

PATAGONIAN DIRT ROADS

Biking the Carretera Austral

Words: Sarah Stirling

Running down the west coast of Patagonia, a chain of high, wild peaks forms an almost impenetrable barrier. This mountain range divides a narrow strip of rainforest, fringed with fjords, from the more arid eastern plains. Before the 1980s, the handful of tiny communities dotted down the green ribbon behind the Patagonian Andes were isolated. Visiting a neighbouring community required a boat, and a lull in the tempestuous weather.

Then the infamous dictator, General Pinochet, set 10,000 soldiers to work building a gravel road linking these isolated communities together, and to the rest of Chile. One of the most difficult infrastructure projects in South American history, it took nearly 20 years. Why did he do it? Patagonia, a geographical region spanning Chile and Argentina, has not always been amicably shared. Pinochet aimed to strengthen his claim to the region over Argentina's.

Adventurous cycle tourers are eager

scavengers of incidental glories like this. Like carrion crows of lonely dirt roads, we swoop in on Google Earth to investigate. And so the 1240km Carretera Austral has risen to become something of a biker's gravel grail. It's logistically tricky, so remains untouristy. We typically passed around two other cycle tourers a day, and swapped tales of joy, like 'I caught a two-kilo salmon!' and disaster — 'Wrapped in my tent, I lay in a ditch till the storm passed.' Here are some extracts from my diary.






 The Carretera Austral
is no ordinary road.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK



0-100KM DECEMBER 4-5

Last night we knocked on the door of what looked like a gingerbread house and a Chilean grandma invited us in. It felt like a jet-lagged dream. Like all the buildings we'd seen on the short cycle there from Puerto Montt airport, this one was made from overlapping petals of wood and painted a bright colour. Perla rents out a couple of rooms to travellers.

The interior was treehouse-style — everything crafted from rough-hewn wood with the beginnings of branches left on, and lovingly polished. Chickens clucked around our feet as we packed our panniers with the food and fuel we'd just bought. We won't see another town till we reach halfway, just little villages. I was too excited to sleep.

This morning, Perla directed us, "Go down the hill, turn left at the sea and just keep going." The coastline was shattered into fjords, strung with colourful, hand-painted fishing boats that sparkled in the sunshine, and fishy-smelling. Taking a short, regular-running ferry across a narrow but deep inlet, we relaxed into holiday-mode. This was going to be a doddle!

Then we turned inland and met our first hill. The gravel rose out of the rainforest like a vertical wall. We pushed our bikes up, up — for hours, over potato-like stones, then juddered down the other side, collapsed on a sandy riverbank and set up our first wild camp. We hadn't expected the roads to be quite this gnarly. Too worried to sleep.

100-230KM DECEMBER 6-7

Yesterday morning, the road ended at a pier. Getting any further south requires a ferry-ride across a huge bay. "Mañana," we were told. No boats today. Rob, whose brain is usually either fully on or off, fell asleep by a river, while I enjoyed the rare opportunity to devour half a book.

Sunrise was glowing behind a volcano when we hurried to the pier the next morning. Five hours later, the boat approached a jetty, marking the start of an invisible trail winding through huge, rainforested peaks. This land used to belong to the late Doug Tompkins, founder of The North Face, and his wife, Kris. The pair dedicated their lives to conserving Patagonia's wildernesses. Last year, Kris gave one million acres of land to the Chilean government, and the authorities agreed to protect an additional nine million acres. Five new Patagonian National Parks opened.

Unfamiliar birdsong emanated from the walls of green. I thought about the man-made landscape of grass and sheep at home. Crazy to think that before written history, large-scale rainforest-clearance had already begun in Britain, as had the import of our favourite lawnmowers, sheep — the white plague, as Monbiot calls them. The 'wild wood' remains part of our culture, though, as the place you find yourself by getting lost. Robin Hood, King Arthur, Shakespeare... Funny how cranking pedals makes your brain whirr.

The gravel road here wasn't too steep. Gaining confidence on the loose stones, we whizzed downhill and popped out of the rainforest at a volcanic, black sandy beach. Dolphins played in sunset waves as we set up camp. "Robert, that's my toothbrush, where's yours?" "I used it to clean the bikes."

