

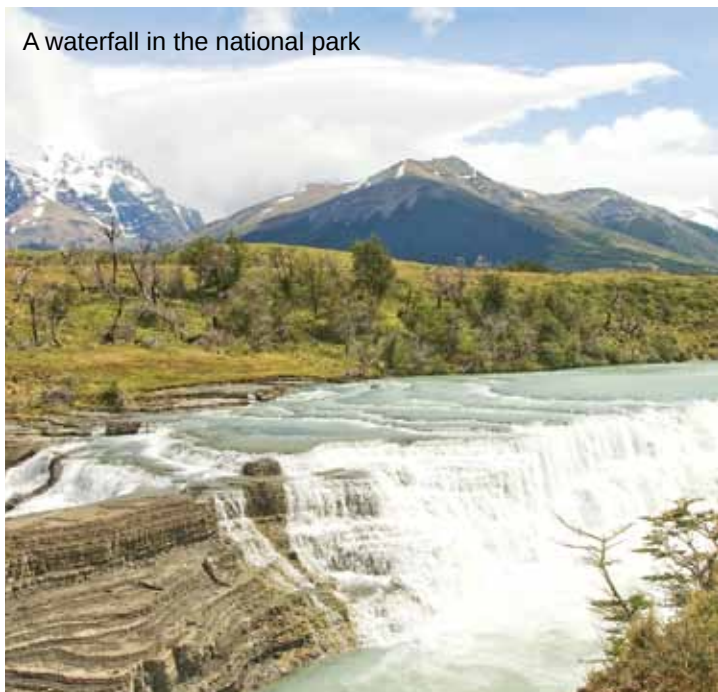


The Paine Massif up close

UNPREDICTABLE JOYS

CECILY MABASA explores the wonders of Chile's Torres Del Paine

A waterfall in the national park



The magnificence of the 935-square-mile Torres del Paine National Park, a UNESCO biosphere reserve, makes it one of the holy grails of trekking. It's an essential item on any serious hiker's bucket list as the massive and breath-taking landscape almost covers the beautiful Paine Massif and the eastern ridge of the longest continental Andes mountain range.

The only luxury lodge in this vast and distant paradise is Explora, a sprawling white structure that's surrounded by glaciers. It offers the best views and marries adventure and indulgence perfectly. The service is top-tier – they go to great lengths to satisfy their guests – and the food is heavenly. Coming to Torres del Paine and staying in Explora means days of adventure, but also rest and relaxation away from the endless buzz of the urban world.

TOO MANY OPTIONS

We stayed here for ten days. Each day we chose either explorations on foot or on horseback that enabled us to enjoy the Paine Massif from different angles. We were the only guests at the lodge at that time so we could pretty much decide our own itineraries.

Our first trek was an easy half-day walk to the shore of Lake Pehoé and to one of the best viewpoints of the massif, the Mirador Cuernos, which overlooks the aquamarine waters of Lago Nordenskjöld.

First we passed the Salto Grande waterfall and then headed in the direction of the Paine Massif until we reached the vista point of Lake Nordenskjöld. Here we were served a spectacular view of the French Valley, the Paine Grande Massif and the Horns amidst strong winds.

Photographed by Cecily Mabasa

A lone adventurer trying to capture the Paine Massif on film



The next day was cloudy and windy with the massif hiding most of the time behind grey clouds. The weather in Torres Del Paine is moody and unpredictable, and this made me feel the same way. Anticipating bad weather for the rest of the week, I felt the gloom of the clouds. However that didn't keep us from continuing to explore the park, but this time on horses.

Horseback riding through the fields like the wind has always been one of life's simple joys in my book; and, in this case, it was accompanied by a quincho feast for lunch that definitely lifted my mood. Passing through forests of deciduous Antarctic beeches with views of the Baguales peaks, the Las Chinas River, Mount Almirante Nieto, the Towers and the Condor Nest peak also made me happier. The weather ceased to be a huge factor.

ADVENTURE AND LUXURY

And, at the end of each exploration, the Explora lodge awaited us as a place to regain energy and enjoy gourmet cocktails, sumptuous meals and much-needed pampering.

Our succeeding rides usually began through a prairie in the direction of the Las Carretas campground, where there was a splendid view of Lake Grey and its icebergs. After a gourmet picnic lunch in the area, we would continue to the Refugio Pehoe, with spectacular views of the Paine Massif, Lake Pehoe and the Andean mountain range.

As luck would have it, one day we were awoken before the break of dawn with breakfast in bed and the promise of a clear day ahead. The lodge arranged for a special sunrise photography session at Lago Amarga. We hurriedly donned our warmest clothes and headed to the photo sight. With the pink hues of sunrise creeping up, I took some of my best photos ever. An added bonus was the still lake mirroring the massif. In that one hour of freezing in the cold, I saw the sky's colors change from a pinkish glow to lavender hues; and, as the hour went by, to a light citrus.

By the time the sun was in full blaze, and warmed by our hot chocolate, we headed off to Puente Weber for more photo opportunities. In addition to the glorious sunrise, we were rewarded with a rare sighting of a puma lurking about.

PRETTIER THAN A PICTURE

However, the most unique walk of all occurred one evening on a full moon, with clear weather and no clouds in sight – a rare occurrence at the park. After an early dinner, we trekked steeply uphill for 90 minutes to the viewpoint with icy wind blowing. But at the top, the massif was lit only by the glow of the moon and stars ablaze in the skies. Words cannot describe the beauty I witnessed; we tried to capture the moment on film but even photos could not replicate the beauty of that evening.

For most of our stay, the weather had been too windy to trek up the Paine Towers, one of the most exciting and challenging walks. Fortunately, one day, the weather cooperated and we were on our way. Filled with anticipation, we traveled by van towards the Cerro Paine Ranch to start our trek uphill, ascending almost 350 meters through the Ascencio River Valley to the Chileno campground.

One must be in good physical condition to even make it through the easiest part of this uphill climb to the viewpoint; but the promise of seeing the Paine Towers up close keeps you going one step at a time. The final ascent to the base of the Paine Towers is the do-or-die moment. This is where people either head back down or challenge themselves through the steep hour-long climb through boulders and rocky glacial moraine until they reach the Towers vista point at the lake.

With wind picking up speed, we made it to the top and found a spot to enjoy a picnic lunch while staring in awe at our view. Exhilarated from this achievement, we followed the same path back to the Cerro Paine Ranch, with a view of multi-colored lakes. By then, I was already looking forward to a Patagonian asado feast for dinner.

I was able to explore over a dozen hiking trails, and was even able to do some trails twice over. Not once did it look the same. Yes, the Massif would bask in all its glory one day, glowing in the rays of sunshine and, then stand proudly behind mysterious gray clouds on another visit. Each time I reluctantly left the park, I would stare at the Massif with a heavy heart. I never seem to get tired of its splendour and I still look forward to my next unpredictable adventure. ■

The luxury adventure group Sea to Summit Explorations offers the Cross Country Patagonian Adventure from Santiago, Chile to Punta Arenas and onwards to Puerto Natales.

www.seatosummitadv.net
Tel. (63)(2) 815 8233
Email: ces@seatosummitadv.net

Hundreds of Patagonian Huemul roam the park, providing food for the pumas