

March 3, 2012 - Saturday

We fly all day, which means lots of airplane food for free which is fun because it's like playing house. Also good because we are hungover from the 'Clash of the Titans' wrap party.

March 4, 2012 - Sunday

We are waiting in Santiago for our third flight and realize it's our first time in the southern hemisphere. After a three hour bus ride from Punta Arenas to Puerto Natales, we walk around the small port. The water line reminds Brian of Alaska. We eat some empanadas.

At night we go to the hostels adjacent base camp/bar for lasagna, quizo, and pico sours [the delightful chilean drink made from a grape-based liquor]. We get half the questions right [with the help of our new Seattle-ite friend 'Other Brian'] and I get drunk on 3 pisco sours. We talk a lot with other Brian about travel and our preparations for our respective upcoming treks. Shower time.

March 5, 2012 - Monday

The Erratic Rock hostel is great. It has two common rooms and a full kitchen, animal pelts, brown colors, and an antique stove. Next door is their bar and base camp setup. At 3pm we go to base camp for an info session about the national park, it seems like its going to be a lot of work. We find empanadas por desayuno and spend the rest of the day food shopping and picking up last minute gear. I just bought a hideous watch. I bought it because we needed it. It was hideous because I couldn't ask for a different one in spanish. I did however have an entire conversation while renting hiking poles. We cook dinner in the kitchen, talk to a few other travelers, and play cards.

March 6, 2012 - Tuesday

(the start of the backpacking trip)

The hostel breakfast is yogurt and homemade bread with dulce de leche. The table is all set and we talk to two girls from Vermont. Before the bus to the park at 7am I am pretty nervous, but sleep through most of the journey.

Except! We see 'llamadeer', flamingo-things, and emu (maybe). The emus run like they were drunk and their bushy butt feathers wave.

All of us sleepy gringos file out of the bus and the second our feet hit the Torres del Paine ground everything goes insane. The winds rip through us. I start chasing flying sunglasses (3), the bus door is rattling off the hook. Water pellets from the lake shoot us in the face. We cower in fear.

Regrouping, we run up the path to Salto Grande, a huge awesome waterfall. We return to board a catamaran from Laguna Amargo to Laguna Pehoe. It is awesome. We stand on the roof and sail (zoom) over a teal blue silt like that is going off with the heavy wind. Surrounding the lake are these two huge epic snow capped jagged mountains; our first glimpse. The wind, water, and nature are dramatic (Brian is losing his shit [figuratively]).

We hike for a while through an area that had been burnt with forest fire.

At the first mirador [lookout], we walk up to a high domey rock. The winds are whipping. As we ascend we get our first look at glacier grey. I could cry. Its in the distance, over a blue lake. Itself a massive sheet of glowing neon blue light dropping down from snowy mountains sharply ending at the water. Light is bouncing everywhere. It is a singularly dramatic image. Also, the wind is so strong that it holds me up. That is until it blew me to the ground, back and ass-first onto the rocks.

For lunch we stop for bread and jam. Along the way we see some floating icebergs. They look like two ton blue 7-11 slushies.

We have arrived at our first campsite at 6pm, shocked to be here so early and feeling so energized after six hours of hiking, about 10 miles. Pretty easy.

Our asses currently unkicked, we hike an extra hour away from camp. It feels like we have the whole park to ourselves. Out here we cross a huge waterfall and stream in a bouldering old glacial flow. Brian climbs up the rocks a long way. To finish the crossing we climb up (and down) an incredibly long scary ladder.

Arriving back at camp, we are only a minutes walk from another glacier lookout. We are insanely close this time. It's evening, so the bouncing light is gone. Now it looks old, wise, and even more vast. I feel haunted by it all night and in the morning a new iceberg has broken off.

March 7, 2012 - Wednesday

We don't sleep much and get a late start. I do some stretches by the glacier and fill our water bottles in the nearby glacial stream (we can drink from almost all the streams). We quickly retrace our steps down the first leg of the trek, making excellent time.