230-330KM DECEMBER 8

Yesterday my hands got sunburnt; today my fingertips are white with cold. We were soaked when we reached Chaitén this morning. The village was all dust and wood like a Wild West film set. Much of it was destroyed in 2008 when the nearby volcano erupted. Nature feels so huge and powerful here; the villages so small and ramshackle. It reminded me of a Deakin quote: 'Houses represent what we would like to be: permanent, rooted, here for eternity. But a cabin represents the reality: we're just passing through.' There's no hiding from the truth in Patagonia.

Our clothes dripped on the floor of the little grocery shop. We smiled when a wet, shaggy dog slunk in, and empathised when it was shooed out. In Chile, dogs (owned, not strays) wander freely, forming packs. They busy about and interact with great purpose, like caricatures of people.

We skulked under a restaurant porch, feeling dejected. It was closed. Peeking through the window, the owner — square face, fantastic white moustache — took pity, unlocked and sat us by the fire with the usual Chilean 'coffee': a jar of Nescafé and a kitchen kettle so we could make the recipe to taste.

"Hay un gatito en el baño," I said, carefully. I'd looked the words up in my phrasebook. The old man rushed away, explaining that they climb through the window when it rains. The tiny kitten raised its fluff and hissed as though David Attenborough was about to narrate its final moments. It was literally raining cats and dogs.



1 Fjords near Puyuhuapi.



2 Camping in a field of lupins near Coyhaique

330-450KM DECEMBER 9

The MSR stove is humming and the pot lid is rattling. Food options are limited here but hunger adds the most delicious flavour. I'm cosy in the tent, reading about dinosaurs, again. The rainforest looks like what it is — a habitat that evolved for giants — and I'm fascinated. "Listen to this," I call. "Those plants we see all the time, that look like green elephant ears with stalks like lion's tails? Gunnera dates back around 150 million years and is nicknamed 'dinosaur food'."

Patagonia, the land of superlatives, is littered with particularly enormous fossils. In 2010 a gaucho dug out what looked like a useful round stone and happened upon the skeleton of the largest land animal ever discovered. Five more lay nearby. As one newspaper put it, these Patagotitans make 'the T Rex look like a munchkin' but they were actually vegetarians living on a diet of pure South American greens.

There are clues about modern-day dinosaur descendants and their food in the shrub-line — pink fuchsias and tiny, red, bottle-shaped botellita flowers growing, rather symbolically, from stumps and other tree wounds. These delicate flutes are pollinated by little hummingbirds called firecrowns. We saw one once, flitting super-fast as if in a different time dimension.

Above the shrubs the tree-line shoots up. If I crane my neck I can finally see sky and Andean peaks above the last sunlit row on the horizon. Some of these trees, the Alerce, are 60m-high relatives of the great Californian Sequoias. Sadly a lot were chopped down in former times but clusters remain. Some have been alive since the Bronze Age: an incredible thought. Dinner is ready.

"THE FOREST FLOOR HAD BECOME A MUSICAL TYPEWRITER
FAT PROPLETS WERE DRIPPING SLOWLY THROUGH THE UNDER-STORY
AND PINGING OFF SMALL ROUND LEAVES, MAKING THE RECIPIENT
FROGS CHIRrup HAPPILY"



📍 waiting for the
ferry... 'mañana!

450-510KM DECEMBER 10-12

It's easy to imagine weather gods in Patagonia. This morning we were cycling alongside sunny fjords, dolphin-spotting, but as we headed back into the rainforest, the road reared up steeply and clouds gathered above us. Height-gain gave us good views of the dark, jagged peaks piercing the tree-line, with glaciers dripping into narrow fringes of waterfall. Birds joined us in the race against the weather, swirling around in panicked murmurations. With the effort of pedalling hard uphill, Rob's knee, which had been niggling, became painful.

Then, incredibly, because they are rare, we passed a refugio. Even rarer: this one had a sign saying 'hot chocolate' outside it. There's no place better than sparsely-populated roads to prove the world is full of serendipity. Did we stop? No. The gravel road, the question of what might lie in the next valley and the addition of kilometres under the wheels, lured us halfway up the next mountainside before we stopped and looked at each other, realising we had gone quite bonkers.

