

The Southern Ice Fields of

PATAGONIA

CHILE

"Hold on to the truck door, or the wind will rip the door off!" Some of the first English words spoken after the initial greetings by our very gracious, expedition trainee and host. We found ourselves in the furious fifties, -54 latitude, South America, Tierra del Fuego, Chile. A journey to the end of the Americas to explore the Southern Ice Fields of Patagonia, mentor a top Chilean paddle coach and provide expeditionary training for a young local expedition company.

Getting there

The journey began from Boston, Massachusetts in mid-January 2017. Standing in front of the Air Canada ticket counter with three-piece NDK Explorers in two bags, one additional gear bag, and a small backpack, Paula Riegel of Kayak Waveology (a BC 5 Star Advanced paddler and coach) and myself received many interesting looks from other passengers and security. First, a 90-minute flight to Toronto, Canada, then a long haul 14-hour flight to Santiago Chile.

Upon arriving and before enjoying a rest evening with our coach friend and expedition company partner, Juan Paulo Ceron (JP) of Universal Kayak, we airfreighted our three-piece kayaks to Punta Arenas in southern Chile to arrive just ahead of us the following day. After a four-hour morning flight the next day, we arrived in Punta Arenas greeted by a young lad saying, "Welcome Greg and Paula, I am Camilo from Nativo Expediciones." Nativo is the young expedition company seeking guide training experiences and coaching from Kayak Waveology and Universal Kayak companies.

Story: Greg Paquin
BC Coach, owner of Kayak Waveology, USA
ISKGA Advanced Guide

From there we collected our three-piece NDK Explorer sea kayaks from the air freight side of the terminal without a hitch – then the driving adventure began. It started with a two-hour drive to the Magellan Straits ferry crossing and crossing in a small, open top ferry. Force 5 winds and opposing tides made for an interesting sea spray-filled ride. After another two hours of driving on dirt roads, we met up with Nativo's other partner, Fredy.

All said and done, we arrived in one of the last villages in Chile, Porvenir, Tierra del Fuego. We met all the expedition team members for a bite to eat and a trip briefing to review plans and whatever chart and map information the young Tierra del Fuego lads from Nativo Expediciones came up with. Then we packed up the off-road trucks, yes, the trucks are set up for some serious expedition off road driving.

Off-road adventure

We left at 22.00 for a race-paced, night time off-road adventure for the next six hours. With serious off-road lighting, oncoming off road traffic and animal critters, like guanacos, are easily seen at night, giving more time to react while travelling swiftly on rugged dirt roads. Finally, in the early morning hours, we all arrived at the remains of Caleta Maria, a 1940s saw mill site. A small cluster of logging camp buildings now remain, maintained by mountain climbers over the years.

Positioned at the entrance of the Almirantazgo Fjord, all around us rose numerous mountain peaks reaching 10,000 feet. The journey used to take saw mill workers and mountain climbers five days by horse back to get to the location as the dirt road was only built five years ago by the Chilean military. This primitive, wood stove heated camp was a welcomed place of rest for the next day and a half and gave us a chance to sort through the local's choice of expedition food for the next five days on the water.

Our expedition would take us into the deeper fjords that just lie north of the Beagle Channel. After a good sleep to recover from all the jet setting and off-road driving, it was time to get busy working through the nutrition for this trip in the sub-Antarctic environment. Afterwards, we all drove from the cozy camp to a nearby mountain lake for a few hours of practice and to have a look at Camilo and Fredy's paddling skills on flat water: Basic skills where there so we had a crash course to refine strokes and



manoeuvres. They proved quick learners and all was good enough if we didn't have a big crossing with tide and strong, opposing winds.

Expedition food

After the practice session, we stopped at a local farm/ranch. Paula and I were asked to wait in one truck at the entrance gate while our friends took the other truck to the house. It puzzled us as to why we were not allowed in. We waited roadside for about an hour when they finally reappeared with the other truck. All sorts of crazy thoughts ran through our heads on what they might have been up to. Back at camp, and hanging out next to the blazing wood cook stove, a surprise was presented to us - a full lamb! That explained their secretive stop and that is what we took for meat/protein for the paddling journey.

