



CHILE
FEBRUARY 14 - MARCH 4,
2019

DAYS 1-2: TRAVEL & PUERTO NATALES

We left for Chile amidst great uncertainty. Our government was about to shut down for the second time. It was a hectic time at work with lots of organizational change occurring. Prior to leaving for our trip, both a hotel and an airline provider incorrectly charged us twice for the same service, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth about the country's business practices. Three weeks and eight planes rides, six bus trips, one catamaran ride, and one unexpected river crossing in a 4x4 (more on that later), however, had us calling Chile the trip of a lifetime!

Getting to Puerto Natales, the town that acts as the official gateway to Patagonia, was no small feat. Door-to-door, our total travel time clocked in at 32 hours. This included driving to JFK, flights from JFK to Santiago and then Santiago to Punta Arenas, and finally a bus ride from Punta Arenas to Puerto Natales, with lots of layovers in between. We arrived at our hostel, The Singing Lamb, just after 8pm. The first thing that was a shock was the light! At home it was just barely light as we left work at 5:30pm but here, the sun does not set until after 10pm. This worked in our favor as we mustered the energy to head across the street to a bar for a celebratory beer (we survived the trip!) and empanadas. We then fell into bed exhausted and ready for a night of good sleep.



We had a built in day in Puerto Natales for rest and relaxation and to allow for any travel delays before starting our hike. The weather was cloudy and unseasonably warm at close to 70 degrees. We had planned to spend the morning at a local museum and then wander around town but sometimes the best laid plans are not meant to be. We arrived at the museum only to find it closed that day for administrative purposes. Ugh! Instead, we found ourselves walking along the coast and meandering through town. In my mind, as the gateway to a place like Patagonia, I pictured a bustling port town with outdoor stores selling adventure gear on every corner and people roaming the streets with backpacks in tow. Instead, we found a sleepy town consisting of buildings that were little more than strung-together shacks. It was a bit disappointing, but I was also tired and feeling out of sorts, so that may have influenced my perception. We had a lovely lunch of chicken sandwiches and lemonade at a cafe and then went to the supermarket to stock up on bottled water.

This statue is of a mylodon, a now extinct species of ground sloth resembling a bear. The mylodon only lived in the Patagonia region, weighed over 2,000 lbs, and were just shy of 10 ft tall!



Faint rainbow over the decayed pier



Sculptures along the coast



The last part of our day was spent preparing for our hike on the W. We went to outdoor equipment rental store, Erratic Rock, for their free “3 o’clock talk”. Somewhat infamous, the talk is a must-do among trekkers. We obtained invaluable information about the W trek including logistics, weather, and gear. Since we had done a ton of research ahead of time, the talk was most helpful to us in terms of mental preparation and what to practically expect. Our lecturer said we all needed to be prepared to be wet and have wet boots during the hike and we should just embrace it now because it will make the hike a lot more enjoyable. Anyone who has hiked in wet boots knows it’s not an experience you soon want to repeat, but we appreciated the honesty. He told a story about watching three guys in the park trying to rock hop across a river one time. The first guy made it across successfully, the second missed the last rock so he had one wet boot, and the third guy missed the last rock but fell on his face and knocked out his top row of teeth. Moral of the story? Walk across the damn river and get you boots wet. Got it! We were also cautioned about wind that could rip up tents from their stakes, blow away untethered backpacks, and

spread rain from one side of the park to the other. Patagonia is known for its extreme weather conditions but hearing it firsthand started to make me nervous!



After all that chatting, it was time to head next door to Base Camp, a trekker and climber pub with a laid back atmosphere. While videos of climbing played on the wall behind us, we enjoyed local Austral beers and delicious pizza, excitedly talking about tomorrow when we’d depart for Torres del Paine!





DAY 3

PUERTO NATALES TO REFUGIO GREY



Official park tickets

Trying not to panic, we re-boarded our bus for the final half hour leg of our journey which would take us to Pudeto where we would catch the 11am catamaran across Pehoe Lake. Along the way, our driver stopped and motioned for me to approach him. He pointed out a puma on the mountain just outside our bus! There are only about 50 pumas in the park which totals 900 square miles, so it is quite rare to see one. I was excited but hoped to only see one from the safety of a vehicle. As we waited in line for the catamaran, we got a taste of Patagonia's special wind gusts which were enough to knock you over if you weren't prepared. Thankfully, the 11am boat left on time and by 11:30am we were on the other side of the lake. It felt like the past two and a half days of travel were all building towards this one moment when our trip would finally start! While we've been to more remote places in the world, Patagonia definitely felt like the most indirect. The number of flights and buses, and even a boat, were unlike anything we'd ever encountered.

After waking early, throwing back breakfast, and stowing our duffel bags in lockers at the hostel, we set out to the bus station with everything we'd need for the next five days on our back. Buses for the national park, Torres del Paine, generally depart twice a day, once at 7am and once at 1pm. We boarded our 7am bus and made the two-hour drive to the park entrance called Laguna Amarga. Here we disembarked and had to watch a short video about park safety. Essentially the message was, don't start a fire. Several accidental fires have ravaged the park in recent years, so open flames are only allowed in designated cooking areas at the campgrounds. We then proceeded to buy our entrance tickets and had a brief chat with a ranger to explain where we were staying each night in the park. Advance reservations are required which is something I was intimately familiar with given I had to book everything last June to get the dates we wanted! We were told the catamaran may be delayed due to high winds (yikes!) and then looked at the weather board which showed rain and 45 mph winds over the next few days.

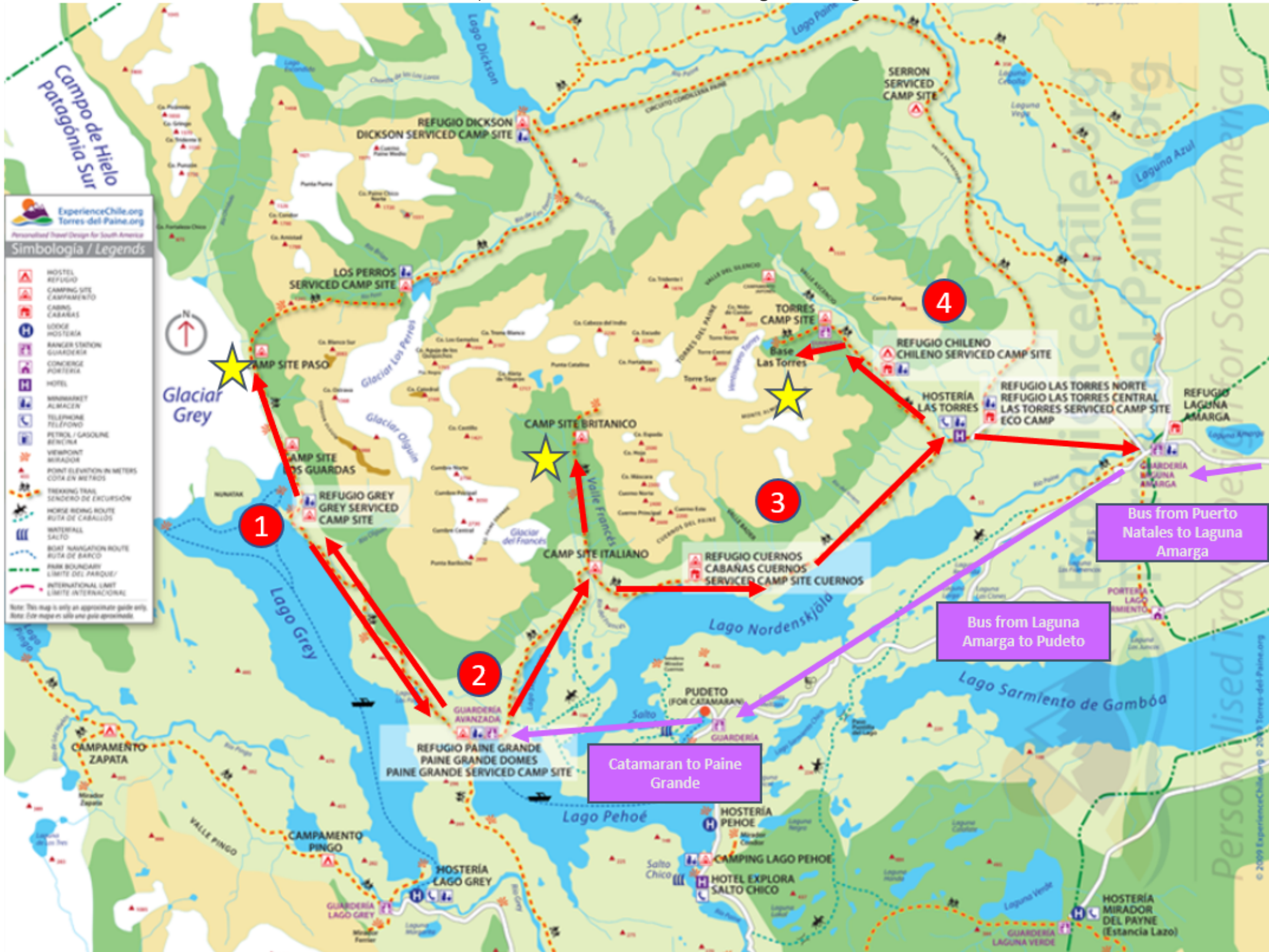
FECHA DATE	VIENTO Wind	CLIMA / WEATHER	°
14	70 Km/h		Min 9° Max 17°
15	70 Km/h		Min 9° Max 20°
16	60 Km/h		Min 9° Max 15°
17	70 Km/h		Min 4° Max 10°
18	50 Km/h		Min 4° Max 15°

Not so promising weather board at the ranger office. And what's up with the black cat on the 18th??



Our W Trek

Based on my map, you can probably see why the trek is called the “W”. We would take five days to hike the 50 miles of trail. Our nights would be spent at Refugio Grey, Refugio Paine Grande, the cabanas at Los Cuernos, and the campsite at Chileno. The stars indicate viewpoints we would be trekking to along the W.





After disembarking at Pudeto, we stopped at the Refugio Paine Grande to use the bathroom and drop our bags on a bench while we ate the packed lunches from our hostel. We were surprised to learn the main meal consisted of a cold hamburger! But, we were famished and had a hike ahead of us so we ate up and then finally set out!

It was cloudy, cold, and very windy as we wound our way along the shores of Grey Lake. As soon as we weren't going uphill, we had to stop to layer up and wear our gloves. The 6.8-mile hike wasn't too strenuous, however, and we arrived at Refugio Grey just after 3pm. We were checked in and showed to our room where we dropped our packs and headed out again to explore some good viewpoints of the glacier further up the trail.





