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Separated by nearly half a continent, southern Chile's rugged Torres del Paine National Park and the spectacular Iguazú Falls that divide northern Argentina and southern Brazil couldn't be more dissimilar. The first offers vistas of jagged mountains and fields of ice while the second boasts lush jungle paths and plummeting walls of water. The distinctive sites, though, are being increasingly linked as two of South America's most iconic natural wonders and among the can't-miss destinations by travelers in search of some of the world's most spectacular scenery.

Depending on the rainfall, 160 to 260 separate waterfalls can be seen at Iguazú Falls.

ON THE COVER
Guanacos in Torres del Paine National Park in southern Chile.



On the scene in South America

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE. LAN Airlines and regional carriers such as Aerolíneas Argentinas regularly make the 90-minute flight from Buenos Aires' Jorge Newbery Airport to Puerto Iguazú. Round-trip fares start at about \$118, excluding taxes and fees.

GETTING AROUND. Although buses regularly ply the routes from the airport to Puerto Iguazú and Iguazú National Park, the easiest way to get around is by car. Roads and signs are dependable and rates with AVIS average around \$45 a day for a compact sedan.

DETAILS. Argentina uses the Argentine peso, with a current exchange rate of about 3 pesos per dollar. More information about Argentina's Iguazú National Park can be found at iguazuargentina.com while Brazil's Parque Nacional do Iguaçu has its own site, cataratasdoiguacu.com.br/index_en.asp.

LODGING. The Hotel St. George in Puerto Iguazú is a decent option, given the area's expensive accommodations. The best rooms are on its upper floors and run about \$100 a night, double occupancy (breakfast included). More details can be found at hotelsaintgeorge.com/english/home.htm.

Known for its three peaked granite towers, Chile's Torres del Paine National Park proves it's far more than a one-hit wonder



The travelers took a catamaran across Torres del Paine's choppy Lake Pehoe.

If we had been postal workers, we could have been filming a commercial about how neither rain nor sleet nor snow would keep us from our rounds. Bundled up in waterproof outfits and backpack covers that instead made us look like chemical spill responders, my traveling companion, Geoff, and I wondered what we were getting ourselves into at the start of a four-day trek through Chile's Torres del Paine National Park.

The park, as we discovered, can be rather tempestuous in southern Chile's fall months (spring in the United States). The stunning scenery, well-maintained trails and wide range of lodging options, however, have combined to make Torres del Paine one of the most popular hiking destinations in the world.

In the end, we discovered why Torres is justly famous when we reached an overlook

offering a magnificent view of the three tower-like rock formations that give the park its name. And despite some less-than-ideal conditions, we found that getting there was actually more than half the fun.

The most well-traveled route forms a big "W," with its three upper tips leading to some of the park's principal attractions: Glacier Grey, an alpine valley known as Valle Frances, and the granite towers called Las Torres. On our first day, park rangers advised us to start with the 7-mile trail leading to Glacier Grey because recent snows had blocked the overlook for the towers and foul weather had obscured their peaks.

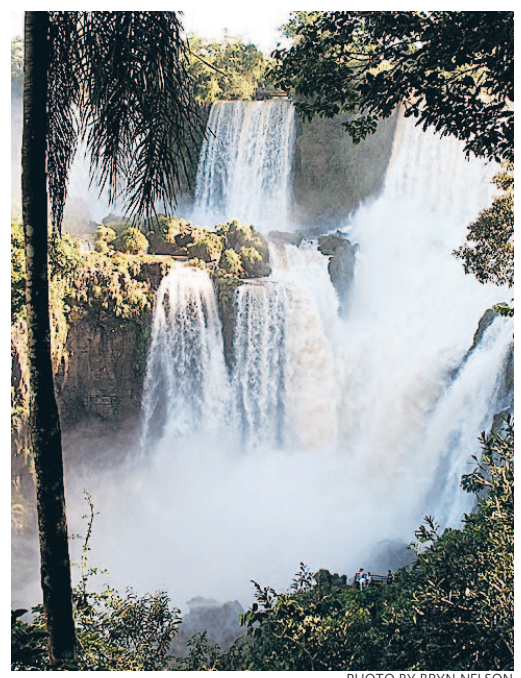
If the dramatic Andean landscape of Chile's Patagonia region was initially veiled by snow, rain and mist, its wildlife was surprisingly conspicuous. On our van ride to the park from the gateway city of Puer-

to Natales, we had seen several llama-like guanacos, a Chilean condor and fíandú, a smaller cousin of the ostrich. We also glimpsed Chilean flamingos, though the startling sight took a while to register, because I associated flamingos with more tropical climes, and southern Chile hardly qualifies as that.

