

TRAVEL+LEISURE

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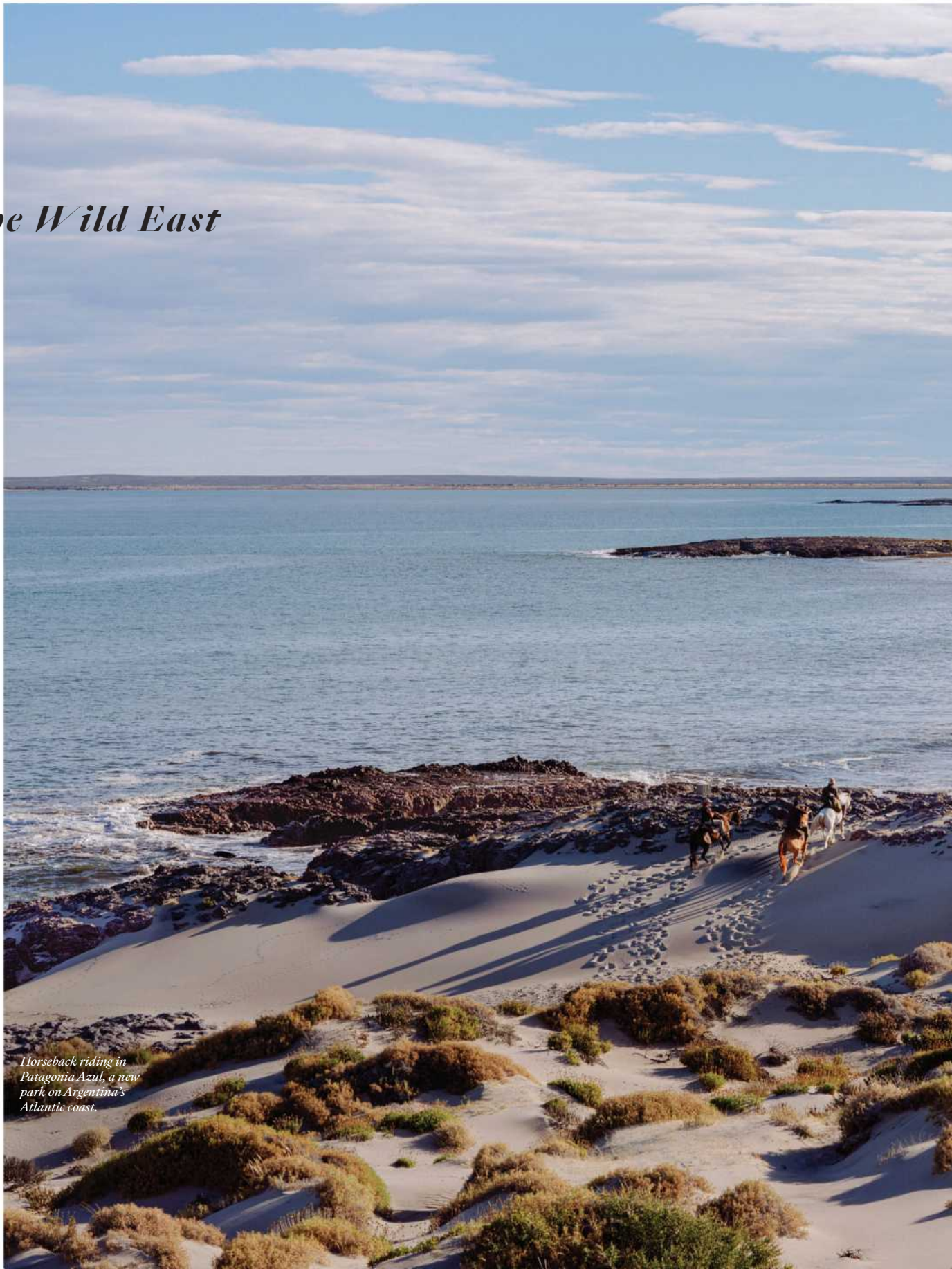
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*The coastline of
Patagonia Azul,
near Bahía Bustamante
in southern Argentina.*



The Wild East

Horseback riding in Patagonia Azul, a new park on Argentina's Atlantic coast.





On a road trip from Argentina's windswept Atlantic coast to the largest desert in the Americas, **Mark Johanson** explores an overlooked patch of Patagonia—and keeps an eye out for the region's most elusive species.