Our explorations took us to a good lookout of Glacier Grey and the ice that had calved into the lake. We made our way up the trail and had to climb a ladder to cross a hanging bridge to get to a lookout at the foot of the glacier. I'm glad we did this extra hike but by this time it was even colder and now raining, so we headed back to the warmth of fireplace in the refugio.

As this was our first refugio experience, we weren't sure what to expect but we were pleasantly surprised! Our room had four beds (two bunk beds) and plenty of storage space and room to dry out our now wet clothes and boots. We were bunking with two older gentlemen from Germany.

Going into the trek, we both had a preconceived notion that we'd encounter lots of young backpackers. But really, we found the crowd where we stayed to be quite the opposite and most either our age or older. After a shower and several overpriced but very necessary beers at the bar, we sat down to dinner at 7pm. Dinner consisted of an asparagus soup with bread, shredded beef with mashed potatoes, and a dulce de leche dessert. So impressive and delicious considering we're near the end of the world! Over our meal, we chatted with a couple from Australia who was on a 6-month backpacking trip. We turned in early to try and get a good night of rest before tomorrow.



DAY 4

REFUGIO GREY TO REFUGIO PAINE GRANDE

Before hiking back down the W trail today, we would be completing a trek ON Glacier Grey with a company called Bigfoot Adventures. We were some of the first people at breakfast at 7am and after ditching our larger packs at the refugio, we made the short hike to Bigfoot's base camp by the lake.

After signing the obligatory waivers and receiving our harness and crampons, we met up with the group that would be joining us. They were eight friends who knew each other from their time in the Air Force but were now spread out across the United States. By this point, it had been steadily raining since the prior late afternoon and so our guides told us upfront that there was the chance the trek would be a no-go. This is because the glacier access point was about a 1-mile hike across a rocky island that was now filled with waterfalls from the rain and glacier melt.

Hoping for the best, we boarded a zodiac that would take us to the access point across Grey Lake. We then hopped off onto the island and began an uphill trek across slippery rock that had us shedding layers in no time despite the cool rain that fell.





Sometimes we had to climb up ladders and that was fun!

About 40 minutes into the hike, we reached the go no-go decision point. There was a raging “river” we needed to cross and the guides were worried about how high it might be when we tried to re-turn later that afternoon. After a few tense moments watching them converse, we got the thumbs up. Phew! We all turned around and watched as the boat, which had been waiting in case we needed to return, sped away back to base camp.

At last we arrived at the access point to put on our safety harness, helmets, and crampons. We received our ice axes, a safety chat, and a brief lesson about how to walk in crampons and were on the ice. For the next hour and a half, we explored ice caves, spirals of water that seemed to go on infinitely, and other beautiful natural ice formations.

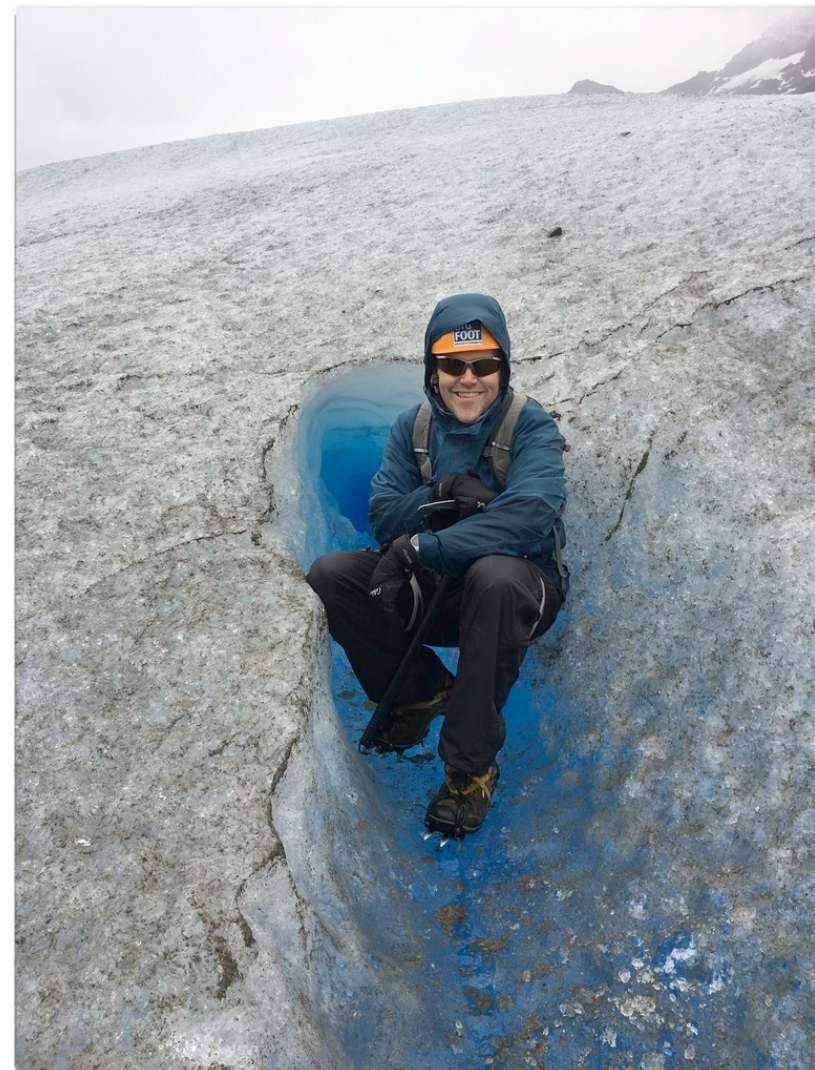
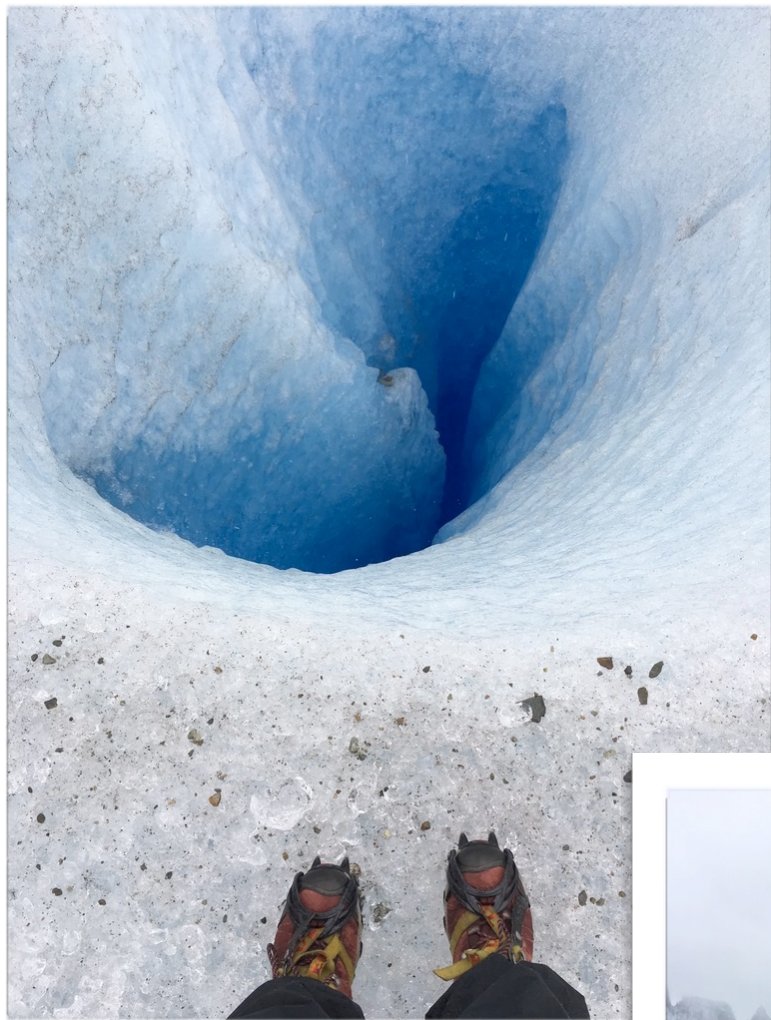
Grey Glacier is massive and is 17 miles long! It is a part of the Southern Patagonian Ice Field which has an incredible area of over 4,700 square miles in Chile and Argentina. It is the third largest in the world behind Antarctica and Greenland.



Near the glacier access point

The water was delicious!





After de-gearing and safely climbing back down the same route, we were back in the boat and heading back towards the base camp in no time, arriving around 1pm. It was easy to forget it had been steadily raining all morning since we were having so much fun on the glacier. As we trudged back to the refugio, however, we realized just how cold and wet we really were. We sat by the fire inside and ate our packed lunch, wishing we could just stay here and not have to make the 6.8-mile hike back to Refugio Paine Grande. We didn't have a choice, however, so we put our nice dry backpacks on over on soaking wet clothes and headed out.

As much as I tried to keep the advice from Erratic Rock at the forefront of my mind about keeping a positive attitude, there is no way around it - the next three hours were miserable. It was raining really hard by this point, the trails were flooded, my boots were wet, and my fingers were so cold I couldn't feel them towards the end. I have virtually no pictures from this hike because my phone was packed away to keep it dry and it was the same exact trail we took on the way up.

We arrived at Paine Grande to find a line of people waiting to check-in. As we stood in line, we began to hear chatter about flooding in the park. The man in front of us said he had come in via the east side of the park and had to be driven through flooding in a 4x4. As we crept closer to the reception desk, we realized the line largely consisted of people who didn't have reservations, but either couldn't get out of the park or couldn't get to the next campsite due to flooding. At this point I started to have a sinking feeling of dread about what this could mean for the rest of our hike, but my first priority was getting warm and dry. At last we were checked-in but told the refugio was currently without power (!!) but they expected it back soon.



We headed to our room to change and this picture is of me, sitting on our bunk surrounded by all the clothes we were trying to dry. Unlike the last refugio, this room had a single dresser and the beds, with no other storage area or place to lay your gear. We really lucked out, however, because somehow our roommates never showed up so we had the entire stinky room to ourselves.



As we walked around the refugio, it was clear everyone was in the same boat as us in terms of wet gear. People were huddled around the fires in the common areas with clothes hung on every conceivable surface. It felt like an indoor refugee camp for stranded hikers. We were able to snag a seat at the bar on the second story that had gorgeous windows but unfortunately not a great view on this night because of the rain. We played cards and sipped on beers while waiting for our dinner time at 8pm.

