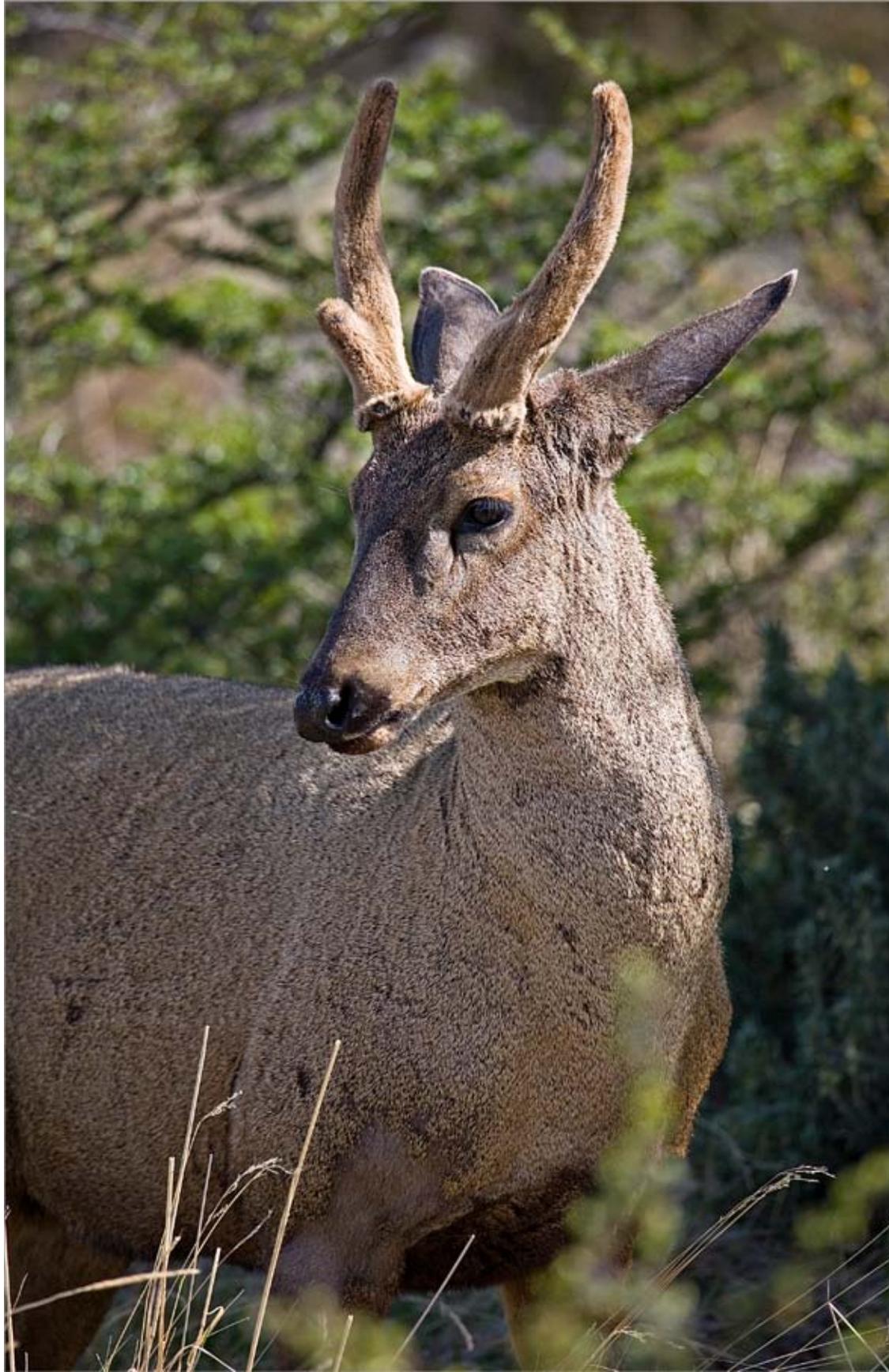
And who is left? The *colonos*, the European settlers, are relative newcomers here. Many of their grandparents trekked across the pampas of Argentina to reach Aysén and Palena. Like all pioneers they were amazingly tough and still are. Like all pioneers, Patagonian settlers were more focused on subduing nature than celebrating it. But in a couple of generations they put down deep roots. Today’s *patagón* loves the land. Knows what a privilege it is to live far from the traffic jams of the capital. To breathe pure air. Drink pure water. To be a citizen of the South.

*A carpintero de magallanes,  
or Magellanic woodpecker,  
red-headed denizen of deep  
and shady forests.*





*A chuncho or austral pygmy owl, the smallest owl in the world, a Patagonian native.*