Watching the 'Aggrocrag' mountain change in the light is a treat. Sometimes it looks like Mt. Olympus and sometimes it looks like Mordor. In fact, this place is looking so much like Middle Earth I've been catching myself singing the Hobbit song.

We eat tuna and avocado at Refugio Grey before trekking another three hours to the next campsite. We are tired now and it sucks a little, but the surrounding lakes are beautiful and the sunny side of the would-be Teaton Mountain looks like The Land Before Time. At camp, there is an epic waterfall, backdropped by a mountain glacier and the scariest bridge ever.

March 8, 2012 - Thursday

Campamento Italiano has lots of people milling around the cooking area. We eat our oatmeal with chocolate and dried fruit.

We get to leave our packs at camp for a day hike up Valle de Frances. This is awesome, as my legs are already painfully tense. The start of the trail is lots of loose rocks, which is hard to walk on, but it is changing to forest that is fun to run through. There are glacial streams every ten minutes.

In fact, the entire trail is running next to a huge rapid that is rushing from the glaciers all the way down to the distant lake below. The lake is still and blue with mountains carving inlets off into the distance.

The first mirador is at the foot of a giant dark rocky mountain. It is covered in glaciers. We are insanely close to it. As we are watching, giant avalanches roll down the cliff with a low rolling grumble.

The second mirador is an epic three-sixty panorama of the entire valley. You can see the sunny side of every mountain in the park at once. Big red rock walls, the granite topped sandstone, the

back of the Torres, and the back of the monstrous 'Aggrocrag', which on the first day had been a glistening ridged wonder of blowing snow, but is now just a dirty rock.

We run into 'Other Brian' at the mirador and eat snacks before descending. After picking up our bags from the camp, we hike down along the lake to the next campsite. Stopping along the rim of the lake to rest, I put my feet into the freezing water. Brian runs in naked. He only lasts a minute. It was really nice though. After an hour, lots of people were running in.

We camp near refugio (lodge) Cuerons. This is a treat because we get a couple pisco sours and some beers, which I am sorely needing. We talk to some German travelers and eat a huge bowl of mashed potatoes with melted cheese. Our tent faces huge granite and sandstone walls which pick up the last stray rays of the fading sun.

March 9th, 2012 - Friday

After the now customary oatmeal, we leave the refugio for our biggest day of walking yet, probably about fifteen miles. We walk around sparkling lakes of different hues of blue, while a cast of different mountains and some peek-a-boo glaciers pass us on the other side. It's crazy how fast the scenery is changing from one moment to the next. The wind is still for the second day in a row and the sun is mega-bright, so we cool off in a clear lake with a fine gravel bottom which we reach by crossing a horse pasture. I wade out into the lake and it is cold. It was a picturesque scene, a lake in a pasture under a snowy mountain, that I can safely say I never thought I would be swimming in (or standing frigidly, as it were). We opt to take a more direct shortcut along a ridge that turns out to be a long, hard, uphill walk in the pounding sun. We deplete our water reserves quickly in the heat, and there are no streams around. We're running out of energy fast.

We make it over the pass and descend to a raging river on the other side. We chug water from the rapids and eat everything in sight. We scarf cookies, juice, chocolate, and prepare a special mixture of all of our leftover food: pasta, mashed potatoes, peppers, and tomato sauce. I call it 'red mush' and we are inhaling it. At the river, we see gauchos, or cowboys, on horseback. They have sexy outfits.

The final ascent to our last campsite was (likely) through some gnarly woods. It was steep and looked like Fanghorn Forrest.

For dinner, we had a bucket of rice and tuna, but we are still starving.

March 10, 2012 - Saturday

We woke up at 6am today and jumped right on the trail to see Las Torres at sunrise. It was a one hour hike, entirely uphill in the dark, and it nearly killed me. Definitely the hardest part of the trek.

Once we reached the peak, The Towers totally revealed themselves with a big "oh, hey there" and we sat on a rock to watch. Three rock pillars shoot out of the earth with stripped rock and an oval silt blue lake at the base. As the sun rose, the blue cast was washed away to reveal the orange of the pillars. These neat low lying clouds circled around their peaks. The surrounding loose rocks create stadium seating to enjoy the view from. We hobbled down to the rim of the lake to see the water. The nature here is so intentional it hardly seems possible.