Dinner was done cafeteria-style and in two shifts. Thank goodness the power had come back on and they were able to produce the meal. As we sat eating our meat and potatoes, we overheard more people

talking about the flooding. Some people said the east park entrance was now closed and I saw a video of flooding that made it look like there was a lake where there should not be a lake. Someone else said they had talked to a ranger who said tomorrow we could expect more of the same weather. One of the frustrating things within Torres del Paine was the lack of reliable information, or really any information at all. Without an internet connection or phone signal, or posts within the refugios themselves, hikers are left to operate entirely on hearsay.

Wanting to crawl into the warmth of bed, we headed back to our room. The bathrooms here left a lot to be desired, so we did a teeth brushing only and went showerless. Just as we were closing the curtains, we began to see blue sky behind the campsite. The picture through the window is terrible, but we took it just in case this was the only blue sky we saw during our time in Patagonia. It was actually quite funny, as soon as the clouds began to break, almost every single camper came out of their tent to take a picture. We hoped this was a sign of good things to come!



DAY 5
REFUGIO PAINE GRANDE
TO LOS CUERNOS



Overnight, the beginnings of a blue sky had developed into a full blown cloudless sky. We were overjoyed when we peeked outside and this made it somewhat more manageable to put on our still wet (and now cold too) clothes from yesterday. When you pack light, there's not room for many spare clothes. We wanted to ensure our dry clothes for the refugios stayed dry so we'd have something to look forward to at the end of the day. We quickly ate breakfast and hit the trail!

When it's not raining, it's windy, so we were able to quickly dry our outer layers as we got into the hike. With the sun shining down on us, the day felt glorious. Our morale was 1,000

times better than yesterday. The trail took us along the banks of the turquoise-blue Lake Skottsberg and we reached our first marker of the hike, Camp Italiano, in just under two hours. As we crossed a hanging bridge (with a max capacity of 1 person!) to enter the campsite, we could see just how utterly trashed it was from the rain. It looked like the entire place had been flooded out and I feel horrible for anyone who had to sleep there the night before. From here, we turned left on the trail to make our way along the Valle Frances. Our destination was Britanico, said to provide one of the best, if not the best, view in all of Torres del Paine.





The hike in was absolutely stunning. We were surrounded by mountains, the most impressive of which was Paine Grande mountain. Standing at 10,000 feet tall it holds Glacier Frances and with the clear skies every time we heard a rumble that sounded like thunder we could look over and watch small avalanches and see ice calving from the glacier. This ended up being my favorite part of the entire hike. The trail was fairly difficult as we gained 1,500 feet of elevation over the 3 miles. The trail was also heavily flooded from all the rains, so at times we were literally climbing up loose rocks that had a waterfall coming down them. As we got higher in elevation, we left most of the running water behind and only had to rock hop across streams. A half an hour from our destination, the wind really picked up and it started snowing!! Seeing no clouds above our heads, we actually think this was “snow” blowing to the ground from the avalanches. But still, it was quite a spectacle! At last, we reached Britanico and were treated to 360 degree views of mountain peaks in every direction. It was spectacular even if it was a bit more cloudy (and snowy!) here. I have to admit that until this point, I thought Patagonia was very pretty, but I didn’t understand all the hype. Now I understood the hype. We took the opportunity to eat our lunch here on a secluded rock and really enjoy the views.





Making our way back down the trail, we briefly stopped at Camp Italiano to enjoy some chocolate and then continued on the waterlogged trail towards Los Cuernos. This part of the W led us through scenery that was reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands. The diversity of the W trail is amazing! We hugged the shoreline and at times the trail literally went into Lake Nordenskjold, so we had to make an alternate path. At long last, we arrived at Los Cuernos in the late afternoon. Our hike today totaled 15.6 miles and we felt so lucky to have had perfect weather and to have been able to complete the hike as planned.



Trail marker in the lake



Mike deftly crossing the stream

Cabana #4



We had opted to splurge and reserve a private cabana for two at this location. It was worth every single penny and felt like a true indulgence given the sleeping situations the past two nights! It was spacious, private, had plenty of hooks and storage space and best of all, a fire place!

View from the deck of our cabana which looked like it could be in the Caribbean!



Roaring fire!



Although the cabanas usually have access to a separate shower area, they had issues due to the rain so we were directed to use those inside the refugio. Not wanting to waste any time, we opted to forego showers again and use our Sea to Summit wipes to clean up and headed to the bar to play cards and drink beer before dinner. Over dinner, we heard more horror stories from people that had come in the east entrance of the park over the past few days.

Some were saying they had to be driven across roads in zodiac boats due to the flooding, waiting in a line for hours just to do so. We weren't sure what lay ahead for us, but we were determined to continue to enjoy our hike. While we were at dinner, the staff lit the fireplace in our cabana. We headed back to luxuriate in its warmth and spread out our socks and boots to dry from all the water we had to walk through today.

DAY 6

LOS CUERNOS TO REFUGIO CHILENO

We woke this morning to hear pouring rain on the roof of our cabana, but by the time we were ready to make our way to breakfast, the most beautiful rainbow made an appearance with the sun hitting the mountains behind it.

We began the day's hike after breakfast at which point it was raining again. Our spirits were still buoyed from the spectacular day we had yesterday, but the first two hours were still a slog through even more flooded trails. We reached the trail cutoff that would take us to our campsite for the night in about two hours. The rain had let up by this point, but it was very windy and cold. So cold I had to put my winter gloves on!

We turned into a large valley just teeming with waterfalls. My attention quickly turned from the beauty, however, as it became even more windy and started snowing. This was not fun weather given my clothes were soaked through from the morning. We arrived at Refugio Chileno after about four hours of hiking, covering 8.1 miles. We sat inside to eat our packed lunch, where it was also cold because they did not have the fire going!

Since camping check-in did not begin until 12:30pm, we opted to put on our packs and head towards Mirador Las Torres.





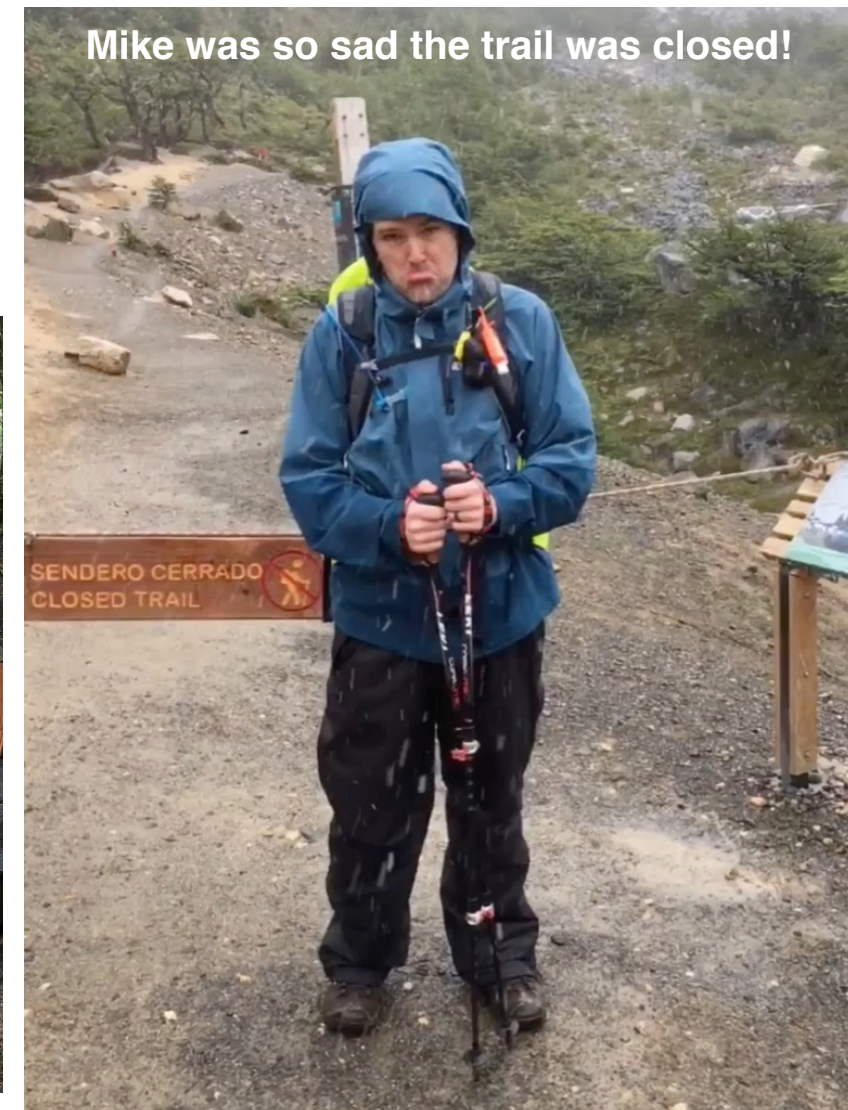
Morning rainbow

Probably the most iconic hike in the park, it takes you to the base of the three granite towers that give the park its name. The first part of the trail was through a forest which helped protect us from the snow that was still coming down pretty hard. At this point, I wasn't convinced we'd be able to see anything once we got to the lookout, but we pressed on. We reached the guard station that lies about 45 minutes from the lookout only to find a rope across the trail with a sign that it was closed. Nooooo! One man went around the rope and immediately guards came running out and stopped him. They told us the trail was closed due to high winds making it unsafe. We wish we would have known this back at the beginning of the trail, but oh well.

We headed back to Chileno (the hike was 3.8 miles roundtrip) and checked in to our tent for the night at platform #18. It was nice to have the tent on a raised platform and the mats and sleeping bags were of a high quality. After changing into warm clothes, we headed to the refugio for card playing, journal writing, snacks, and beer. Dinner was the most varied of our trip! Instead of meat and potatoes we had corn soup, chicken stew, and lemon ice cream. All the food (except the ice cream) was perfect on a rainy and snowy night! We filled our Nalgens with hot water before leaving the refugio and stuck them in the bottom of our sleeping bags to keep warm. It was in the 30s, so we wore lots of layers and hats as we hunkered down in our tent to get some sleep amidst the howling wind and pouring rain.



Tent #18 - home sweet home



Mike was so sad the trail was closed!



DAY 7

REFEGUIO CHILENO TO PUNTA ARENAS



**Walking across the bridge over
the flooded river**

Today was a LONG day! We woke to a chilly morning and although the skies were semi-clear at camp, the towers were still shrouded in snow. We felt good about our decision to not try to make it to the towers again that morning as the trail was still likely closed.