We had plenty of time to think through our first impressions as we caught a catamaran across the park's choppy Lake Pehoe, hiked through the snow and mud along a small lake edged with stunted evergreens and continued beside the much larger Lake Grey.

Ice blue wonder

And then I saw it: My first iceberg. Against the slate-gray water, the small berg appeared startlingly blue and out of place. When the glacier itself appeared in the distance, the jagged wall of ice and its countless fissures



Located on the Brazil-Argentina border, parts of Iguazú Falls cascade 260 feet.

With water, water everywhere, visitors to Iguazú Falls can find new marvels around nearly every bend

The first sensation was something like this: Your stomach fills with butterflies, as if you've been peering over the edge of the lead car on a roller coaster, but you're really standing on a metal platform less than 5 feet above a gigantic horseshoe-shaped wall of water rushing down into a seething mass of foam and spray.

Then I saw tiny flecks of pepper that resolved themselves into hundreds of swift-like birds, swooping and diving into the roaring abyss and ducking behind the seemingly impenetrable curtain of white.

My introduction to the torrent dubbed the Devil's Throat

— perhaps the most astonishing feature of South America's Iguazú Falls — was both electrifying and more than a little unsettling. Rivalled in scale only by Africa's mammoth Victoria Falls, this UNESCO World Heritage Site straddling the border between Argentina and Brazil is an easy plane ride from Buenos Aires and makes an extraordinary side trip. And what's memorable by day is unforgettable around the full moon, when visitors can tour the falls by moonlight.

At some vantage points within Argentina's Iguazú National

See FALLS on D8

Torres del Paine National Park

Travel

CHILE from D7

and peaks spread across the valley behind it brought to mind a massive bluish meringue. The skies cleared toward twilight, and we admired the glacier's rough topography and the way it had gouged the rock around it during its gradual movement.

The day ended at a rustic lodge that greeted us and about 20 other hikers with bunk beds in tiny upstairs rooms and a common space with a fireplace on the ground floor.

The next morning, a challenging hour-long hike brought us even with the glacier's forward edge and within earshot of its creaking and groaning. Back-tracking down the first leg of the W, we eventually reached a surprisingly cushy lodge called Paine Grande. After blissfully hot showers and a decent pork dinner, we drank Chilean wine, laughed and discussed hiking strategies with tourists from England, the Netherlands, Spain and China.

Pummeled by the wind

Perhaps it was the lull in the weather and the relatively easy day that had fooled us into believing the worst was over. Maybe it was the beautiful rose-tinged dawn the next morning.

Either way, Geoff and I were pulling on our waterproof pants in anticipation of a hike to the park's "not-to-be-missed" Valle Frances when we saw the wind battering the Chilean flag on the flagpole outside. After an hour of hiking through pelting rain and wind gusts that easily topped 60 miles an hour, we were both soaked, miserable and unanimous in our decision to definitely miss the valley.

Fortunately, we returned to the lodge in time to catch a return catamaran and bus that would take us within a half-day's hike of our final goal: the towers. Again, we were spoiled by the just-opened Las Torres lodge, where we feasted on chicken and rice by gas lanterns and candlelight (the lodge was so new it didn't yet have electricity).

As we chatted with our new friends and dried our boots around a roaring fire, the

GETTING THERE. Reaching Torres del Paine requires some patience and planning. First, catch a flight to Chile's capital, Santiago (American Airlines, Delta and Avianca offer flights from JFK Airport, starting at about \$650 round-trip, excluding taxes and fees, in mid-November) and transfer to the southern city of Punta Arenas (LAN Airlines is a good choice; round-trip fares start at about \$310, excluding taxes and fees). Several bus services, such as Buses Fernandez, regularly make the three-hour trip from Punta Arenas to Puerto Natales, from where the park is accessible by bus or van. One way per person is about \$6.