We eat our last oatmeal back at camp and say goodbye to the park ranger and his friend Fredrico, a carved tree trunk dressed in abandoned clothes that keeps him company (a la Castaway) at his A frame hut.

The hike down is mostly uneventful. No number of hiking poles makes all that downhill comfortable. When we finally finished we are feeling pretty good, considering; just dirty, smelling, hungry, and a little sore.

Now we lay in the grass with other back packers, waiting for our buses. Everyone seems to be French.

On the bus back to P. Natales, we see herds and hers of llama deer, which we now know are called guanaco, and more flamingos (this time gliding over the water), which we now know are actually flamingos.

Back at Erratic Rock, we ate all the food. All of it.

At the Base Camp Pub, we throw down with a Dutch feminist named Flora, an Antarctic badass named Travis, and a host of other UN representatives.

March 11, 2012 - Sunday

TRAVEL DAY. No plans, no tickets, have currently made it onto a plane headed to Santiago. Only minor incident involved two drunk men trying to explain to us the effects of alcohol in spanish ("Energy!!!")

When we get to Santiago, we have to decide between Valpariso, La Serena, and Arica, based on what tickets are available when. Those 20 minutes were so stressful we swear off open ended travel forever. We red eye to Arica.

March 12, 2012 - Monday

Today is the strangest day of the trip/life. We land in Arica at 4am thinking we will stroll the beach until sunrise but as we taxi to town the place looks like a Third World Pittsburg. The taxi drops us off at an intersection we've picked at random and we are left standing with all our bags in a totally dark, desolate, shuttered up town; utterly vulnerable. We decide hiding in an alley is not an option, so we tiptoe through town as quietly as possible. All the hostels are locked up, but one. We ring a doorbell, someone opens a gate, takes our cash but not our names and we are safe. In the morning, Brian walks to the sir shops only to find they don't actually sell boards, if they are open at all. So when we see a stranger on the street carrying a board, we run after him. He gives us a slip of paper with a cell number and the name "Miguel". This sets into motion a day long mission to find a board, this name our only clue. The first two payphones drop the call with Migyel and within an hour, after more payphones and a man in a bazaar with a cellphone in a drawer, Miguel's number no longer exists.

We awkwardly enter the workplace of Renalto, the surfer who happens to be a minister of tourism. He gives us many pamphlets, one full of phone numbers of surf renters. We stressfully utilize a call center, which is like a peepshow kiosk for telephones, only to find out that none of these numbers exist either. We get a patio buzz going with mugs of Crystal beer to keep Brian from killing himself. Every Arican who walks by dressed head to toe in Quicksilver apparel antagonizes Brian, who has come to the conclusion (through extensive investigation) that not a single person here actually surfs.

Defeated, we walk to the beach for sunset, which is intensely beautiful even though major storms along Chile have caused the river to gush muddy water onto the beach, making the sand impassable the ocean brown. Brian swims in it anyway while I start talking to a local surfer (in Spanish!) I see getting out of the water. Hardly anyone speaks english, so I probably seem like

an adorably stupid Californian (which actually seems to be welcome by everyone here...) and Ignacio the surfer offers me weed and says I am his friend. His buddies shake my hand and kiss me on the cheek, which seems to be a thing here. Ignacio (who says he rents surfboards!) gives us his phone number. We despair because we think all phone numbers here are fake.

This day is more like a movie than any other day of my life: running around a foreign city which is beautiful and lively and full of markets, but devoid of any practical functionality, carrying with us only a name and a number on a slip of paper from a stranger, looking for a thing from a guy. Arica was going off as much as it's swell.

March 13, 2012 - Tuesday

Everyone in Arica is unspeakably friendly. Almost no one speaks English, but their dealings with us range from understanding and helpful to genuinely excited. Everyone is stoked on California. A cook came to our table to ask us the english word for 'rice' and the security guard at a sporting goods store shook our hands and welcomed us to his town. A jewelry maker in the market has a friend at the Venice boardwalk. We thought each other equally rad so I bought a necklace and he gave Brian a pendant.