Photographs by Carol Sachs

FROM LEFT
*Preparing a maté
 drink at Isla Leones
 Camps in Patagonia
 Azul; the main
 house at Marisma
 Camps in the park.*

OPPOSITE
*Hiking through a
 canyon in Parque
 Patagonia.*



Just beyond the slick gray rocks thronged with sea lions, and offshore from the Magellanic-penguin colonies, a rigid inflatable Zodiac bobbed in the waves. Ignacio “Nacho” Gutierrez Galvan, a young marine conservationist, motored us through the kelp-choked water surrounding a chain of islands along the jagged Patagonian coast, in Argentina’s Chubut Province.

He was there to study seabird nests and the feeding cycles of five migratory whale species, including southern rights and orcas. “If the whales are here, that’s because it’s an important place,” he explained. “They know more than we can ever pretend to know about the health of this ocean.”

Gutierrez Galvan and his colleagues with Rewilding Argentina—an offshoot of Tompkins Conservation, an influential nonprofit launched by American philanthropist Kris Tompkins, former CEO of the outdoor brand Patagonia, and her late husband, Douglas, founder of the North Face—have been traveling here regularly since 2022. Among other things, they’ve restored ecosystems damaged by trawl fishing and invasive species such as sheep, rats, and rabbits. “I definitely see the changes on these islands,” Gutierrez Galvan told me, as a “committee” of pearl-white terns swirled overhead. “Over time, I can see this becoming one of the hot spots in the South Atlantic for research and conservation.”

We were in Patagonia Azul, a new provincial park funded by Rewilding Argentina that envisions this overlooked archipelago as a kind of Galápagos of the South Atlantic. Situated near the mainland fishing villages of Camarones and Bahía Bustamante, the area was unreachable for researchers and unknown to tourists until the NGO began purchasing coastal sheep ranches in 2019. Since then, it’s ripped out fences, restored habitats, and crafted a model of marine conservation funded, in part, by ecotourism.

This is a novel proposal for the eastern coast of Patagonia, a frosty, windswept world’s end where arid grasslands seem to stretch infinitely from the ocean. The air is radiator-dry, and so salty you can lick it off your skin. The greener, loftier Patagonia of puffy-jacket logos is some 500 miles away.

Yet that remoteness is what had drawn me here. I wanted a quieter, sunnier counterpoint to the granite castles of Mount Fitz Roy and Torres del Paine, whose resort towns suffer from overtourism. Over the course of a week, I planned to visit the new parks, trails, and hotels that have birthed a nascent tourism industry in Patagonia’s “B-side.”

I wanted to learn how tamed landscapes can become feral again—and maybe glimpse some pumas along the way. Throughout it all, I hoped to explore the largest desert in the Americas: the Patagonian Steppe.

“THE STEPPE IS the least known and least respected of all Argentina’s landscapes,” Evaristo Ortega, a soft-spoken horseback-riding guide at Patagonia Azul, told me the next day as we galloped atop dunes on an empty beach. During the span of an hour, the sun descended over the steppe, highlighting its prickly grasses, painting the crumpled plains in radiant gold. “There’s a charm here that’s both graceful and subtle,” Ortega added, fanning his arm over the expanse. “Some people just need to learn how to appreciate it.”

My schooling began in earnest during a three-hour drive from Comodoro Rivadavia, the largest city below the 45th parallel south, along a route lined with sprawling sheep estancias. The destination was Isla Leones Camps, which Rewilding Argentina opened in Patagonia Azul’s namesake gateway in 2024.

The moment I reached Isla Leones, I felt as if the gates of adult summer camp had just swung open. The lobby had a chalkboard listing potential activities that piqued my imagination, as well as maps. The six simple

