



# CHILE'S PATAGONIA

by **Joseph Pedro**



Rain pounds the front windshield of the Bell 407 helicopter, and a strong wind whips up through the valley and causes the aircraft to jolt. It throws me into a Chilean couple I haven't really met yet. I let out a squeal that pierces the noise-cancellation headphones; they smile at my conspicuous American anxiety. As I regain composure, the storm clouds pass through the cabin like spirits, and the helicopter engines rumble, loud enough to drown out any noise of an angry storm. The helicopter regains balance as we clear the top of a mountain peak and swoop down the other side, nearly brushing the top of the trees.

As we pull back up, the clouds break and the disorienting grays explode into a fairytale blue that falls into lush green—a vision I thought was only found in Bob Ross' imagination. With the calming smell of clean, after-rain air, the helicopter glides comfortably on. As viewed from high in the air, the endless, undisturbed nature looks prehistoric. I almost expect to see a dinosaur make its way through the brush and gulp from the flash watersheds. The pilot must have been thinking the same thing as he puts on the soundtrack to *Jurassic Park*—a tune that clearly transcends political borders as the Chileans and I laugh and clap with excitement. “Señoras y señores,” the pilot says as he steers the helicopter closer to a massive glacier, “Bienvenido a la Patagonia.”

In a land this vast and unspoiled, exact political boundaries are difficult to determine and disputes over land arise between the countries of Chile and Argentina, who both own halves of the southern section of the South American continent. Chilean Patagonia begins at the Pacific Ocean in the city of Valdivia and follows through the Rio Calle-Calle toward the cordillera of the Andes. The Chilean side also encompasses a section of the “Ring of Fire” that contains the majority of active volcanoes. Besides Valdivia, Puerto Montt, and Coyhaique, much of Chilean Patagonia is uninhabited except for small villages, farms, and summer fishing outposts. The unpredictable conditions of the region make it one of the most difficult areas to live in, let alone navigate and explore. There is only one company licensed to explore by land, air, and water, and that's Chilean-based **Nomads of the Seas** ([www.nomadsoftheseas.com](http://www.nomadsoftheseas.com))

Before boarding the ship I will call home for the next seven days, I arrive at Nomads HQ in **Puerto Montt**. It's a luxurious cabin-like structure with panoramic views of the water. A much-needed spread of food is available offering fruits and vegetables, assortments of cured meats and cheeses, soups, and fresh shellfish—definitely a good culinary omen for what's in store. Here, I meet my fellow travelers. There are two Chilean couples, two boys who work for Nomads (they won the trip at the company Christmas party), and five Texan fly fishers—a unique mix to say the least. We sit through a brief information and safety demonstration (that in addition to describing every horrible emergency situation that could happen, introduces us to the ship, and also gives us a laundry list of equipment that we'll be using). Afterward, we are led through a downpour to the Atmosphere. It's a small (120-foot), industrial-like vessel that is unlike any “cruise ship” I have ever seen—then again, this isn't your typical cruise. We look like astronauts about to take off. A line of engineers, chefs, captains, a concierge, wait staff, and the rest of the 32 staff members are lined up to shake our hands as we enter the ship. Shoes off, Champagne in hand, I take one last glimpse at my cell phone and bid a final goodbye to the outside world.

When Magellan first explored the area in the 1520s, he most certainly did not navigate Patagonia in this kind of luxury. Inside the main floor of the ship I find a combo lounge, dining room, and a fully-stocked, circular bar area. For entertainment, there are eco-DVDs, books about the area, leftover fiction from former passengers, and board games—I won't need to use any of these. Outside on the main floor, there's a wraparound deck and an outdoor smoking area that contains baskets of locally made wool ponchos, so we won't freeze while enjoying sunrise or sunset. Upstairs is half occupied with the spa, thalassotherapy tubs, a treadmill, and sauna, while the other uncovered half is the sun deck that offers a front-row seat to all the action. The least used parts of the ship are our cabins.