The buses here look like 80s safari buses with hand painted signs in the windows, an old wooden coin organizer by the driver, and various flowing curtains along the windows. You can basically flag them down anywhere like taxis. We took one to Las Machas for a beach day. We just so happen to get there the same time as a surf instructor. We determine he has boards to rent so we get in his car (...) and drive to his house to pick them out. His dog, which is not allowed in the car, runs beside it all the way through the streets to his house. We agree on a price and time and are left to surf.

Brian's got a short board and I've got a 7' 3" funboard. The water is a little brown, with a super strong current and a howling on shore wind, but the locals are tearing it up. One of the (sexy) locals asks me for surf wax and he helpfully describes to me the current and even helps me paddle out with the rip current. When I catch a wave on my feet (I catch two), he gives me a thumbs up. When I say goodbye, he tells me to practice paddling, which is fair enough considering these are the friendliest surf locals known to man.

On the beach, Brian and I eat an empanada and a towering slice of chocolate cake we ordered

on accident. Playa Las Machas is a little dirty so we hop on a bus to a more southern public resort style beach where we throw down a chill ass chill. It's a little bay for swimming with straw umbrellas for shade. We read books and have a martini, successfully burning the shit out of our skin. After a shower in our low rent hotel, which has actually turned out to be pretty awesome, we find a great dinner spot. Like all of the eateries here it is basically some tables under an aluminum roof that opens onto the sidewalk like a shanty restaurant, but we get an exceptional three-course meal. The first round is ceviche, which defies Brian's vegetarian sensibilities, followed by the most five-star of soups. Mine was a chicken broth with a chicken berate, potato, and a corn cob floating in it, and Brian's was an epic seafood soup with muscles and clams. The final course was friend fish with rice. It was a legit fancy meal for about \$10 USD plus the beer. Damn.

March 14, 2012 - Wednesday

Yesterday we held an elaborate conversation in Spanish to book a day trip to the National Park in nearby Putre, but the lady ended up tracking down our hotel to return the money because the trip was canceled. We investigated various methods of getting out of Arica, but we were basically stuck for a third day. We deemed it a day of relaxation. Brian read and sketched outside the hotel room and I went souvenir shopping and finally at the complete I'd been lusting after. It's a hot dog on a roll with tomatoes, onions, avocado, mayo, and Chile's taste sauce salsa.

After a siesta, we found a patio for beers. When Brian left to buy empanadas, some probably crazy man with a bag of ceviche sat at my table and kept shaking y hand and throwing gang signs to God. The waiter who spoke English asked him to leave and it was really awkward. He waved to us when he saw us eating dinner later that night at another restaurant. We must be pretty conspicuous; a few people have waved at us. We will miss Arica. It is a nice place.

March 15, 2012 - Thursday

We used a call center to hire ourselves a taxi to the airport. The flight is uneventful other than marveling at the lax airport security. After taking a bus and a subway into Santiago, we are thinking we are doing a good job until we accidentally inhale a spent cloud of teargas fired by the herds of police in riot gear that are everywhere. "Do you feel like you just inhaled some poisonous fas?" Like idiots we try to walk further toward the ensuing riot, but two women in gas masks turn us around. Since our hostel sappers to be located in the center of a riot, we

start walking around. We see riot tanks zoom past us and two big plumes of tear gas go up from under the bridge in front of us. Herds of college students walk the streets, acting totally unphased except for an occasional tear. Once the lunch hour is over, the streets clear, the path to our hostel opens, and it's like nothing ever happened.

We make it to Hostal Providencia, which is colorful and funky.

We eat a fancy seafood lunch in the Central Market which looks like a beautiful late 1800s iron translation. From here we start walking south. Santiago feels like Europe or old timey New York, but with palm trees. At first glance, Santiago looks like an unkept mess; it's beautiful old stone buildings are covered in rough graffiti. It's only until you start reading the words, everything from critiques of the fallen Pinochet regimen to this year's student led educational protests (the cause of today's tear gas), that the graffiti begins to add to the cultural mile of the city.