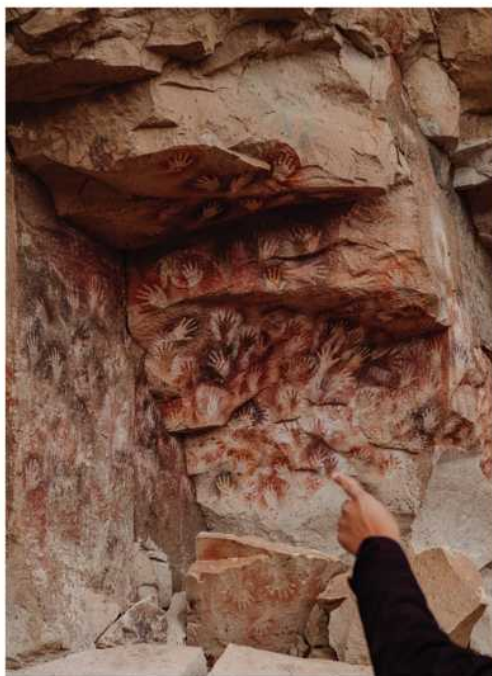


casitas were built in the local style, with corrugated metal and quaint wooden trims, all painted in khaki and bush green. Each had a deck overlooking the wild, cliff-lined beach, which I often strolled during twilight hours. Llama-like guanacos, dwarf armadillos, and giant flightless birds called Darwin's rheas, or *choiques*, were frequent visitors.

Rewilding Argentina has a knack for perceiving the value of underappreciated landscapes. The foundation's model is to buy up private lands, build out infrastructure, restore wildlife, and then donate everything to the National Parks Administration of Argentina. After completing successful projects in the northerly Gran Chaco forests and Iberá wetlands, where national parks opened in 2014 and 2018, respectively, it pivoted south.

"We Argentinians are blind to the ocean, which is why we're now pushing people to get out and explore it," Mariana Cassini, Patagonia Azul's marine-program coordinator, explained over dinner on my second evening. "You need to know places like this exist to care enough to protect them." Cassini often brings women and children from the nearby town of Camarones to snorkel in these waters, which, despite registering only 60 degrees Fahrenheit at the height of summer, are more bearable than you'd imagine, tingling the body without numbing it entirely.

In addition to the boat ride with Gutierrez Galvan and regular ocean plunges, I also hiked with guide Martina Zaffino to a string of shell mounds and arrowheads left behind by the area's ancient inhabitants, the Tehuelche. Zaffino and I continued on along a newly



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Carol Puracchio, the chef at Marisma Camps; balls of wool yarn used by ALAS, in the town of Camarones; prehistoric hand stencils at Cueva de las Manos, in Parque Patagonia.



built five-mile circuit trail, Sendero de Cañadón, where we met a group of sporty señoras from Buenos Aires.

The air on the trail smelled of honey and pepper, as yellow ragwort bushes swayed in Patagonia's notorious breeze. The gusts had reached 60 miles per hour by the time the women and I were huddling together at a lookout, windbreakers flapping, staring across brown-sugar beaches that curved, one after the other, along a blank horizon.

THE WIND DIED DOWN the following morning for my trip to Marisma Camps, the newest lodge at Patagonia Azul, which opened last January near Bahía Bustamante. On the way, I stopped in Camarones to visit ALAS, a women's weaving co-op that helps area artisans

enhance and market their textiles.

ALAS is one of Rewilding Argentina's many efforts to create nature-based economies for its neighboring communities. Its 13 members clean the town's famously fine merino, which has a designation of origin, and spin it into yarns for hats, shawls, and rugs sold at a small shop downtown, as well as a store on the Patagonia Azul reserve and another in a nearby lodge.

"My grandmother wanted me to join her in weaving, but I remember telling her, 'Ay, Grandma, that's just for old people!'" recalled Estela Pichiñan, who took to the loom two years ago despite her childhood avoidance of the craft. "She must be looking down at me and

ABOVE *A Magellanic penguin at a nature reserve near Isla Leones.*

laughing now.” Pichiñan is Mapuche and often weaves Indigenous geometric patterns in natural hues of pearl and charcoal. Her mom and aunt are members of ALAS, too, and she told me it’s become a way for women in town to socialize while also earning a living.

Fifty miles west of Camarones, I reached Marisma Camps and settled into my new casita, which was roomier than the snug one at Isla Leones had been. It had a private deck framing the South Atlantic sunrise and woolen blankets that I cozied up with in the evenings. Included activities at Marisma ran the gamut from kayaking to horseback riding and mountain biking, all of which I relished. But the highlight of my two-night stay was the gastronomy of chef Carola Puracchio, who grew up in Camarones. She infused her three-course lunches and dinners with a surprising ingredient: seaweed.