So, we had plenty of meat, crackers for carbs, onions, potatoes, rice, some fruit, power bar snacks and a token bag of frozen veggies. Lamb would be eaten for every meal they said, the best way to survive. Well, you must respect their culture and go with the flow, after all we are guests in their country. The rest of the evening consisted of butchering the lamb, baking bread, grilling up lamb for dinner and toasting to new friends with some nice Chilean wine. No worries about refrigeration, the water is quite cold with all the ice bits floating about. This was the southern Patagonia summer and all weather was to be expected.

The next morning, while packing up the sea kayaks with kit and provisions, one of us had to keep constant guard as we had a very curious Zorro (fox in Spanish) stop by. He really wanted the lamb we were packing into the kayaks. Take one look away and he snuck up just feet from you. No bears exist in this region of Patagonia, but it is big cat country. With Pumas around, you always had to keep a keen eye on your surroundings.

Paddling in these southern latitudes, one can expect five to seven low pressure systems to pass every two days, so we were always paddling in Force 5-7 with little breaks between the next approaching system. Winds come predominantly from the west, then veer around depending on where the pressure system was in relation to us. It took a few days of reminding myself that low-pressure systems rotate clockwise in the southern hemisphere before it became second nature.



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End of the earth

With all the BCU training over the last 18 years and working with experienced mentors, like Nigel Dennis, you really dive into the critical thinking of expeditionary planning. You put your mind there before your body and study the effects of the sea with pressure systems and weather fronts coupled with tides, currents and places to be where and when. I thought I have seen a lot, with paddling in wild places like Scotland, Wales, North America, Mexico and Canada but this was an entirely different level of challenge, in a place that felt like the end of the earth. On top of that, we were training paddlers on this trip too. All of my guide senses were alive and firing on all cylinders.

The first day on the water consisted of pushing into Force 6 headwinds heading west from Caleta Maria. I did wonder what the local lads thought about the weather, as they had been pretty quiet during the eight-hour head wind push to the intersection of another fjord heading south into the Perry Ice fields, where the environment

became even wilder. Our assistant Chilean coach, JP, quietly reminded us that South America has a very machismo society and if Paula was working in those winds with no problem, then they certainly would not voice any complaints.

There certainly were some good learning moments in the push of the first day into the wind, from mimicking our paddling body movements, trim changes, tactical places to hide and rest, to how much effort coupled with efficiency to apply. It's one thing to have qualifications under your belt, it's another thing to prove that you can paddle. The lads were curious – and constantly watched and judged us. By the end of that first day on the water, they knew we were serious and we were starting to get to know them better too. Coach to athlete relationships were growing and barriers to learning disappeared.

A vast region

After the first day on the water, a jagged rocky beach camp site awaited us where waves smashed the shoreline just feet from our tents. We lit a proper, roaring Tierra del Fuego camp fire and had lamb for dinner. We were all in it together and good bonding and trust settled in. From what we knew and what the area locals told us, no one had sea kayaked up into these fjords around the Perry Ice fields before. It certainly had that feel, the terra firma looked like it had never been walked upon. The Patagonia Chilean region is so vast, it's almost unfathomable as to how big and untouched this part of the world is. It felt very pure and raw.

The next four days consisted of working our way up into the Perry Ice fields and exploring. With each passing mile, brash ice become increasingly prevalent and then finally we found it – glaciers just falling into the sea! What a sight, 13,000-year-old ice being undermined by the sea water, relieving pressure and crumbling and calving. There had been, up to this point, some suffering to get to that place – wind, wet, biting

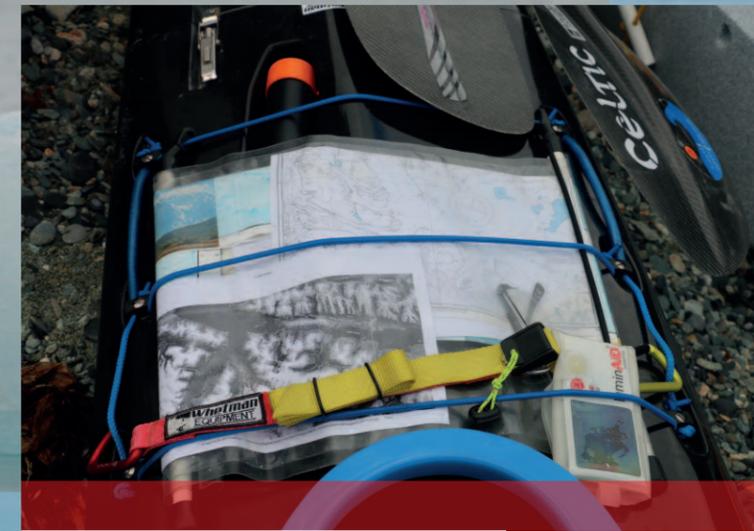
cold, sleet/snow - but it was worth every minute of it. Undoubtedly, one of the most beautiful places I have been in this world to date.