While my trip only has 13 people on it, the ship has room for up to 28 guests. Passengers opt to stay in one of the ten deluxe twin, two deluxe king, or two premium king cabins. I had a twin all to myself, and it was perfect for a snug night's sleep, but it could be tight for two.



Photo: Nomads of the Seas



Photo: Joseph Pedro

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As the people who book this trip are looking for adventure, the ship primarily serves as home base for meals and shut-eye.

Every Nomads trip is divided into two groups, either the Ultimate Fly Fishing Program (the five Texans) or Wildlife Adventures Program (everyone else). If space permits, you can, of course, switch groups for the day. Naturally, the eco-group tends to be filled with a mix of adventurous free spiritis, bird watchers, nature enthusiasts, scientists, and, like me, those who have no idea what they are about to get themselves into! While this eclectic mix of people can create some initial discomfort, the spirit of adventure ultimately ties everyone together.

Magellan and his crew called the area *patagón*, a name, through popular mythology, that means “The Land of Big Feet.” It was commonly believed that the explorer first found giant human footprints and subsequently saw these people standing twice the height of the average person. This oversize theme permeated many explorers’ accounts of Patagonia, from giant birds to giant bones. While giant humans are dismissed today as exaggerated storytelling, I’m able to understand how the size and scale of this vast wilderness can play tricks on the eyes and challenge what we know about the world. Comprehending the scope and diversity of the area through immersion is Nomads’ basic philosophy. You’ll explore the area by air with the Atmosphere’s helicopter; you’ll explore the waters on the ship’s ocean kayaks, jet skiffs, touring kayaks, jet boats, pontoon rafts, RIB Zodiac, and drift boats; and by land on your own two feet.

After a wonderful dinner, I enjoy a drink on the sundeck and try to keep my eyes open for the sunset, but I can’t make it until 10 P.M. That night, I have a rough sleep on the rough seas, hardly able to get more than a few minutes here and there. The next morning, Cecelia, the ship’s concierge, comes to my room with a fresh mug of coffee. As the caffeine courses through my body, I suddenly realize the boat has stopped. I open the lightproof curtains, and the view before me

is astonishing. I am in a new world south of Puerto Montt called **Piti Palena**. Half wanting to just sit there and reflect and half wanting to run out the door, I choose the latter. The only people upstairs eating are the Texan fishermen. I sit with them and load up on delicious fruits and a made-to-order omelet. After some awkward “good mornings,” I listen in on a titillating confab about what the best fly-fishing reel is to use in Patagonia. (Note: It’s a different pole than they use in Texas.) I never thought I’d be so happy to see the faces of my eco group, even if most of them don’t speak much English.

Both groups utilize the helicopter to get to their designated activity, and a bulletin board tells us exactly what time we leave. My friends in Santiago told me that it would be warm down south and to leave my heavy, winter jacket with them—they were wrong. It’s freezing and raining. Thank God, the ship has a wet room with everything you could possibly need. I put on a pair of super-warm, waterproof overalls and opt against sunscreen (it was raining). I wait, eagerly anticipating the arrival of the helicopter to whisk us away to our activity, exploring **Melimoyu Glacier**. Here is where my *Jurassic Park* chopper ride takes place; we ultimately land safely, thankfully, on a hilly and rocky stretch of land near the massive glacier.

Our guide Gian Paolo Sanino (GPS) is a blessing. He’s not only handsome and interesting, he’s a world-renowned marine mammal researcher. We walk toward the glacier, but first GPS talks to us all in both in English and Spanish about the alien environs. His enthusiasm is quickly infectious, as my group is fascinated about everything from pebbles to moss. GPS then points to striations in the rocks and has us inspect the plant life. With his Socratic approach, we conclude that the glacier is actually part of a massive volcano.