Encouraged by a researcher at Patagonia Azul, Puracchio began incorporating halophytes (a salt-tolerant plant) and algae into her dishes, like a hummus of earthy *Codium*, and a pesto with the asparagus-like *Salicornia*. “Seaweeds have incredible untapped nutritional potential,” she said as we walked down to the shore the next day to harvest ulva, or sea lettuce. “They’re full of vitamins and fiber. They don’t have pesticides or agrochemicals. They’re really the food of the future.”

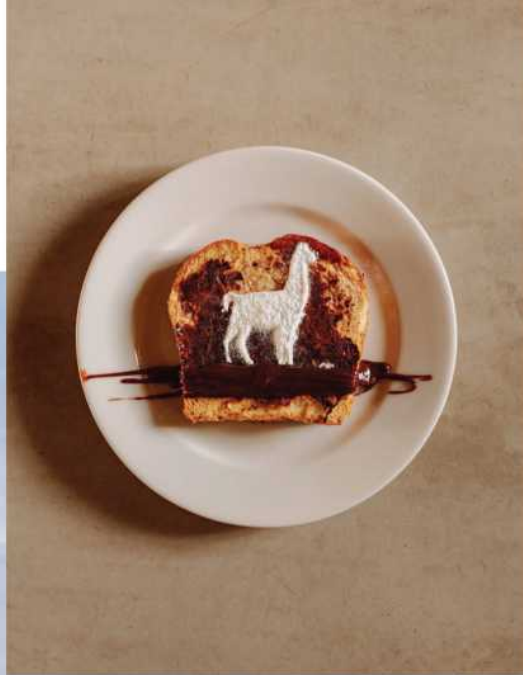
Puracchio is particularly fond of using the tasty but invasive Asian kelp wakame, which blocks out sunlight and kills native species. “When you eat this food, I want you to feel like you’re doing your small part in helping the ocean,” she said. “You’re a little hero for the species that are endangered because of this invader.”

I dined on the umami-rich meals at a big wooden table alongside fellow guests, who shared tales of their daily adventures. At dinner, we looked out the large



FROM LEFT Studying a map of the area around Isla Leones; seals swimming near the camps.





FROM FAR LEFT A flowering Darwin's cactus; banana bread decorated with a guanaco at La Posta de Los Toldos, in Parque Patagonia.



WHERE TO STAY

Isla Leones Camps

Six tiny homes lie along a boulder-strewn beach with easy access to hiking trails in Patagonia Azul. Book a marine safari to search for Commerson's dolphins, Magellanic penguins, or humpback whales. *From \$250 per person, all-inclusive.*

Marisma Camps

The hilltop homes in this part of Patagonia Azul, two hours west by car, are slightly larger than at Isla Leones, with decks overlooking the steely South Atlantic. Kayak past flightless steamer ducks in the namesake tidal marsh, or bike out to the barren beaches of Bahía Bustamante. *From \$280 per person, all-inclusive.*

La Posta de Los Toldos

This nine-room lodge in Parque Patagonia has a strong focus on educational programing and regional cuisine, including alfajor cookies with dulce de leche filling. At night, search for the Southern Cross from the on-site observatory. *Rates not available at press time.*

HOW TO BOOK

Rewilding Experience

This commercial arm of Rewilding Argentina manages all the properties above. It also organizes multiday excursions between the two Patagonia projects, which lie roughly 300 miles apart and are most easily accessed via the airport in Comodoro Rivadavia. Trips may include gaucho-style horseback rides along the Atlantic and puma tracking in the golden steppe.



**CLOCKWISE
FROM FAR LEFT**
*A roadside hot-water
vending machine;
guest beach huts
at Isla Leones;
kayaking on the
Arroyo Marea, near
Marisma Camps.*