Inside the cosy, wood-panelled Refugio Rio Cisnes, we realised we're almost out of cash. "Don't worry," said the owner, who looked like a Chilean John Lennon with dreadlocks — unusually, he spoke English. "We work something out. Perhaps you transfer money by internet." We stayed two nights, cleaned ourselves up and had to insist to pay for the food we ate. José and Diana moved there from Santiago to give their daughter a greener childhood. They'd installed solar, hydro and were digesting a permaculture manual. We left feeling refreshed and inspired.

510-630KM DECEMBER 13-14

The scenery changed dramatically as we approached Coyhaique, the halfway mark of the Carretera Austral. This morning, we bathed in a dream waterfall pool in the rainforest. Then, in a tiny hamlet, a lady chased her aggressive turkey away so we could get in the local shop: her front room.

This afternoon, we cycled up a broad river valley carpeted in grasses, dotted with cattle and popping with lupins. In the distance, the city was tucked under a cliff-band. It was disconcerting to feel more comfortable in this kind of environment, which, let's face it, had been brutally burnt and cleared of rainforest and tribespeople by European conquistadors, long ago. It felt safer, being able to see for miles.

As we bumped downhill, I tried to remember a John Berger quote, which gets at our relationship with trees — at times finding them spooky, at others a comfort: 'That they held up roofs for so long is not surprising. Trees offer an elusive sense of company, which is earlier than justice or the notion of indifference. When humans were first naming the world, trees offered their measures — of distance, of height, of diameter, of space, and in this offer was the discreetest assurance that we have never been utterly alone.'

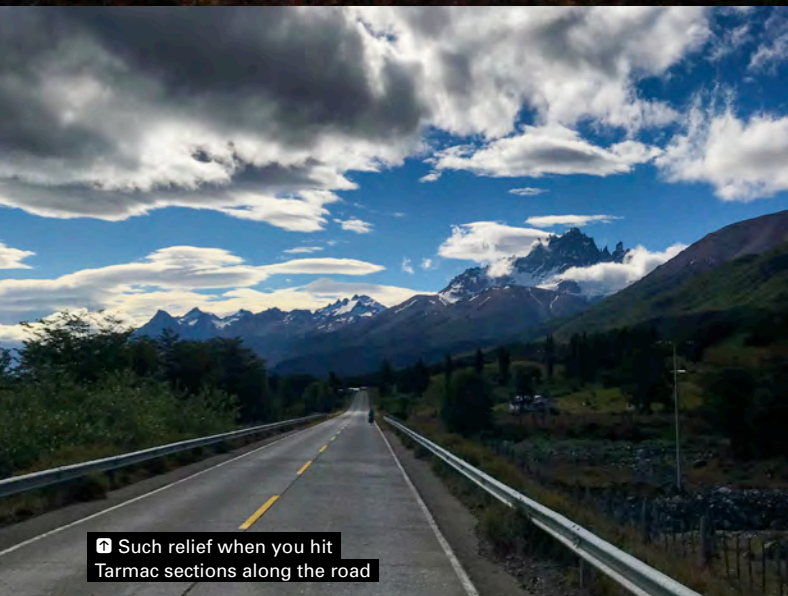
Nowadays Coyhaique has a friendly, small-town vibe. An odd blip of civilisation along a route where you rarely see anything as big as a village, it's a good place to MOT your bike and stock up on any food you've been missing. It felt like taking a breath before the harder half.