After breakfast, we headed down the trail to make our way to Hotel Las Torres. Although the hike through the pass was quite windy, as we lost elevation the sun came out and we began to pass many other day-hikers making their way up towards the towers. We even passed horses carrying supplies - one had a 12-pack of Coke in its saddle bags! This three-mile part of the trail was really quite uneventful and after stopping briefly at the hotel, we made our way towards the Welcome Center where we caught the 10:30am shuttle to the Laguna Amarga ranger station, where we started our time in Torres del Paine.

This was where the worst of the flooding had occurred, so across the river from Laguna Amarga, we had to get off the bus, walk across a bridge, and then wait for a pickup truck to shuttle us across the river that had completely flooded the road. I can see why this was such a problem earlier in the week! We were lucky to be there early in the day when not many people needed a ride - we barely had to wait for the next truck. What an experience!



Our truck ride

Our tickets for the bus that would take us to Puerto Natales were not until 1:30pm. Thankfully the 11am bus was late and because it was not sold out, we were able to use our tickets for this bus instead. We felt like we had won the lottery - we'd be back in Puerto Natales around lunch time instead of having to wait two hours at the ranger station with nothing to do! On the bus ride, we ate the celebratory stroopwafels we had been saving and enjoyed the views.

Unfortunately, once we got back to Puerto Natales, all the buses to Punta Arenas were sold out before our scheduled departure time of 5:30pm. We went back to The Singing Lamb Hostel to pick up our duffel bags and ended up eating our packed lunch there and grabbing a beer from the bar while making the most of the free wifi. Feeling guilty about staying there all afternoon, we went to the bus station and plopped down in a cafe there until our bus departed for Punta Arenas. We arrived in town at 8:30pm and checked into our hotel for the night. Since we had to head out early and would miss breakfast, they gave us a boxed breakfast that night. We were so tired, we couldn't bear the thought of going out, so we ate our breakfast for dinner! We enjoyed the most amazing hot showers - our first in days - and took the opportunity to repack our bags for the next leg of our trip. While we're really happy we did the W trek, we both felt like it didn't live up to our expectations and a large part of that had to do with the weather. We were ready to move on!

DAY 8

PUNTA ARENAS TO SANTIAGO

Arriving at the tiny Punta Arenas airport for our flight to Santiago, we found the check-in line for our LATAM flight snaked around the entire terminal. Although frustrating, at least by the time we dropped our bags and went through security, our plane was already boarding! After a smooth flight, we touched down in Santiago at an airport flanked by the Andes mountains in the distance. The sky was clear and the air was warm! We took a taxi from the airport to our hotel in the Vitacura section of the city. As the world passed by the car windows and I watched people eating at sidewalk cafes and bustling around in business suits, a wave of relief washed over me. I don't consider myself a "city person" but it felt so good to return to the civilized world. The day kept getting better as the hotel upgraded us to a junior suite on the top level! Maybe all my trips to Chicago staying at the Hilton are paying off!

We were only spending a day and a half in the city, so briefly scoping out our room we headed out. I'm not ashamed to admit our first stop was the Wendy's across from our hotel. We were ravenous and a hamburger and fries sounded perfect! We then headed to the nearest metro station where with the help of our limited Spanish and Google Translate, were able to purchase metro cards and make our way to the Museum of Memory and Human Rights.



This museum details the human rights violations that took place during Pinochet's era from 1973 to 1990. Sobering, the museum provided facts about this dark time in Chile's history but balanced them with beautiful art installations. We spent two hours reviewing memorabilia from the Pinochet dictatorship, letters to family members by prisoners in detention centers, newspaper snippets and newsreel footage, and testimony from survivors.

We were given free drink coupons for the hotel bar, so we opted for a delicious pisco sour before heading out to dinner. Our meal was at Bocanariz, a Chilean restaurant that has repeatedly won awards from Wine Spectator due to its extensive wine list. Just look at that board! We opted to do a tasting menu with wine pairing. The appetizer was "from the sea" and consisted of bites of crab and oysters paired with three separate Chilean white wines. We both had flank steak with a large glass of red wine for our main and dessert was delicious and paired with straight pisco. Our waiter did a great job of explaining each area of Chile the wines were from, even going into detail about the vineyards themselves. We took home the labels on our glasses to see if we could find them back in the States!



Pisco sours consist of pisco, lemon juice, simple syrup and egg white



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DAY 9

SANTIAGO



We began our day by joining a free walking tour of the city led by our guide, Franco. We met on Plaza de Armas, the main square of the city which is flanked by several important structures including a cathedral, the post office, and main government building. We were with a group of about 15 other people and spent the next three and a half hours winding our way through the city. We learned so much not only about the history of Chile and Santiago in particular, but also gleaned some oddball facts. For example, Santiago has cafes called “coffee with legs”. These cafes are patronized by men who are served coffee by scantily-clad women. They are very popular across the city! We also passed by a restaurant across from the opera house, where years ago President Bill Clinton had stopped at to have a Diet Coke after a show. The owner has capitalized on this for years, plastering his storefront with pictures of Clinton. He even has a glass case inside with the actual glass of Diet Coke!



Metropolitan Cathedral of Santiago



The Clinton Cafe! :)



Statue in honor of Chile's indigenous people, the Mapuche.

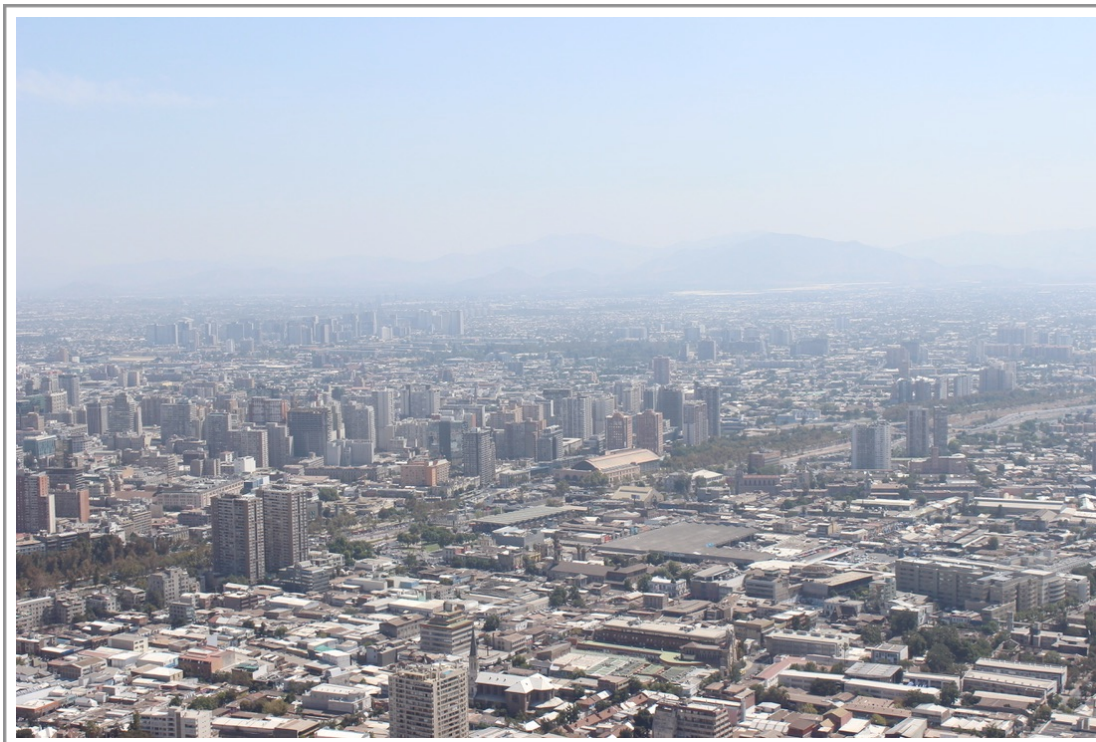
Mural on the streets of Santiago as a protest against development that has left very little green space in the city.



La Moneda Palace, the seat of the president of Chile, was bombed during the military coup in 1973. Although largely restored, some bullet holes remain today.



Leaving the walking tour behind, we had ice cream for lunch (yay!) and headed to the museum housed in Pablo Neruda's Santiago home. Neruda was a Nobel Prize-winning poet and politician who died in 1973. His house in Santiago was originally built to be a hideaway where he could visit his secret lover, Matilde Urutia. He called the house *La Chascona* in her honor for that was the nickname he gave her due to her wild, untamed mass of red curls. The house was quirky, yet beautiful and filled with art and mementos from their travels. Although it only took an hour to tour, this museum was a real highlight of our time in Santiago. Unfortunately no photos were allowed inside so we have little to show for this outing.



The final part of our day was spent taking the funicular up San Cristóbal Hill. One of the tallest peaks in the city, once up top it provided a nice, if hazy, panoramic view of the city. There were lots of vendors and cafes along with a sanctuary dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. We tried a traditional Chilean drink called mote con huesillo which consists of a sweet clear nectar-like liquid made with dried peaches (huesillo) cooked in sugar, water, and cinnamon, and then once cooled mixed with fresh cooked husked wheat (mote). Not finding much else to do up top, we headed back down in the funicular and made our way back to the hotel to split a sandwich and enjoy beers at the outdoor cafe attached to our hotel.

Our last meal in Santiago was at Chipe Libre, a restaurant that works to infuse the best of Chilean (Chi) and Peruvian (Pe) food. This was one of our favorite meals of the entire trip! We ate outside in the courtyard in the rear of the restaurant and shared our way through a plate of oysters, ceviche, and empanadas. We each had a unique pisco-based cocktail to start and ended the night by having traditional pisco sours - one made with Chilean pisco and the Peruvian. Both were great!





DAY 10

SANTIAGO TO ATACAMA

Our flight to Calama left just before 7am, so two days later we found ourselves back at the Santiago airport in the early morning hours. Thankfully the check-in process at this much larger airport was more orderly and we had plenty of time to get breakfast before our flight.

Sitting in the northern part of Chile, the Atacama Desert covers 600 square miles of land. It is one of the driest places on earth, receiving 0.6 inches or less of rain per year! This aridity owes to the fact that the desert sits between two mountain chains (the Andes and the Chilean Coast Range) which act as a barrier to any moisture breaking free. It has a cool term - a two-sided rain shadow! Occasionally, however, this barrier is broken and most recently happened in early February this year. While preparing for our trip at home, I read the headlines from Chile about a “freak rainfall” devastating the driest place on Earth. In a place where some areas had not seen rain in years, it rained for eight straight days and wreaked havoc on the infrastructure. I remained in close contact with the hotel to ensure it would be opened and fully operational when we arrived, which I was assured would be no problem. We did not encounter any weather-related issues during our stay and in fact hotel occupancy remained very low for that time of the year, hovering around 40%, due to a number of people cancelling.

