

# Pumping Patagonia

After setting up camp at Los Cuernos, a quick run along the shores of Lago Nordiskjold.

**Richard and Bev are Team Eat.Run.See, two former South Africans now living in Vancouver. Follow their insights, experiences, and culinary quirks issue by issue from the countries and trails they visit on their three-year vegan globe-running adventure.**

**P**atagonia is a vast and sparsely populated area (about 80% the land mass of South Africa) on the southern tip of South America.

It's home to a dizzying array of breathtaking mountains, lakes, and glaciers. It extends into both Chile and Argentina, and owing to its remoteness and staggering beauty, is a remarkable place to experience true wilderness.

On our visit here in March 2014, we explored the Torres del Paine National Park in Chile and also spent time near the town of El Chalten, within the Los Glaciares National Park in Argentina. In this issue we focus on Chilean Patagonia, with the equally stunning Argentinian region to be covered in a later issue.

We planned a six day adventure in Torres del Paine, which would see us hike and run along the famous 'W' trek which remains just south of the Cordillera del Paine massif. We initially planned to run the complete 110km 'O' circuit, which essentially circumnavigates the massif.

Unfortunately we had to opt for a more conservative route, due to logistical difficulties exacerbated by

cold weather challenges. So, out of necessity, we set out to complete the 'W', with plans to get in plenty of running on the gorgeous trails of this spectacular part of our planet. Over six days we ran half of the 'W', a total of 40km or so, and did around 70km of full pack trekking with gear, food, and camping equipment.

We started our adventure at Laguna Amarga, the main entrance to the park. Using the pay-for-use shuttle bus service, we drove the first 10km into the park and then hiked 9km uphill to Campamento Torres for our first night in the park, encountering heavy winds and snow along the way. We set up camp, and wasted no time heading out for our first short run up to the Base de las Torres, where we were treated to a private audience with the splendid granite spires that give the park its name (*torres* is Spanish for towers). This area is usually congested, and most trekkers arrive for sunrise or later in the evening owing to the logistics of how people move along the hiking routes. We'd arrived early and had a stunning 20 minutes in absolute silence to enjoy the company of this spectacular sight. An absolute highlight.

The following morning, we did the 9km hike back down to a campground near Refugio Torres from where we had planned a longer run north east towards Campamento Seron on what is known as the back of the 'O' circuit. The weather, however, was steadily deteriorating and before long we cut our planned two hour run short, returning to our tent after an hour in the now-howling wind. It was beginning to dawn on us that wind was going to be a big part of our Torres del Paine experience. Notwithstanding the shortened run, it was still a gorgeous, non-technical singletrack trail, which offered wide, sweeping views of open landscape in this part of the park.

That night the wind continued to gain strength, really whipping our tent around, and the following day turned out to be a write-off. It started raining, the wind was howling, and we had little choice but to stay bundled up in our tent for most of the day. We were thus forced to spend another night at Refugio Torres. We learned later that the winds were at a sustained 70km/h to 80km/h, a strong gale, according to the Beaufort Scale.

The next day dawned clear, but with no break in the wind. After breaking



**We were gobsmacked by the magnificent Glacier Frances on our French Valley out-and-back run.**

An out-and-back is required, though, due to the

up camp, we hiked the 11km to the next overnight camp, Los Cuernos. It was a beautiful ramble, along the northern shore of the magnificent Lago (lake) Nordenskjold. We couldn't wait to get into our running gear to take in a run along the lakeshore. It was stunning.

Unfortunately, it was also cold and windy, and with sunset fairly early, we only covered 5km before being forced to make our way back to camp, where we had to find a way to get warm and make dinner. Dinner was easy in the shelter of the *refugio*, but it turned out that we wouldn't be warm again until some time the next day. That night was well below zero, and with our lightweight gear, we knew all about it!

The next morning, we shook the ice off our tent, and set off to Refugio Paine Grande, 13km away. Along the way, we ran the 8km stretch up the middle of the 'W', with the French Valley to our right and the magnificent Glacier del Frances to our left. This was a steep and technical run, offering gorgeous scenery, another major highlight.

layout of the trail, giving a total of 16km before continuing on to Refugio Paine Grande. This made it a rather long day, with a total of 29km and a fair amount of climbing: 1,200m in total elevation gain.

The following day was our last day in the park and it was nothing short of spectacular. We put in a 24km out-and-back (over 1,100m in elevation gain) as we ran up the left leg of the 'W' to just beyond Refugio Grey to take in the awesome Glacier Grey. Along the trail, there were magnificent views of Lago Grey with plenty of side options to reach higher ground for even more spectacular sights. The trail was highly varied, all singletrack, but ranging from easy, smooth running to highly technical, steep and rocky business. It was the perfect way to end our time in this most memorable place.

Upon returning to Refugio Paine Grande, we caught the ferry across Lago Pehoe, back to the park entrance. From here we bussed back to Puerto Natales, very happy to find a hot shower and cosy bed at Erratic Rock, the friendliest hostel we'd encountered on our travels.

And so concluded one of our most memorable adventures, with firm promises to return to explore more of this special place. 🏔️

### BEV & RICHARD ATTFIELD

Their journey started in Belize, Central America, and has taken them through 27 countries, including South Africa. [eatrunsee.com](https://www.eatrunsee.com)

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## Patagonian Primer

▲ **WEATHER.** Expect unpredictable and extreme conditions especially strong winds and quickly-changing temperatures.

▲ **CLOTHING.** Bring layers and a good wind/rain jacket along with gloves, hat, and neck covering. Don't forget sunscreen and lip balm.

▲ **BEST TIME TO VISIT.** October to March.

▲ **ACCESS.** Puerto Natales is the gateway town for Torres del Paine National Park. Reach Puerto Natales by bus from Punta Arenas (easy and cheap) or ferry from Puerto Montt (difficult and expensive but worth the effort). Regular buses run between Puerto Natales and the Park; buy tickets at any travel agent in town or at the bus station (slightly cheaper).

▲ **FOOD.** Stock up on food and camping gear (purchase and rental) in Puerto Natales as supplies are very limited in the park.

▲ **ACCOMMODATION.** Erratic Rock Backpackers/Basecamp Rentals is your best bet for warm hospitality, clean and cosy dorm beds and good rental gear (tell Bill we sent you and make sure you attend their free daily orientation for all the best info and tips). There are other non-camping accommodation options that offer a bed as well as food. However, it's not cheap at an average of R550 per person per night in a four or six-person dormitory, plus another R200 to R300 per meal.

▲ **CAMPING.** Undoubtedly your cheapest accommodation in the park with tent and gear rentals available at each hostel/lodge. If camping with your own gear, bring a quality lightweight sleeping mat (the ground is hard and cold!) and sleeping bag rated below zero degrees.

Bring a thin rope and zippered canvas bag to store and winch up food when in camp. Those cute Patagonian mice will wreak havoc on your food supply if it's on the ground!

**The breathtaking view along the Paine Grande-Grey trail with Lago Grey's waters being fed by Glacier Grey.**



### Your research starts here

[torresdelpaine.com](https://torresdelpaine.com) (general info and maps)  
[parquetorresdelpaine.cl/en](https://parquetorresdelpaine.cl/en) (official park website)  
[verticepatagonia.com](https://verticepatagonia.com) (camping and lodging in park)  
[fslodges.com](https://fslodges.com) (camping and lodging in park)  
[erraticrock.com](https://erraticrock.com) (hostel and gear rental)

### Organised races

[ultratrailtorresdelpaine.com](https://ultratrailtorresdelpaine.com)  
[patagonianinternationalmarathon.com](https://patagonianinternationalmarathon.com)