Rumbling, popping and crackling

We established a base camp for a few days, perched on a smooth rocky headland. Views of glaciers all around us, hanging and tide water type glaciers. This created an incredible sound like a constant thunder storm of rumbling, popping and crackling. The first growing eco-systems were amazing to see, both on land and in the sea. The moss-covered earth is so thick, we sank up to our knees. With a base camp, travelling in lighter boats exploring four more tide water glaciers over the next few days was more efficient. With only three hours of twilight, exploration options seemed limitless. We stayed out for many hours and came back to a fire with lamb cooking in the wild and then slept in late the next day. It really doesn't get any better.

Back to the coaching side of things, this was happening on many different levels with the Nativo future guides. Much was still happening by observation because of the language barrier, so good modelling of strokes and manoeuvres, behaviours, and decision

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making were all being watched carefully by Fredy and Camilo. Paula and I observed steady growth each day, and noted their different learning styles and different rates of skill acquisition. We enjoyed sharing our knowledge and equally learning without egos. On the client care side of expeditionary training, Fredy and Camilo's survival skills didn't need any tweaking at all. They clearly knew how to manage dampness, cold, strong winds and nutrition for themselves and had some good ideas in how to care for others.

Camilo was a great outdoor chef and created simple, tasty recipes from the largely protein based meat diet. Fredy is the master of making fire anywhere and doing it fast. This was clearly a strong point, as Tierra del Fuego is called the land of fire for this very reason. Grilling lamb on an open fire is always a treat, but for every meal every day? I certainly enjoyed it but not sure if other paddlers from different cultural diets or with different dietary needs would. Imported goods are expensive down in that part of the world. However, expanding the menu to get more vegetables, greens and complexed carbohydrates into the mix would be good, especially if wanting to attract paddlers from other parts of the world. The guys were very good cooks, so I'm very sure they will create a great balanced diet menu for the next visit.