After we touched down and were in our van transportation to the hotel, it felt like we had entered another planet. The air was dry and clear and the landscape looked to be from Mars. All we could see was red rock and dust for miles! In fact, the Atacama is used by NASA as a testing site.





View of the main building

We arrived at our home for the next four days, the Explora, around 10am and were greeted by the manager and given a tour. Due to the remote location of the desert and our desire to be active, we elected to book at Explora which provides an all-inclusive environment. We'd have our room, of course, and all drinks and meals at the hotel, but also have access to the various excursions they offer. Unless you were doing a full-day excursion, you would generally take part in one morning



Guide room where we learned about each day's excursion

and one afternoon excursion. After exploring the hotel grounds and enjoying an amazing cheese plate at the bar, we relaxed by the pool for a bit and then had a meeting with one of the guides to obtain an overview of the surrounding area and excursion program. We devised a tentative plan which had us doing a series of active excursions that would culminate in a high-mountain ascent on our third full day! I can't say enough about the hotel (no really, you should read my TripAdvisor review which I'm pretty sure was close to the character limit), and the food was a real stand-out. That first day we found out that even lunch was a three-course affair with appetizer, main, and dessert, along with wine, beer, or any other drink you wanted! We felt like royalty!



Pool area



Divine cheese plate

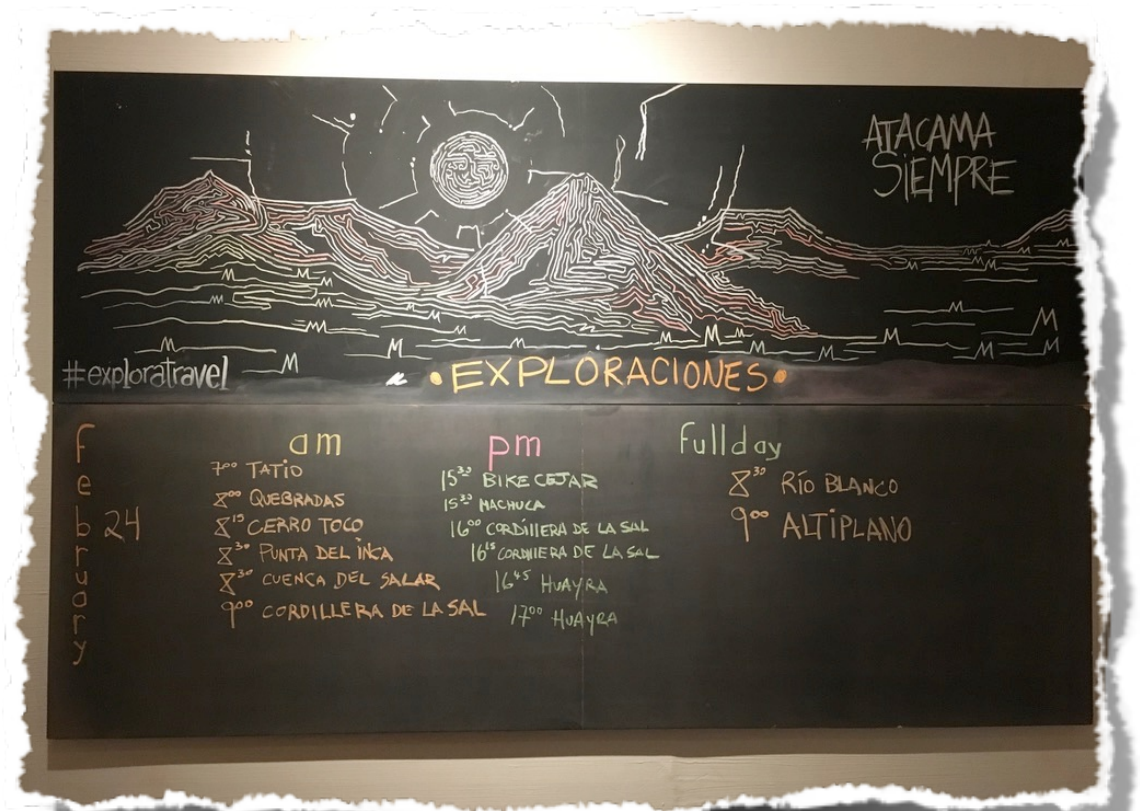


View from our room!

Due to the heat in the middle of the day, afternoon excursions typically departed at 3pm or after. So, close to 5pm we found ourselves in the lobby waiting to meet our group and guide for a trip to the Mars Valley. Our guide would be Negra and we were joined by one other woman named Karen, a judge in her home of Brazil. We only needed to drive about 20 minutes to get to our destination which lies in the Sal Mountain Range. It was extremely windy here! While on our hike we had a hat and a hiking pole from our group blow away (both were retrieved!). We walked the rim of the valley along a cliff and then, in my favorite part, we descended into the valley down a huge sand dune. We first stopped to take off our

shoes and having our feet sink into the cool, silky sand was heavenly. Along the way we even passed some people sandboarding down the dune! As we climbed our way out of the valley towards the waiting van, we got absolutely sandblasted. Even with sunglasses on and our hands shielding our faces we had sand in our eyes, mouth, ears, and noses. Despite that unpleasantness, we had an amazing first excursion in the desert. Better yet, the van was waiting for us with fresh blueberry muffins and drinks. Mike and I cheered with a beer!





After returning to Explora and rinsing off all our sand, we headed to the dining area and snagged a seat on the outdoor patio near a roaring fire. Although it's hot during the day, the nights can get cool. As with lunch, dinner blew us away! We enjoyed ceviche for an appetizer, local fish for our main, and these amazing little popsicles featured to the left.

Explora is unique in that it is the only hotel in the Atacama Desert to have its very own observatory! Lack of light pollution, the altitude (the hotel is at 8,000 feet), and arid atmosphere make this a prime stargazing location. We were signed up for the 10:30pm session that evening which was way past my bedtime, but not something we wanted to miss. Joined by one other couple, we walked along a boardwalk to first do an astronomy lesson and look at the stars, particularly constellations, with our naked eyes. We then headed into the observatory and saw the most wondrous star clusters, nebulae, and even the sombrero galaxy, so named for its shape. We had such an amazing time but as it neared midnight, it was time to head to bed and rest up for the next day's adventure.

DAY 11

ATACAMA



This morning's excursion would take us to the Cactus Valley, or Punta del Inca. Driving about 30 minutes towards the small village of Guatín, we arrived at the start of the hike which sat at an altitude of 10,500 feet. We were the only people on the excursion and were led by our guide, Julianna. She was fantastic! Originally from Colombia, she used to be a guide at the Explora hotel on Easter Island, where we were headed to next. She offered us great advice on both Easter Island as well as her home country, even going so far as to write down her suggestions for us so we could remember!

The hike itself was really, really cool. The trail followed the river along a canyon dotted with cacti. These cacti grow only 1cm a year, so you can imagine how old these were based on the pictures! Some of the cacti had broken due to natural causes and we got a close look at all the wood that is inside them which we never knew! The trail crossed the river several times and we had a blast climbing up

and down the canyon walls along the way. One of the best parts? We never saw another soul. After making our way out of the canyon, the van was waiting for us with a full spread of cool drinks and fresh fruit. A perfect ending to the hike!





Arriving back to the hotel after our hike, we had some time to spend before lunch began at 1pm, so elected to make the ten-minute walk into the small town of San Pedro de Atacama. The town is mostly filled with souvenir shops and businesses hawking their tours of the desert, but a standout was the church. Built during the Spanish colonial period, it is constructed of adobe material and the walls, roof, and entrance door are built with cactus wood. The church is a gorgeous example of building with indigenous materials.





For our afternoon excursion, we elected to do something a little bit different and do a 15-mile bike ride from the hotel to a nearby salt lagoon. Our guide was Augustine and we were joined by a couple who currently live in the United States but were originally from Ireland. They were lovely!

The bike ride itself was hot, dusty, and extremely bumpy. Even in the later afternoon, the sun was pretty intense and we stopped often to drink water. Although the roads took us out of town and then through some salt flats, other than the mountains in the distance, it wasn't too spectacular. Just over an hour later, we arrived at the lagoons. One lagoon which was not for bathing contained flamingos which was neat! We then moved on to the main event and got in the water where even Mike was able to float (he normally sinks to the bottom of any body of water). I imagine this is what floating in the Dead Sea feels like - effortless and pretty amazing! While floating on my stomach, I couldn't keep my legs in the water if I tried! After a bit, we headed back to the beach to towel off, our bodies already streaked with white salt where the water had dried. Luckily we didn't have to bike back to the hotel. After a quick outdoor shower, we hopped in the van which shuttled us back to the hotel for a proper shower.

We enjoyed drinks on the rooftop terrace while watching the sunset followed by another fabulous dinner!





DAY 12

ATACAMA

Our acclimatization plan had us doing a full-day excursion today to a place called Rio Blanco. Although it was a one and a half hour drive to the starting point of the hike, it was totally worth it. We were joined by our guide, Augustine again (!), and Kim who worked at Explora at the front desk, but had a day off. This hike would be great because we would get to see the Ta-tio geyser area full of geothermal activity, but also follow a warm-water river through a paradise of greenery and wildlife.



We began our hike at 14,500 feet and hiked alongside gurgling geysers and then descended through an open ravine.





No one in our group was showing signs of any altitude sickness, so we passed our bail out point and sat down to eat our packed lunch next to the most beautiful waterfall. It was one of the best picnics I've ever had!

Shortly after lunch, we turned the corner and entered the wildlife paradise we had been promised. The landscape along the river was lush and green and we saw many guanaco, close relatives of the llama. We even got to observe two males fighting over territory!



Our hike today was so beautiful and we couldn't believe how varied this, the landscape in a desert, could be. It was full of life too! It was a good sign that none of us felt ill effects from the altitude. It meant we had the all-clear to attempt our mountain summit tomorrow. Once back the hotel, Augustine introduced us to an IPA brewed in Santiago which we wished we had known about earlier. It was amazing! This was to be the last drink of the night for us, however. In preparation for tomorrow we were under strict orders to drink no alcohol and to carbo-load. We had a happy hour with mango juice and made sure to get the pasta entree that evening!



DAY 13

ATACAMA



After a hearty breakfast and so hydrated we could have grown gills, we headed to the lobby to find out who our guide would be for the day. To our surprise, it was Augustine again! Not all guides like to do high-mountain ascents, so he switched around with some others in order to go with us. We were thrilled because we'd gotten to know Augustine really well over the past few days and he's really fun! The precipitation that fell as rain in the desert in early February fell as snow on the top of the mountains, so before we left the hotel we geared up in high gaiters and received super warm mittens to take with us in our backpacks. Then we set out on the highway towards the border with Bolivia to make our way to Cerro Toco.