OPPOSITE *A puma
walking through
Parque Patagonia.*

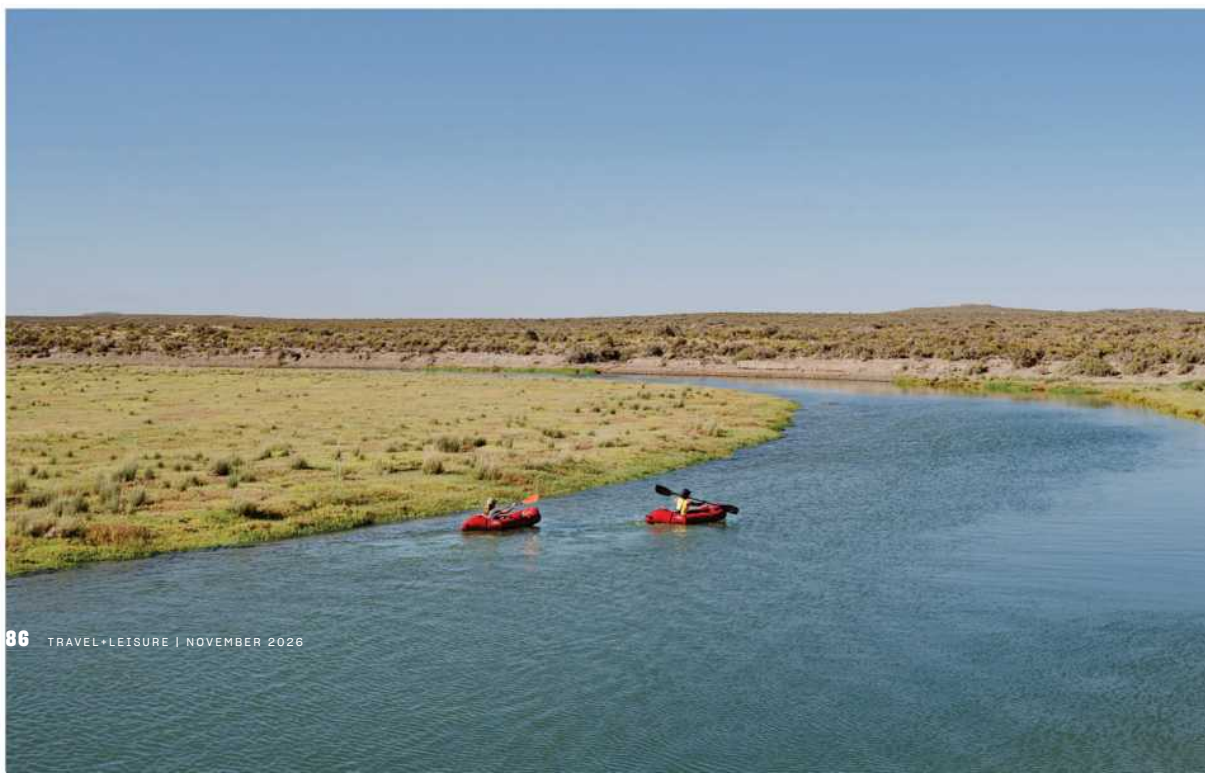
window that revealed the sea, with flightless steamer ducks surfing the high tide. When we returned the next morning for breakfast, the tide had gone out—and islands had emerged from the ocean, rock pools had emptied, and the sea had receded from view.

I **CROSSED THE STEPPE** the next day from east to west, driving 375 miles through desert the texture of crinkled paper and feeling, all the while, like a tiny speck on an infinite plain. There was no cell signal for the entire journey. Instead I tuned into the AM radio; the isolated folk who live on grand estancias there communicate by sending messages to the station, which during my drive announced canceled birthday parties, surprise pregnancies, and mud-stuck cows in need of rescue. If World War III ever breaks out, these will be some of the last people to know.

In the rural town of Perito Moreno, I saw my first trees in hours, poking above a grid of boxlike homes. Past the town limits were canyon lands reminiscent of the American West. I was now in Parque Patagonia, a patchwork of national, provincial, and private lands currently under development by Rewilding Argentina, with support from organizations like the Freyja Foundation. The national-park lands lie atop a lava-covered plateau with dozens of conical peaks, and Patagonia's only glaciers outside the Andes. The private and provincial parks lie in a string of canyons below.

The star attraction is Cueva de las Manos, a UNESCO World Heritage site with at least 860 handprints, made by hunter-gatherers over a span of 8,000 years on the rock walls above the Pinturas River. It's a monumental record of a lost society. Touring the site with a guide, I learned

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(Patagonia, continued from page 86)

that right hands feature in only 31 paintings (presumably created by a few left-handers). Interestingly, there was also one hand with six fingers, as well as a paw print that may have belonged to a puma.