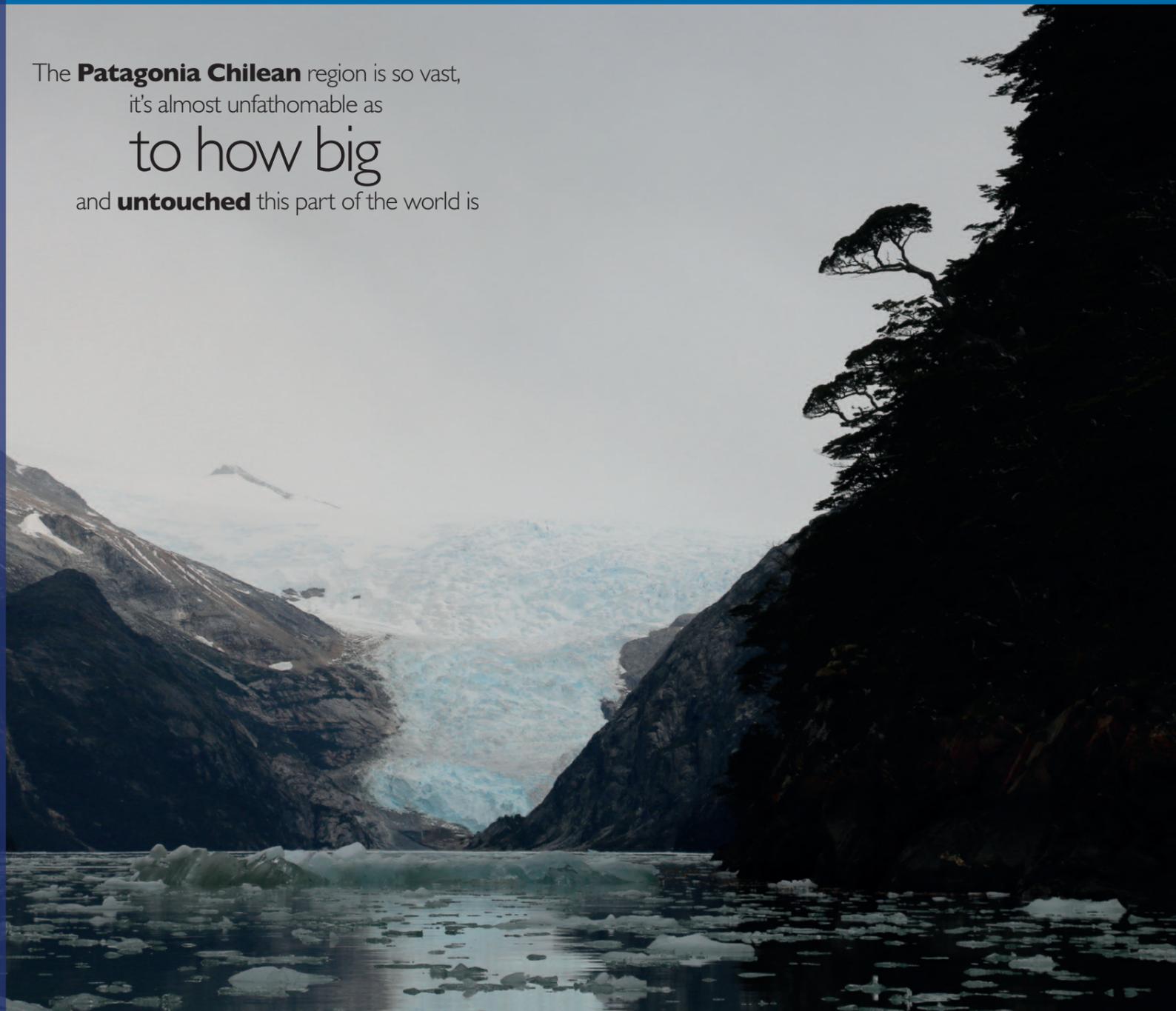
Challenging remoteness

Navigation and rescue communications are a serious concern down in those lands. Being so remote and never seeing another soul for days and weeks can pose real challenges, especially if one plans on taking clients to the area. Marine charts did not exist for the area. The best we could find was a large scale National Geographic adventure map and satellite images. Finding our way was simple enough, the only problem was creating an accurate scale on the satellite images of these fjords in order to determine distance. So, a little engineering project was started.

With the mountain peaks so large, the scale of real life travelling on the water was deceiving. We made our own scale on the satellite images by timing how long it took to paddle between headlands and estimating paddling speed. By working the (distance = speed x time) equation, we worked out distances and developed a map scale. It is of the utmost importance to know where you are, as a rescue satellite phone call to the Chilean Navy would be the only way out. You are really out in the wilds in the Southern Ice Fields.

Marine wild life can be abundant or you could see nothing for days. When huge Leopard Seals are in the neighbourhood, hauled out on their own little icebergs, you realize why no other creatures are around, they kill everything! Luckily, they were content on their little icebergs, or very full, as they showed us little to no interest other than a yawn with fang-like teeth as we paddled by.

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Exploration days took us to three more tide water glaciers deep into Perry Fjord Ice Fields, all very impressive to see and experience. Hanging glaciers surrounded us and some sheltered slopes showed the vegetation line right at the ice line, while more sun exposed slopes showed a raw earth zone between the ice line and vegetation line. Another sign that the sub-Antarctic wild ice mountain lands are melting fast by global warming and climate change.

A following wind

When our time came to start the journey home from our glacier camp, a great weather window opened up, coupled with a leaving tide down the

fjord. We had the wind on our backs all the way back to camp Caleta Maria. Force 4-5 winds going our way for a change created a delightful following sea challenge. What took us two and a half days going into the Perry ice field camp, took us just eight hours to get back. Needless to say, the young Nativo lads Camilo and Fredy learned very quickly and had to put it all together to surf heavy expedition sea kayaks for miles on end. Plenty of time for practice.

JP, the Chilean paddling coach, had some great learning moments as well during the expedition coaching journey, sharing coaching style ideas with



discussions and observations. Seeing how we applied different coaching styles, whilst all the time creating long-term learning moments broadened all of our horizons. From Caleta Maria camp, it took us four more days to get home back in New England, USA. The people of southern Chile and their culture, hospitality and willingness to learn and share was such a beautiful life experience. We are so honoured to have been able to share with them our knowledge and skills and can't wait to go back for another adventure. Adventures like these make lifelong friends across the world.