Toco is a volcano and stands at 18,385 feet. It's neighbor is the volcano Licancabur which is the very conical-shaped volcano we can see from our room. Interestingly, at 19,409 feet, it's not too much taller than the one we'd be climbing. When we climbed Kilimanjaro a few years ago, we followed a very conservative acclimatization plan that had us summiting on our 7th day of climbing. We also climbed almost 10,000 feet of elevation over those days. Here, we had the benefit of having great access in which the van drove us to around 17,000 feet and we "only" had to climb the next 1,500. Further, we would be able to immediately descend to 8,000 feet after our hike.

Having climbed at a high altitude before, I knew what to expect - that no matter how slow you walk, every step will leave you slightly breathless. I'm glad we had this prior experience because it took away some of the scariness of feeling this way. We saw a few other groups as we slowly made our way towards the summit over the next hour and a half, covering about 1.25 miles of distance. Due to the snow covering the volcano, there was no trail to follow per say, we just made our path. As Augustine said, "All paths lead to Rome".



We eventually reached a small, flat plateau just below the summit that afforded amazing views of the surrounding area. From here, we could look into Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina. We could even see the guard house far below at the border of Bolivia. After snapping some pictures, we slowly walked on and at least reached the summit! Whenever you accomplish a feat like this, it's a moment of pure joy. Augustine gave us the biggest hugs and we all had huge smiles plastered on our faces. We took in the moment, rested, and took a bunch of pictures at the summit. Although I wore only one layer when hiking up the volcano in the sun, now that we were at the windy summit and had stopped moving, we got cold very quickly! We were adding extra layers and putting on those warm mittens in no time. In scuba diving, there is a phenomenon that occurs called getting "narced" which is diver slang for nitrogen narcosis. This occurs at deeper water depths because the compressed air they breathe has a higher concentration of nitrogen. While it can make people do crazy things like take their regulators out of their mouths, I've experienced mild symptoms before and it's like feeling pleasantly drunk or having a slightly out-of-body experience. I began to feel the same thing on Kilimanjaro and on Toco too, so at that point I knew it was time to go down. Thankfully going down was MUCH quicker and took about half the time as we basically slid down in huge strides on the snow.

At the summit with Augustine, Licancabur is the volcano to the left



Making our ascent



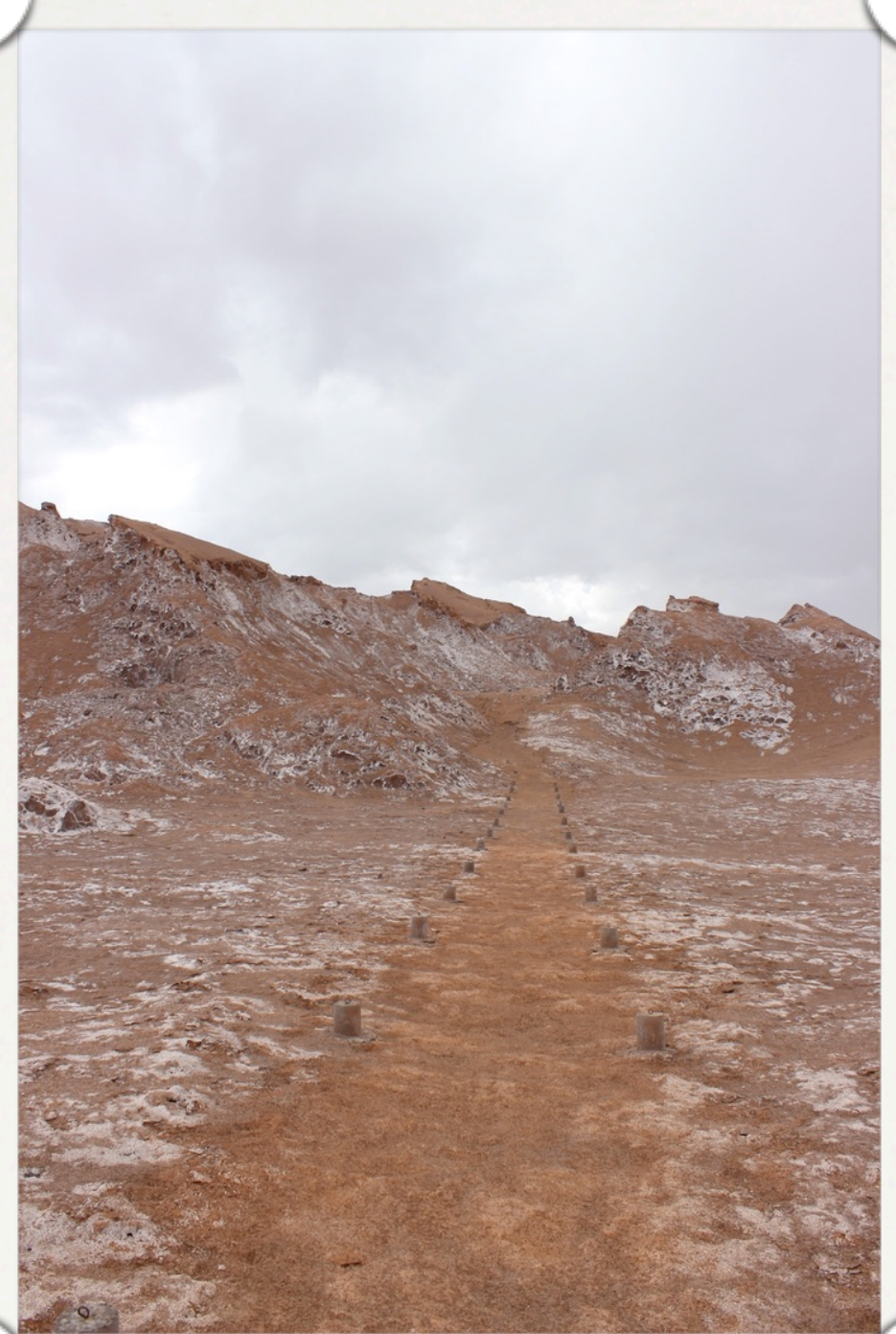


It's crazy to think that summiting the volcano was just our morning excursion! For the moment though, I was happy to be back in the van and heading back to the hotel. I literally felt high on life as we sped along the highway, windows down, old school rock blaring, and singing along. The highway we took to Toco is apparently one of the most dangerous in all of Chile because of the elevation gain and loss and all of the curves. Going down, many people don't realize you need to be in a lower gear and can't use your brakes otherwise they will overheat. We pulled over at the side of the road at one point to take a look at a bus whose brakes had caught fire and then consumed the whole bus. Thankfully everyone got out and was okay, but it was an eerie sight. There were still suitcases with clothes and other items strewn about the area. Augustine fancies himself a bit of an artist, so he took possession of my camera and did a photo shoot of sorts.

This might be the weirdest picture I've ever been in. Mike was a very good driver!



Our afternoon excursion would take us to the Moon Valley, or Valle de la Luna. Only a short ride away from the hotel, we entered another landscape that did indeed make you feel like you could be on the moon. Wind and water had carved an impressive landscape which was made even more interesting due to the recent rains that had cause salt to seep out of the rocks, creating a white dusting over every surface. Years ago, there were salt mining companies in the area but they have long since been abandoned for more lucrative mines focused on pulling copper and lithium out of the ground. Our guide was Karo who was so enthusiastic and friendly, and we were joined by three other couples - two from the States and one from Australia. It was by far our most relaxing and least taxing of the excursions, but after our morning, we were happy with our choice and it was neat to see yet another totally different area of the Atacama. Once back at the hotel, we ate and drank heartily and sank into bed one last time in the desert.





DAY 14

ATACAMA TO SANTIAGO



Explora has 20 specially-bred and very well cared for horses used exclusively by guests for the excursions the hotel offers. I had been very interested in taking a horse back ride and we had the opportunity to do so on our last morning before heading to the airport. We would be partaking in a 5-mile ride called Dunas de la Chula. Donning our helmets and chaps, Mike and I set off to meet our horses. Both of our horses were nine years old



and Mike's horse was named Copucha and mine Carlita. They were great horses! Along with a group of two other couples from the States that were traveling throughout Chile together, we set off from our hotel with our guide, Julianna again! We headed along the road towards the Sal mountain range and crossed the, now dry, San Pedro River. We eventually came to an area with dunes where we stopped for a drink of water and had a photo opportunity. Then, in our favorite part of the ride, we entered a dry riverbed and rode through a valley with towering rock formations on either side. It was amazing and the perfect end to our time in the desert! Upon return to the hotel, we were able to get cleaned up and enjoy lunch before heading to the airport. As we sat on the porch savoring our last moments in the desert, I reflected on the fact



that I felt the most relaxed I had in months. It was a great feeling.

Given that we had an early flight the very next morning, upon arrival, we stayed at a hotel across from the airport terminal in Santiago. The room was great and the location super convenient. Even better, the hotel bar had cheeseburgers and french fries on tap which we had been craving after all the fancy Explora food!

A wide-angle landscape photograph showing a dirt road that curves from the foreground into the distance. The road is flanked by green grass and a rustic fence made of wooden posts and wire. In the background, there are rolling green hills under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is peaceful and rural.

DAY 15

SANTIAGO TO RAPA NUI

Today began with an early morning wake-up call as we made our way to the airport for our 6:30am flight to Rapa Nui, or Easter Island (so called because it was “discovered” Easter Sunday, 1722 by Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen). Even though it is a Chilean territory, we had to go to a special LATAM check-in counter and then fill out immigration forms that were processed in Santiago before we could board the plane. The plane we were originally scheduled to take was undergoing maintenance, so our flight was delayed about an hour and we got put on a much larger plane. The one benefit was a lot of unoccupied seats, so Mike and I both had empty seats next to us during the four and a half hour flight.

As we hurtled through the sky towards the tiny speck of land in the Pacific Ocean that is Easter Island, the remoteness of our destination really hit me. For hours and hours we flew over the ocean and as we started to descend, the rocky shoreline came into view and everyone on the plane craned their necks to get their first glimpse of our destination. Captain James Cook arrived in 1774 and noted in his journal, “Nature has been exceedingly sparing of her favours to this spot”. Other early European explorers described it as “little more than a barren lump of lava-covered terrain”, so to my surprise as we were about to touch down, I felt as if we were landing in the middle of someone’s backyard in Kauai. The clear blue skies contrasted the lush green grass and ferns as far as the eye could see. As far as I was concerned, we had landed in a tropical paradise. At the airport, there was no entry process so we were disappointed to not get an Easter Island passport stamp! Don’t worry though, the story has a happy ending.