The Plaza de Armas houses a gigantic cathedral. One of the bigger ones I've ever been in and probably the tackiest. I had to double take at one of the shrines because I thought it was one of those silver Christmas trees from the 60s. The church is emend, though, with an awe-inspiring line of sight down to the main alter.

The rest of the walk was slow going, our lethargy was palpable. It's super hot too. We try to order an iced coffee, which might not be a thing here because we end up with a giant frapaccino shake, It is delicious. I chat with the cashier and he says my spanish is good.

March 16, 2012 - Friday

We have one full day in Santiago, but because it's such a big city it's actually kind of hard to thing things to do. We subway it over to the Plaza de Armas again. We walk down Bandera street and spend some time thirsting. The street is lined with thrift and vintage shops. I'm jealous of all the hipsters that live here.

Brian heads back to the hostel for a siesta and I try to find the pre-Columbian art museum, but it seems to be under construction. Instead I decide to try these weird drinks everyone is eating. It looks like a cup of rice crisps in a brown liquid. Turns out it is a sort of peach juice with a hunk of canned peach and the rice crisps taste like a mix between a peanut and a tapioca ball. I liked it. I also ate another empanada de carne which has usually been baked, folded in a square, and

filled with beef, onions, an olive, and a hard boiled egg.

Started walking back to the hostel and nothing happened other than I found a park and a woman tried to read my palm and/or maybe steal from me. The park was called Correo Santa Lucia, I think, and it was very whimsical. It rises out of the cut via a winding stone staircase and there is lots of tree coverage. It seemed very romantic with fountains and stairways.

Later in the afternoon we walked north from Plaza Italia to San Cristobal, a big wooded hill-mountain that over looks the city. It's really steep so we take a ride on the Funicular. The Funicular is a cable car system from 1925 that heaves up these rickety tracks as another car goes down. It's one of those fun, magical modes of transportation.

From up there, you can see how immense Santiago is. You can't see the end of it for all the smog, but it could be twice the size of LA. It's not particularly beautiful, but it is big. Up here there is also a sanctuary to the Virgin Mary. There is a huge white statue of her that can be seen from the city below, as well as a space for prayer candles and messages.

On the walk back through Barrio Bellavista, we stopped at a patio bar for dinner. Bellavista was popping with young adults and it definitely seemed like the hip place to be on a Friday. There were also lots of buskers and street performers. It seems normal here that everyone gives some change to each performer who comes by with a hat.

Back at the hostel we go to sleep early because we are both sick and also tired.

March 17, 2012 - Saturday

We took a little van to the airport this morning, only to find that our plane was delayed three hours. We waited in the longest line ever then spent all our pesos on souvenirs and Dunkin Donuts. There were these three American bros, self described "meatheads", who kept talking to us and using the word "attacking" in reference to women... We left them somewhere in the Panama airport where they probably still are, trying to "keep it cool" in the face of the un-American tyranny of flight delays. Because we missed our connection to LA, the airline booked us a night at Hotel Panama. Bonus passport stamp.

The skyline of Panama City looks like the sharp spikes of an audio wave, and at night it looks

like the future. The hotel is one of the fanciest I have ever stayed at. Because it is so warm, the marble lobby has no walls. Everything is very shiny.

We get vouchers for dinner and breakfast, which are very impressive buffets. I am very happy. I eat two of each mini dessert.

Five minutes before the taxi to the airport we jump in the outdoor pool because it is so fancy. I'm really happy we got an extra vacation day to relax at a nice hotel. Otherwise we would have ended on a tired and stinky note. The best part of Panama was flying in over the canal. We must have seen 75 huge ships all parked in the ocean like a game of battleship, waiting for their turn into the canal. Though the ships were probably the size of multiple football fields each, they really did look like toys.

Final Thoughts

Torres del Paine is definitely one of the most beautiful places on earth, Chileans are definitely friendly, and my big toes definitely went numb.