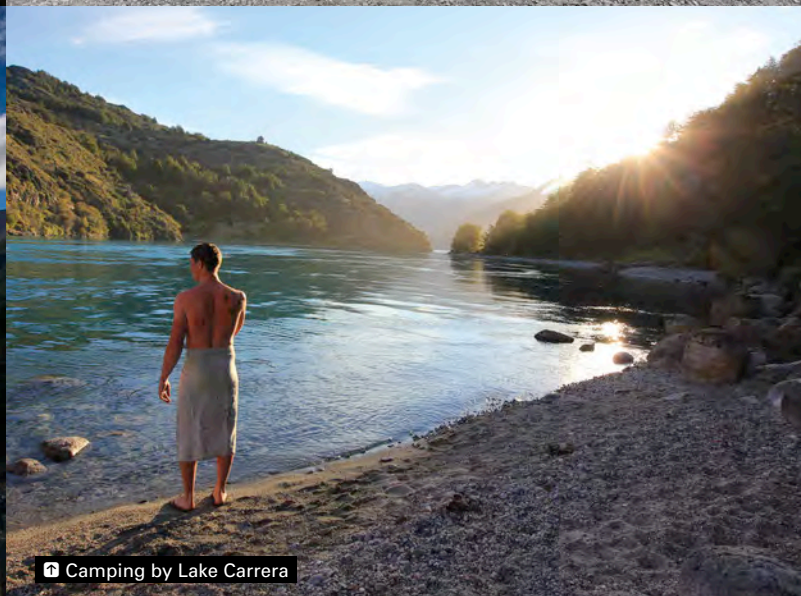
Camping high in the Cerro Castillo mountains



Approaching El Chalten



Such relief when you hit Tarmac sections along the road



Camping by Lake Carrera

> 630-825KM DECEMBER 15-18

As you go south, the landscape along the Carretera Austral grows: spires and snow-caps push out of the tree-line and broader valleys widen the view. Approaching Villa Castillo, a section of glorious tarmac swooped downhill in wonderful curves, overlooking castellated peaks. We are short of time now, but couldn't resist cramming a long hike into two 11-hour days. It was a Patagonian smorgasbord of forests and river crossings, swims in glacial lakes, sunset camps, colourful wildflowers and crunchy snow.

I'm too exhausted to write more. In fact I'm embarrassed to admit that I cried last night, realising that we don't have any rest days left, and it only gets harder from here. Rob, ever the calm rock during a storm, picked me up and put me in the tent. Protesting that I wasn't at all tired, I immediately fell asleep.

825-990KM DECEMBER 19-22

Lake Carrera is so big that, in this wet region, it generates its own sunny microclimate. Our two days cycling alongside it, camping on lake beaches and cooking eggs for breakfast, felt like a summer holiday. Puerto Tranquilo was the closest thing to a tourist village we've seen yet. We even found a lakeside bar that made its own beer and pizza (Rob's treat), and took a boat out to see some 'marble caves' (mine). A well-timed change of Patagonian mood.

I was feeling relaxed and Rob's knee fully recovered, so we were ready when the road steepened again. The valley floor was studded with bright blue lakes linked by a

thread that later turned turquoise as it burst into the Rio Baker, the country's largest river. Finally, the colourful cabins of Cochrane hazed into view through the gravel dust.

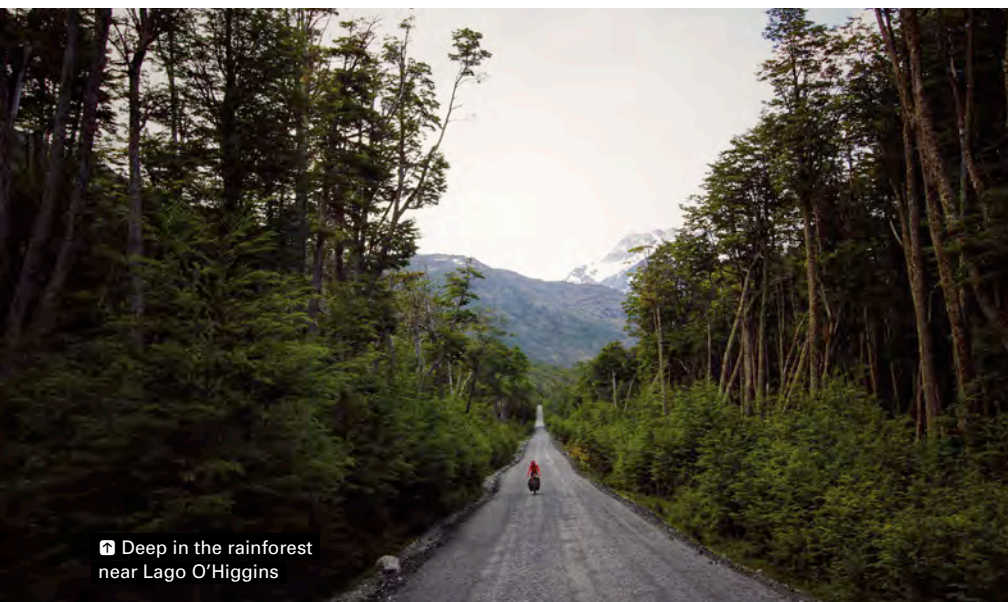
Here, we had a panic. We're two days ride from Lago O'Higgins, which marks the end of the Carretera Austral. We planned to get a ferry across it to Argentina, continue south by bus and fly back to Santiago. However, due to rough weather, we learned that the ferry has not run for a week. If we can't cross in good time, we'll have to turn around and cycle all the way back to the airport at Coyhaique...