Our first moments on the island, at the airport.



Infinity pool

We were staying at another Explora property on Rapa Nui, so we knew what to expect, although this hotel had a distinctly more laid back vibe to go along with the island atmosphere. The hotel and grounds were just as magnificent, however, and we spent time relaxing before our first lunch and excursion, later in the afternoon.

View from our room!



Most important area - the bar!



Hotel's main building with windows overlooking the Pacific

Rapa Nui History

Before we left on our trip, I read much about Rapa Nui's history and the moai statues. One of my favorite books was *The Statues That Walked: Unraveling the Mystery of Easter Island* by Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo. So excuse me while I nerd out and convey a brief history lesson.

Moai = statues

Ahu = platforms

Pukao = hat-like or topknot structures placed on the heads of some moai

Mana = magical spiritual essence believe to be contained within moai



Rapa Nui is believed to have been first inhabited around 1200 AD. Using large double-hulled canoes, people set out from other Polynesian islands and miraculously found the 63 square mile piece of land. During the time period from about 1250 to 1500, approximately 900 moai were carved. 500 of them were transported considerable distances and 200 made it to their final resting place, the ahu. The moai were carved and believed to possess the spirit of their ancestors, whose actual bones were contained within the ahus beneath the statues. All but one set of moai are facing inland, and not towards the sea. This is believed to signify that the ancestors were watching over their people on the land, not acting as sentries against the sea and potential invaders.

95% of the statues were carved from tuff (a compressed volcanic ash) and originated from a single quarry, Rano Raraku. Since there is no written history, how the statues were moved is not known for sure, but oral tradition says people used divine power to make the statues walk. Research done by Terry Hunt and his team using a replica moai shows the statues could in fact be “walked” in an upright position by using a set of ropes on either side and a rocking motion back and forth. Even knowing this method, recognizing that teams of people moved the statues many miles across uneven terrain is just incredible.



Map of ahu on Rapa Nui

After 1500, for reasons we don't know, the people on Rapa Nui abandoned their statue carving. By this point, the population on the island had swelled to a level likely to be unsustainable for such a limited resources, around 3,000 people. They may instead have had to turn their attention to survival.

Contact with Europeans and their disease and distractions had a devastating effect on the island. As a result of disease and the slavery practice of blackbirding, the native population of the island fell to an all-time recorded low of just 110 people in 1877.

Around the time of this European contact, there is also thought to have been a civil war among the population in which moai were purposefully toppled off their ahu. This war and natural disasters such as tsunamis following earthquakes resulted in no moai left standing on ahu. Every moai we see today that is standing upright on an ahu is a result of painstaking reconstruction efforts.



Examples of topped moai

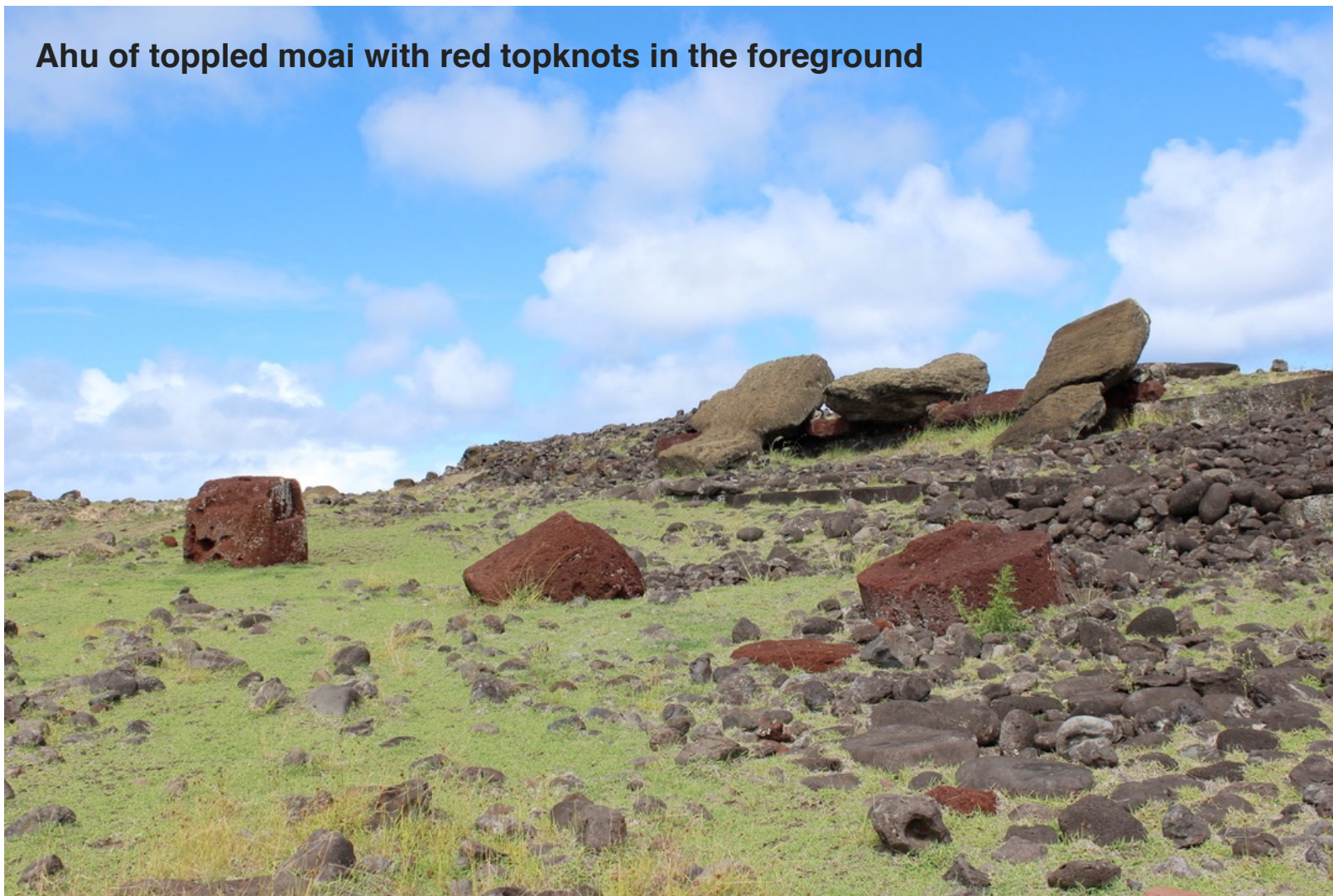


Mike and I ended up being the only people on our afternoon excursion, so we set off from the hotel with our guide, Lily, on foot. We walked through beautiful fields towards the ocean and after about forty-five minutes arrived at Akahanga. Visitors to any of the sites on Rapa Nui are required to purchase a national park pass. I was surprised when we arrived at Akahanga, however, to see a little ranger station where they checked your tickets. We learned that the most popular and important of these sites have the stations. In a way, it made me feel like we were at a Disney World attraction, but on the other hand there was only one other person at this site, so it certainly wasn't crowded!

Akahanga is important because it is a platform that remains destroyed and unrestored. Its moai were toppled both forward and backward, providing a good first closeup view of the statues. According to oral tradition, the first king of the island, Hotu Matu'a was buried in this place. After exploring the area a bit, we headed back to the hotel on foot. All-in-all a relaxing day and we were looking forward to a more adventurous day tomorrow!



Head of a moai broken at the neck



Ahu of toppled moai with red topknots in the foreground



DAY 16

RAPA NUI

We awoke this morning to the most amazing rainbow going from a cloud directly into the Pacific. It was beautiful! Our first excursion of the day would be a 6-mile hike to the largest crater on the island, Rano Kau, the site of the famous Birdman competition. We were led by George and joined by a lovely group of Brazilians who were great company, although they talked a LOT and often took breaks, so our progress was slow.

The Birdman was an annual competition that decided who would be the ruling king of the island for the following year. The would-be kings would pick young men as their delegates for the competition. The winning competitor themselves would win a virgin woman for the year. The competitors began by running down the steep slopes of Rano Kau and then swimming to the islet Motu Nui where they needed to retrieve the first sooty tern egg laid that season. Sometimes they would need to wait days for this to happen! Once retrieved, the egg would be carried in a reed basket tied to the contestant's head so he could have both arms free to swim back and climb up the slopes to the stone village of Orongo. To win, the egg must remain intact!

We greatly enjoyed our hike along the coast and then to the rim of the crater where we could see the islet that featured in the Birdman competition. We walked along the perimeter of the crater and finished our day by visiting the village of Orongo which was only utilized during the competition.





**Panoramic view of the crater with the islet Motu Nui in the distance
to the far left**





Panoramic view of the stone houses in the village of Orongo. The architect of our hotel mirrored his buildings off of these circular structures.

The water off Rapa Nui is some of the most intense blue I've ever seen!



Rocky coastline



Our excursion took about two hours longer than planned, so we rushed back to the hotel and had a half an hour to order and eat our lunch before leaving our on afternoon excursion! We're so glad we made it because it ended up being the top excursion of our time on the island. We met our guide, Nico, and along with four other people we set out to the Rano Raraku quarry.

Despite having been on the island a full day by this point, we had yet to see an upright moai so were we really excited! We began by hiking to the interior of the crater which contains a freshwater lake. We then got to the main event! We hiked out of the crater and along the southern slope of the volcano which was littered with carved moai sticking out of the ground. In his book, Terry Hunt said of the quarry, "Congregated here in so many states and positions, they [the moai] conjure up a vision of scores of artisans at work and an eerie sense that the latter have just left, planning to return tomorrow. It is easy to imagine that their work ceased in a single moment, as if, as with Pompeii, some catastrophe occurred." This perfectly captures the feeling one gets looking in awe at these magnificent moai left at the place of their creation.



The skilled artisans would use basalt hand axes called toki to shape the moai. After they were largely shaped they had to be carefully moved down the slope, moved into a vertical position, and the carving completed. Then the moai were “walked” to their ahu at points along the coastline. During every step of this process, there was great risk of the moai breaking.

It's hard to understand why they are so many moai that are left unfinished or unmoved at the quarry. We attended a geology lecture later in the week during which the professor posited some theories. One is that the quarry was a place of teaching workers, so the statues were purposefully left as examples. Another theory describes the quarry as “the world's first used car lot” in which carvers would display their merchandise to potential buyers. We'll never know for sure, but the quarry is hauntingly beautiful and very mysterious.