*A huemul or  
Patagonian deer—  
today an endangered  
species.*



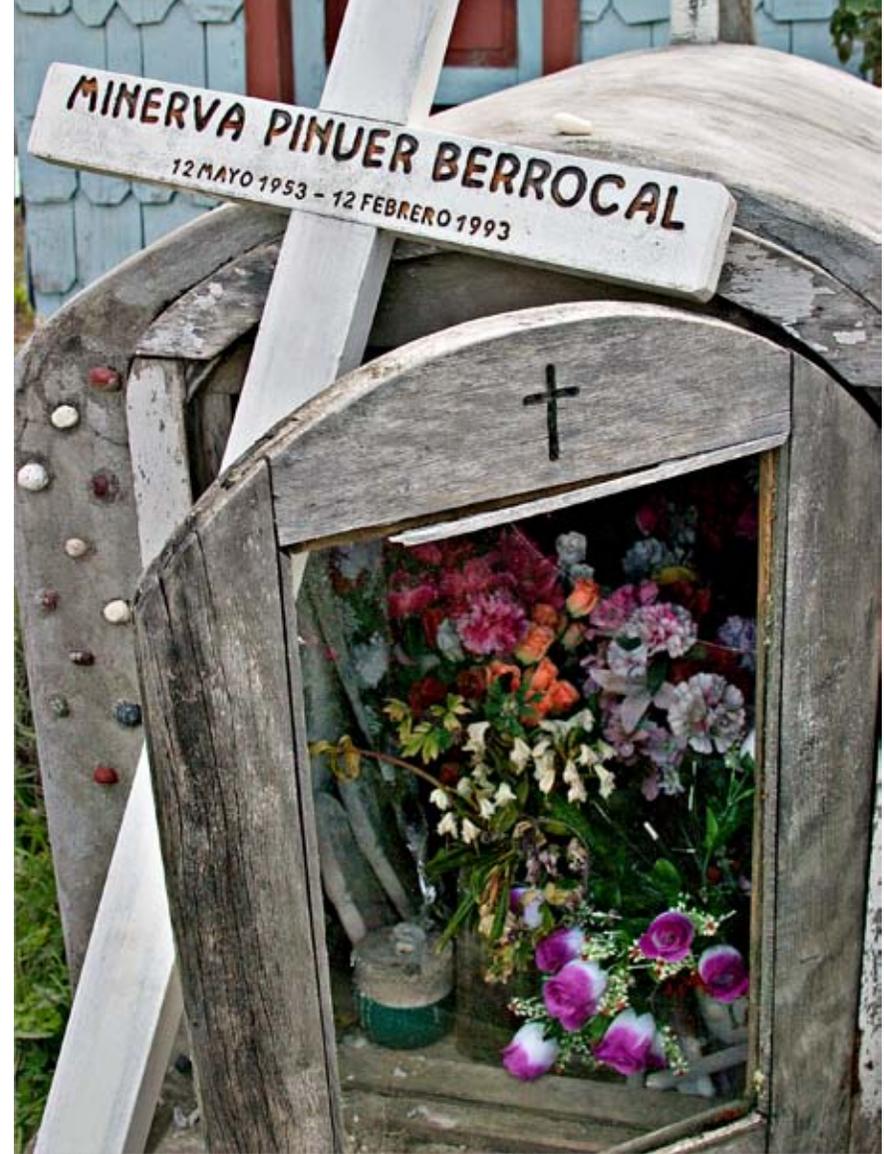
*The mountain vizcacha, a shy cliff dweller, spends long motionless hours looking down across the steppe from its rocky perches.*



*Patagonian newborns, young guanacos known as chulengos, prance and play across the steppes of eastern Aysén in December.*



*Patagonians, los patagones, are tough, independent, and handsome, proud of their culture, wedded to their land. Many patagonian traditions, like graves marked by miniature houses, come from the Island of Chiloé, off the mainland to the north. But oxcarts, gaucho ballads, Basque berets, and bitter mate tea sipped through metal straws are universal symbols of the South.*



## PARADISE FOUND

IS BEAUTY ALWAYS THREATENED? Is perfection always prelude to plunder? Undeniably, it's only an accident that Chile's secret south is so unspoiled, so pristine. An accident of geography: nature threw up countless roadblocks, literal roadblocks, effectively blocking any roads from the populous north, effectively putting the brakes on modern industrial-scale development before it ever got started. What luck! The result is a nearly perfect place. Nearly unspoiled. Nearly unknown. But luck can run out. And many in the South are wondering if Patagonia's luck is running out.

Why? Patagonia has rivers, lots of rivers, free-flowing rivers, rivers you can drink from without worrying about pollution. But when engineers and businessmen look at rivers, they see dams and power lines and profits. A number of questionable government deals during the troubled years of the Pinochet dictatorship gave ostensible control of Patagonia's rivers to foreign energy companies, and thus began a campaign to dam every free-flowing river in Palena and Aysén to

## OR LOST? . . . .

generate electricity, and then to send the power north to central Chile via the largest and ugliest high-tension power transmission lines in the world. Not just one power line but two, side by side, with towers hundreds of feet high, a scenic blight that Patagonia would never recover from. It hasn't happened yet; it shouldn't happen. But it may.

Even the most beautiful, most poetic landscape can't defend itself. It needs friends. Defenders. And who will speak up for Patagonia if no one knows what's there? It's easy to call Palena and Aysén "Chile's Secret South," and it's true that most Chileans still don't know what a national treasure is hidden in the far South. They haven't visited Unknown Patagonia. They haven't seen it. They haven't fallen in love with it. So those who have need to tell the story, show the pictures, praise this landscape, and invite others to visit it. Share the South while it's still perfect.

Perhaps we can keep it that way.

*¡Ojalá!* Let's hope so!



*Sunset on Lago Carrera, central Aysén, the largest, most beautiful lake in Chile.  
The largest, most beautiful lake that most people have never heard of ...*



*Cerro Castillo  
in spring.*

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