My new lodge was on the far side of the Pinturas River Canyon. La Posta de Los Toldos captures the vibe of the best U.S. national-park lodges, but on a smaller scale, with only nine rooms. There is a library for nightly nature talks, a store selling textiles from Rewilding Argentina's community projects, and a heated outdoor observatory, where I searched for the Southern Cross. There was also a planetarium a short drive down the road.

Rooms were full-board with three meals, plus afternoon tea featuring quince pies and *chipa* (cheese-and-cassava) rolls. Guests dined together at a long wooden table, just as at Patagonia Azul, except here the crowd was international. I met couples from the U.S., Spain, and Australia road-tripping Argentina's famed Ruta 40, which skirts the spine of Patagonia. Together we downed bottles of plummy Argentine malbec and warmed up after dinner by the wood-fired stove. Above the dining table hung a photo of a puma, one of the region's most impressive species.

PARQUE PATAGONIA sustains one of the highest densities of pumas anywhere in the Americas. So the next day, I tried to find one with Jorge Rufino

Maldonado, a young and eager guide from Perito Moreno. We were joined by José Bonomi, a strapping Uruguayan wildlife technician in charge of the park's puma monitoring, and other members of his team. They all held a variety of tools required for the task: binoculars, walkie-talkies, antennas connected to radio telemetry.

We set off from El Unco, an old estancia purchased by the NGO in 2018 that has been converted into a biological station, where 15 staff members, spread across four buildings, monitor everything from pumas to pampas cats.

But of course the pumas are what everyone wants to see. That very morning, one of the park's 100-odd camera traps had alerted Bonomi to an 88-pound female trapped in Cañadón Pinturas, whom he had registered and collared. Hours later, we hoped to find Sable, one of the other 34 collared pumas—who, according to the initially faint click on the radio-telemetry tracker that kept growing louder, was within a mile of El Unco.

"The apex predator is a great indicator of a healthy ecosystem, because they need a lot of food to survive," Bonomi told me as we scrambled up a hill perfumed with wild thyme. "Seeing this population thriving means there is plenty of wildlife all around."

The tick of the tracker continued to increase in volume as we climbed through tall grasses while munching on wild *yaoyin* berries, which tasted like ripe tomatoes. Then—*beep, beep, beep*—a puma leaped out of a rock cave on the canyon wall to our left, walking across a rocky ledge. Maldonado passed me his binoculars, and I spotted Sable's one-year-old cub in the cave. Moments later it bounded out to follow its mom, joining her in a nearby grotto where they sat, cheek to cheek, staring back at our group. "Seeing a mother cuddling with her cub, and teaching it, you realize just how similar they are to us," Bonomi said.

I had assumed puma-spotting would only be possible with a guide, radar, and exceptional luck. But the very next day, about 10 minutes from Los Toldos, I encountered an uncollared female walking along the road. Alerted to my presence, she scurried up a scrubby hill to her waiting cub.

I was still high on adrenaline when, a few minutes later, I met with Mariano Nostro of the Freyja Foundation, who is in charge of Parque Patagonia's trail and infrastructure projects. I recounted my fresh puma sighting, expecting to be told how fortunate I was. But he shrugged it off as routine: "I see pumas from my window all the time."

Nostro has helped spearhead the park's development, opening a rock-climbing site with 80 routes in Cañadón Caracoles and a 37-mile network of hiking trails in Cañadón Pinturas. American trail-builders Jed Talbot and Willie Bittner came up with the master plan for the latter, training a team of workers from nearby communities who have helped instill a local culture of conservation. The trails I hiked were gentle and intentional, lingering in areas of great wonder before twisting around for fresh perspectives. One of them, Bajada de Los Toldos, features a staggering 400 steps that snake down a thin ravine.

A decade in the making, Parque Patagonia offers a glimpse of what Patagonia Azul may look like once the ideas tested here get reinterpreted on the coast. My travels through both reserves debunked any myth of the steppe as some monotonous wasteland, devoid of life. Inviting sustainable economies based around tourism has also turned local mining and ranching communities into some of the land's fiercest protectors.

"Many people think that conservation and progress can't coexist, but ecotourism is a clear way to show that this isn't true," Gutierrez Galvan had told me, back on the boat in Patagonia Azul. "It empowers local people when they see foreigners visiting. It makes them think, *If that person is traveling so far to see this land, then what we have here must be important.*" 🌐

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