Even though it had begun to rain, we opted to do the additional hike along a “road” from the quarry the moai would have traveled down. Here we saw many toppled moai laying facedown, for they were abandoned in transport once they fell.



*We went so far, so very far
to understand the orbits of stone,
the deadened eyes that continue watching,
the enormous faces prepared for eternity.
- Pablo Neruda*



An unfinished moai lying in repose, protected by an overhanging cliff.

A moai lying facedown along the road used to transport them from the quarry to their ahu. I found this really heart-breaking to see.





A faint, orange-colored tattoo is visible around the neck of this moai.



Tukuturi, an unusual moai due to its beard and kneeling posture which distinguish it from standard moai.



DAY 17

RAPA NUI

The next morning our excursion was to be a 15-mile ride along the coast and past several important sites. We met our guide, Tavi, and once we were set-up on our brand spanking new bikes, we set off by van to get to the paved highway. Mike and I were the only brave souls who signed up for this excursion!

We began biking at a good clip along the coastline on a picture perfect day. Our first stop was Tongariki which contains fifteen moai and is the largest ahu on the island. This is probably the most famous picture of moai, so chances are this will look familiar! All the moai were toppled during the civil war and subsequent tsunami in 1960 that occurred after an earthquake in mainland Chile. The tsunami pushed some of the statues as far inland as 300 feet! The platform was restored to what we see today in 1990. It seemed like Tavi had been here before, so he took a really fun shot of us lined up as the 16th and 17th moai!



View of the rear of the platform at Tongariki



The moai are perfectly aligned

The “traveling moai” so named for its travels abroad to Japan for an exhibition, stands guard at the entrance to Tongariki



It was amazing to have this important site all to ourselves, but near the end of our stay a tour bus showed up so we hightailed it out of there and continued through the interior of the island and ended our bike at the white sand beach of Anakena. It is the only true beach on Anakena and is flanked by a lush palm grove. According to oral tradition, this beach is where Hotu Matu'a, the Polynesian chief who first settled the island, landed. There are also archaeological sites in this area including Ature Huki which is an ahu containing a single statue, thought to be the first re-raised in modern times. Another ahu, Nau Nau, contains seven moai were are in very good condition due to the fact that when they fell, they were covered over sand which protected them from weathering. After learning about the history of the area, we had free time to go for a swim in the beautiful, turquoise water. It was surreal being in the water and looking back at the moai dotting the shoreline. Amazing!



After our refreshing swim, we were eager to get back to the hotel so we could run into the town of Hanga Roa before lunch. We had learned that the tourist office in town had our coveted passport stamp. While we waited for the taxi the hotel arranged, we got a quick shower and then made the 15-minute drive into town. To our dismay, when we arrived, the tourist office was closed despite it being a Saturday. Our hopes were dashed again! We did a quick spin around town and bought some souvenirs before heading back to the hotel for lunch.

Our afternoon excursion took us by van to an area called Akivi. This ahu is unique because there are seven moai, all of the same size, but the platform is located inland, rather than along the coast. Furthermore, they are the only moai that face the coast rather than looking inland. The moai exactly face sunset during the Spring Equinox and have their backs to the sunrise during the Autumn Equinox.



We moved on to nearby Ana Te Pahu, which is home to large volcanic lava tubes and caves. We explored some of the caves that were used as water reservoirs as well as dwellings. Near an entrance to one of the caves, we were able to observe a beautiful petroglyph of a bird carved in the rock.

Our last stop of the day was the ceremonial complex, Tahai. It was the residence of Ngaara, the last high-ranking ruler, who died and was buried here. The three ahu here are what steal the show, however. We had time on our own to explore the area and then met up with our group and guide, Heta, by the van to enjoy snacks and cold drinks as the sun slowly started to set.



Vai Uri contains five moai and is a good display of the different kinds of moai that were carved.

Tahai contains a solitary moai which is very eroded and stands on the oldest ahu in the complex.



Ko Te Riku, which houses a moai with a pukao on its head and is the only statue on the island with eyes. It is believed that once they were settled on their platform, all maoi were given these eyes made out of white coral with obsidian pupils. It was at this point that the statue was considered to come alive and could project the mana or spiritual power to protect its tribe.



DAY 18

RAPA NUI

Our last day on Rapa Nui would be spent on an 11-mile hike along the North Coast. There are no roads in this part of the island and it is so remote that it's estimated only 1% of visitors see this area. While there are no restored ahu and moai in this part of the island, we wouldn't find any ranger stations either. We'd have direct access to the sites and have them all to ourselves!

Our guide for the day was again, Tavi, and we were joined by a young couple from Philly on their honeymoon. This excursion is only offered once a week to fit hikers, so we were thrilled this was on our itinerary. Although it did rain at one point, we had an amazing day exploring the North Coast with our only companions horses and cows. We stopped to eat our packed lunch next to the toppled, reclining moai featured on this chapter introduction. We ended the day at the beach at Anakena where we had a refreshing swim before heading back to the Explora. We spent our last night on the patio outside, enjoying cocktails, watching the sunset, and reminiscing about the past three weeks.





Do you see the outline of the moai in the rock to the far right?



Mike making his way into one of the substantial cave dwellings we explored



Our group hiking along the North Coast

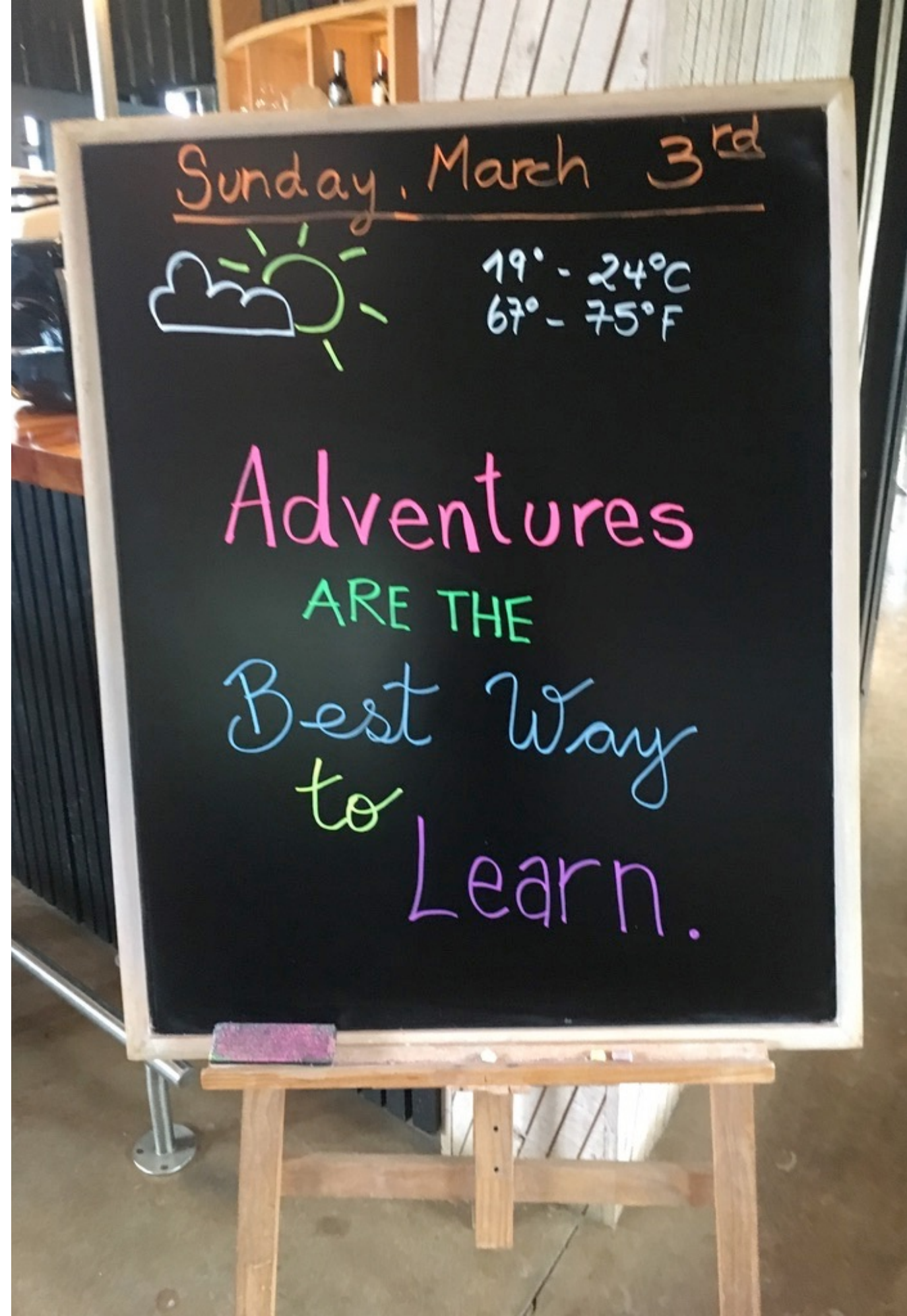


A fallen moai along the trail

THE LONG WAY HOME

After an incredible three weeks, our time in Chile had come to an end. Explora had us get to the tiny Rapa Nui airport extremely early, before check-in was even open! There are only two arriving and two departing flights each day, so the airport essentially only opens when there is work to be done related to those flights. This gave us enough time to walk from the airport into town and visit the tourist office to get our passports stamped! Feeling vindicated, we hurried back to the airport to go through security and wait in the open-air lounge for our flight to Santiago to board.

Although I was certainly sad to be leaving, as we were on the plane I realized that all around us exciting journeys were just starting for other people. Often local Rapa Nui people need to wait months to take the flight into Santiago, and as smiling groups of people excitedly chattered around us and took pictures, I couldn't help but be happy for them and the journey ahead.



EPILOGUE

Mike and I are incredibly lucky to have the health and means to travel the world. There is sometimes, however, a less glamorous side of international travel and that reared its ugly head after this trip. Almost immediately after arriving home, I became very ill and spent the better part of a week in bed and eating a steady diet of bread, rice, and bananas. Despite being very careful about what we ate and drank while in Chile, a test revealed I had contracted the giardia parasite from an infected water source. Giardia's nickname is "beaver fever" which I think is amazing. All this culminated in being prescribed an anti-parasitic and receiving a call from the Delaware Office of Public Health. As a reportable disease, my doctor had to communicate this to the authorities and although they called to ask a few questions, they seemed mollified after learning I had been traveling. Although it took a full week to recover I am so thankful I didn't get sick while on our trip. And no, it hasn't scared me away from travel one bit!



Giardia are actually kind of cute!