ACCOMMODATIONS. Puerto Natales offers an abundance of equipment

IF YOU GO

rentals, transportation options and basic accommodations, such as the warm and cozy **Patagonia Adventure** hostel (apatagonia.com/index-en.html); \$30 for double occupancy, breakfast included. Finding a last-minute room can be a challenge in the high season of October through March, however. **Indigo**, a new boutique hotel with views of Puerto Natales' Last Hope Fjord, makes an excellent splurge after a hike through the park (www.indigopatagonia.com); rates start at \$195, double occupancy, breakfast included.

WHERE TO EAT. **El Maritimo**, on the Puerto Natales waterfront, serves excellent avocado and king crab appetizers,

tasty fish soup and a local specialty made with mashed potatoes and *cochayuyo* (seaweed). (56-61 414994; \$30 for two with wine). **Mesita Grande**, by the Plaza de Armas, serves amazing wood-oven pizzas and Toblerone mousse (56-61 411571; dinner for two runs about \$20).

DETAILS. Chile uses the Chilean peso, with a current exchange rate of about 522 pesos per dollar. Admission to Torres del Paine requires a one-time fee of about \$30 a person; you'll spend another \$100 when you first enter the country, as Chile is embroiled in a nasty tit-for-tat tourist entry fee dispute with the United States. For basic park information and useful maps, see www.torresdelpaine.com/ingles/index.asp.

colors and designs.

As we walked through the park, the butterflies were joined by tropical birds, raccoon-like coatimundis and a rather large crocodile basking in a quiet tributary.

Along the park's easy lower trail, Iguazú teased us with a few waterfalls tumbling into narrow ravines, with catwalks taking us directly over the cascades. After the trail turned upriver, though, we paused at increasingly breathtaking vantage points that gradually revealed a massive bilvel wall of water stretching behind an island in the middle of the churning water.

Small red tourist boats were darting upstream toward the base of the falls and returning with ecstatic but drenched sightseers. Walkways to some of the nearest falls gave us a sampling of the same effect as our glasses quickly misted over.

But far bigger sights awaited.

Bungee jumps and souvenirs

After a 20-minute train ride, we followed a sturdy metal walkway for less than a mile, crossing from island to island above the swift-moving Upper Iguazú River. The route halted at a viewing platform directly over the Devil's Throat formation, where white-knuckled tourists were edging along the railing while birds known as vencejos were diving to their homes behind the falls.

The Brazilian side of Iguazú Falls offers more panoramic views of the cascades, with another thrilling observation platform and rainbows arcing high in the air as if trying to bridge the considerable gap.

We were disappointed by Brazil's theme park-like approach, however, with its more pronounced emphasis on side attractions such as bungee jumping, a challenge course and a souvenir shop peddling gemstones and busy Brazilian dolls.

Most distressing of all was a museum display stating matter-of-factly that the entire region has lost an estimated 97 percent of its forest cover, mostly since 1930.

Even that sobering knowledge, however, couldn't dull the thrill of a moonlit tour of the falls back in Argentina. Only natural light illuminated our second train ride and hike across the catwalk to the Devil's Throat overlook, where the sound seemed especially magnified and the water appeared to simply disappear into a bottomless chasm. Billowing clouds of fine spray soaked anyone who lingered too long at the edge.

My glasses covered in droplets, I gazed in wonder at the roaring, frothing wall of shimmering water that was sending the butterflies in my stomach fluttering to new heights.



ISTOCK PHOTO

The rough topography of Glacier Grey in Patagonia's Torres del Paine National Park

Iguazú Falls

FALLS from D7

Park, the falls' 1½-mile-wide semicircular formation offers the illusion of being nearly surrounded by cascading water. The effect is understandable, given the more than 3.4 million gallons of water spilling from the Upper Iguazú River every second during periods of flood, the equivalent of more than five Olympic-size pools simultaneously dumping their con-

tents.

Depending on rainfall, anywhere from 160 to 260 individual falls can be seen along a wall of water that plunges more than 260 feet from its highest point.

Escorted by butterflies

But the park revealed its wonders gradually, starting with the real butterflies that hovered around my traveling companion, Geoff, and me, landing on our heads and arms and accompanying us virtually everywhere we went. Ones called Eighty-eights, named for the distinctive black and white "88" design on their wings. Red and blue ones. Blue and black. Black and orange — an almost limitless palette of