It reaches so high into the sky that it pierces the cloud layer. It reminds me of a mythical god, sitting there so high with his head lingering in the heavens. The size and scope, along with the brilliant blue hues, are hard for my urban eyes to grasp. Everyone eagerly explores the cracks and crevices in the ice. I drink the dripping water and



delightedly play with floating ice chunks in the base lake. What I use for my recreation, though, are all troubling signs, GPS points out. The glacier is melting the fastest he has ever seen. These signs of a changing Patagonia became more and more evident throughout the trip.

Later, we return frozen, wet, and badly sunburned, but the staff is waiting for us as we disembark. After a big hug, Cecelia gives us much-needed hot chocolate, and then helps us to take off our jumpsuits and shoes—a kind of spoiling I haven't had since I was four. Then, we sit for an expertly prepared, three-course lunch accompanied by local wines. With half a second to digest, we suit up and spend the late afternoon getting familiar with the sea kayaks. Most are for two people, but there are some made for one. GPS warns, as we explore the inshore island of **Marin Balmaceda**, that the kayak is the ultimate test of a relationship. As we reconnoiter the various little islands and passageways, the fighting (in Spanish) between the Chilean couples is almost as entertaining as discovering the untouched wilderness.

The rocky landscape of the islands isn't ideal for plant growth, but after thousands of years, the greenery has flourished in fascinating, bizarre shapes. Ferns cling upside down on rock ledges, thick Tarzan-like vines wrap the island, and hefty trees grow from the water. The age of the flora is evident in the size and scope of the plants—here ferns have trunks instead of stalks.

Returning, now sore, the staff is there to take care of us. I thought lunch was the height of pampering, but I was wrong. After a quick glass of mulled wine, I hit the shower, and return to the main cabin for cocktail hour. I sit outside on the smoking patio, soaking in every second of the outdoors. I brave the sunless, rainy evening with a warm poncho, and Cecelia comes around with the best caipirinha I have ever had. She then comes back with hors d'œuvre that include gorgeous, fresh shrimp ceviche; King Crab toast; and Camembert cheese toast with papaya jam. This pattern of delicious appetizers continues every night on the trip. Captain Victor Espinoza joins our table so we can ask questions. Eager to know why the night was so turbulent, he simply explains that it was, "Highly unusual." We all acceptingly nod. That evening, as the boat rocks, we come to learn he's a liar.

Cecelia's knocking the next morning is unwelcome. Despite fatigue, I race again to my window, anxious to see what's behind the curtain, and I am greeted by another new world. Surrounded by jagged mountains and virgin forests, we're in the calm waters of **Tic-Toc Bay**. I see the first inch of blue skies and sun since Santiago. Contact lens-less, I squint and see a brown creature curiously peering into my window. At breakfast, I find we all had a morning visitor. It was a South American sea lion, and these guys love checking out the ship and swimming up to the windows. On a previous trip, one of the lions even decided to hop on board.

We gear up in full-body, red survival suits and are excited to take a ride on the Zodiac RIB (rigid inflatable boat). The US Navy mostly uses this vessel, and it can hit a top speed of about 70 mph. To not disturb the wildlife, we

don't go that fast. We cruise comfortably, with splashes of the bay water sprinkling our sunburned faces. Cruising around the inshore and offshore islands, we spot a Magellanic penguin bobbling in the water. The engines of the boat shut off and reveal the rhythmic beats of the waves crashing into the jagged shore. Popping his little head above the water, we watch him for nearly half an hour. I contemplate how confused he must be to see this gaggle of red creatures, flashing cameras, yelling strange things (strange even to me) like, "que lindo." We beg to stay longer, and we do. We didn't yet realize that penguins are like squirrels in these parts.