990-1100KM DECEMBER 23

We woke up high on a mountain pass this morning, on the remotest section of the Carretera. The forest floor had become a musical typewriter. Fat droplets were dripping slowly through the under-storey and pinging off small round leaves, making the recipient frogs chirrup happily. Far, far above, the greenery was looming over us as though nature was about to swallow the road.

When we emerged, blinking, out of the tree-cover by a lake, I felt a primeval shiver and looked up to see a cauldron of Andean Condors circling in a thermal. We counted 13 of the near-mythical, endangered birds. These vultures are the weight of medium-sized dogs with ten-foot wingspans and can reach 70 years old. Imagine Mr Burns from The Simpsons wearing a black cape trimmed with a fluffy white fur collar. They floated silently, free-wheeling in the sky.

But these birds are tiny compared to the giants that once roamed Patagonia. I remembered reading that, in the gap left by dinosaurs, when mammals grew supersized,



1 Deep in the rainforest near Lago O'Higgins



2 Our final wild campsite on Christmas Eve

some of the strangest megafauna evolved in South America. Imagine encountering a pack of sabre-toothed cats with foot-long fangs or an armadillo the size of a mini...

Chatwin described Patagonia as a symbol of human restlessness because it is 'the farthest place to which man walked from his place of origins.' The evidence seems pretty damning that, as they spread around the globe, the first humans hunted the largest creatures to extinction. Memories survive in folklore tales of battles with strange giant beasts. I feel sad that more creatures will become just stories in my lifetime. Seeing this rainforest has inspired me work harder on my own carbon footprint, which, paradoxically, was looking good till I flew halfway round the world.

1100-1230KM CHRISTMAS EVE

Reaching the end only to wish you were beginning again. We're just 7km away from Villa O'Higgins, the village at the end of the Carretera Austral. We hope to cross Lago O'Higgins tomorrow. If we do, we'll be on a different road, and in a different country: Argentina.

We rarely light fires, but tonight the river offered us sandy banks, plenty of dead wood and mosquitos: a recipe for a safe fire that we could bury leaving no trace and a reason to light one. As they do, the flames drew us into storytelling and we talked and laughed late into the night over a bottle of red stashed in a pannier.

When travelling like this, under daily signs, gifts and battles, life becomes elemental and led by signs from the universe. At that moment, alone together in the wilds on Christmas Eve, neither of us had any doubts that we were exactly where we were supposed to be. 🍷



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OUR KIT

BIKE AND PANNIERS

My bike is an old lady found on eBay: a vintage Ridgeback, christened the Iron Maiden thanks to an equally vintage sticker on her side. Classic MTB geometry is comfy for long distance cycle touring, and no suspension means less weight and less to go wrong. Fully rigid steel gives more flex than aluminium and you're more likely to find someone who can weld it if it breaks. Rob replaced her bottom bracket, brakes, chainrings and chain. We put Marathon Mondial tyres on both our bikes and Rob made our panniers out of Dundee waxed canvas. Hit me up if you're keen for some customs.



CABANAS OF THE WILD WEST

The grown-up version of the den, wild version of the house, human version of the nest: who else loves a characterful cabin? All the houses along the Carretera Austral, from solitary ones peeking down from mountainsides through to colourful villages, reveal as much personality as the people themselves, especially as the fronts are often decorated with life's necessities like tools, jackets and umbrellas.