I've never been one for bird watching, but once again, GPS' excitement about each species we come across rubs off on all of us. Some of the birds here are quite mythical. The Flightless Steamer Duck is something out of folklore—a creature that Anansi the Spider may have come across. This duck can't fly, but instead flails his wings to travel across vast waters. We learn in this moment, that no matter what language each of us speaks, "awwww" is universal. We gaze at sea lion colonies with hundreds of sea lions and pups clinging to the rocky cliffs. The grown sea lions toss the pups into the water and hilarity ensues. Continuing on, we spend another large amount of time watching the endangered Black-browed albatross. The blue traces of sky have now turned black, the waters rough, and our RIB is wobbling a little more violently. GPS starts the engine so we can make it back; the albatross seems to have had enough as well and takes flight, stretching his near 11-foot wingspan to launch out of the water. The bird circles us and like Samuel Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*—our hovering bird was also bad luck. The storm begins, and we get to see just what the RIB can do. We hit waves, soar for a few seconds, and crash back down. The sprinkle of ocean water turns into waves crashing on board (thank God for waterproof suits), we smile like little kids as we zoom through the once quiet and peaceful waterways. We are early, and the staff rushes to get our hot chocolate ready. After changing, I return to the main deck. The storm breaks, and the sun's rays pierce through the clouds, illuminating the green mountain-tops, and miraculously a double rainbow appears.

We spend another rainy day in Tic-Toc cruising the waters, this time by kayak spotting more penguins and the threatened red-legged cormorants. These birds use the natural caves to mate, but to crack down on illegal drug trade in the area, the government blew up these enclaves leaving limited places for the birds to mate. Upon returning, the staff tells us that there's a surprise waiting for us on **Trebol Lake**. We take the jet boat that navigates the small waterways with ease—its high engine allows it to nearly glide over land. While we're all complaining of being cold, wet, and motion sick, we immediately suck it up when we spot half of the staff working hard to make us lunch...lakeside. Near a fire, we toast with Champagne, enjoy a fresh assortment of cheeses and meats, drink wine, and eat gorgeous seafood pasta. We return to the ship stuffed, and the chopper pilot Francisco Esquivel has yet another surprise for us. He tells us to immediately suit up and get in the helicopter. He takes us 6,699 feet

South American Sea Lion Colony



Photo: Joseph Pedro

high, to the top of Yanteles, another volcano. At this ear-popping altitude, we're able to literally see into the snow-filled crater.

Not every excursion is perfect, some are difficult and, at times, miserable, but when I look back, I forget the pain and remember the laughs and all the great things we accomplished. The next morning, in yet another torrential downpour, we fly to **Auchemo Island on Ccovado Lagoon**. The lagoon is at the base of the volcano we flew to the top of the other day. From way down here, though, it's not visible through the thick cloud coverage. It has only been a few hundred years since the volcano last erupted. We hop in inflatable kayaks (which are much easier to navigate), but our boats are no match for the strong currents. We paddle, seemingly in place, toward the other side of the lagoon. We're already sore from the last few days, and the once exciting prospect of kayak exploration now feels more like labor. Water fills my "water-proof" gloves as I paddle feverishly to a destination now completely masked by the thick grays. The older Chilean couple is far behind the rest of the pack. A few times I even give up paddling, leaning back to feel the frozen rain hit my face. "Come on," GPS shouts, "It's sooo worth it." I keep going just because I know that once I make it, I'll have time to rest. I can see GPS now under a massive waterfall. The force of the falls creates a mini-fog oasis, where we can recoup. Once everyone catches up, we journey along the coast and discover hidden caves and smaller waterfalls. As we wrap back around to the main beach where the helicopter landed, GPS turns back and asks, "Have any of you ever kayaked through a forest?" As we get closer, hundreds of dead trees are revealed in the water. The burnt trunks were preserved by the volcanic ash. In the fog, we weave in and out through the black trees in eerie quietness; it's all very Tim Burton-esque. Another meal awaits us at the base of the volcano. Despite heavy winds and pounding rain, we try our best to enjoy beautiful steaks. Returning to the ship, a warm thalassotherapy bath on the top deck is waiting for me. I finally relax in the hot seawater soak, I sip a basil mojito, and everything is right in the world.

It's hard to believe it's our last day. After being frozen and wet for the entire week, the Patagonian gods have pity on us—today's sky is a gorgeous blue. The world of darkness and volcanoes that we've come to fall for and accept has vanished, and now Patagonia is how we all had imagined it—the Patagonia of *National Geographic*. We take the RIB out for a brief ride around the ship. Peale's dolphins follow us to a nearby waterfall. They play wildly with the boat and impress us with jumps and intricate swim patterns.

Soon, another surprise awaits us. We board the helicopter for one last ride, and we see the recently erupted Chaitén Volcano pumping an ash "cloud" into the sky. We carefully land near a small ranch and spot almost the entire Nomads crew waving at us. The staff worked all day setting up a huge barbeque with every kind of savory meat. GPS smiles at us with a white, suntan-lotion-covered nose and unexpectedly tells us to "relax!" The ranch belonged to a family that's lived in the area for a few genera-

tions. The government sold land cheaply to many people for farming. After burning down thousands of acres, it was quickly learned that the land was not able to sustain profitable crops, and it wasn't suitable for grazing. While many families abandoned their attempts, some remain. A little boy named Matias and his family live here, and he shows us around his home. Of course, we pay him in Snickers bars (which probably kept him hyper for weeks). The isolation is so extreme here Matias has to walk for four days to attend school (or ride two days by horse). Naturally, he enjoys the visitors, and laughs loudly about our inability to walk across log bridges, and our squeamishness toward insects. The afternoon is perfect, and the family even lets us ride their horses. I admit, it was my first time, and the horse took advantage of me by either running madly or choosing to just stand and graze. For the first time we all sit at one table (fishermen and all), and salud to an incredible week.

After one last enormous dinner and a final, tearful PowerPoint, the eco-group heads outside. Gulping down cocktails, it didn't matter what language we all spoke, we spend hours outside laughing and half crying about our lifetime's worth of adventures. When everyone retires to bed, I head upstairs to the sundeck (now the moon deck). The silence and darkness is at first overwhelming, but after I look up at the Southern Cross, the uneasiness turns to divine tranquility, a feeling I didn't expect to find in this uncharted land of extremes. ■

View from Helicopter

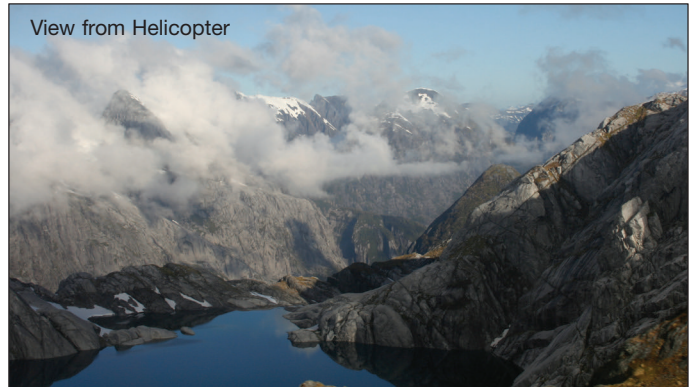


Photo: Joseph Pedro

## HOW TO GET THERE

Getting to the other side of the world to experience this remote region through the Nomads of the Seas expedition is best set up through the **Ritz-Carlton Santiago**. With their "Experiencing Patagonia With All Your Senses" package, you'll be able to get your last bit of true luxury before you head to the vast Patagonian wilderness and, more importantly, you won't have to worry about planning a thing. You'll fly into Santiago and spend two nights at the ultra-luxurious hotel (the only Ritz in South America). The two nights include choice accommodations on the Club Level floor. Besides having a massive room, you'll also receive complimentary food and beverages throughout the day, as well as an attentive staff that is more than eager to help you explore the city. After your two nights, flights are arranged to the port city of Puerto Montt, which is only about an hour-and-a-half flight south of Santiago. From here, your seven-night Patagonian adventure begins. After a long week exploring, you'll get a final day of pampering at the Ritz-Carlton; trust me, it's much needed. [www.ritzcarlton.com](http://www.ritzcarlton.com)