



MYSTERIOUS,
INTRIGUING, ADVENTUROUS.

PATAGONIA

JOIN JOCELYN PRIDE AS SHE JOURNEYS THROUGH THE MAGIC OF PATAGONIA,
TRAVERSING ITS INCREDIBLE LANDSCAPES AND PARTAKING OF ITS LOCAL
DELICACIES FRESH FROM THE PLAINS AND THE VINES.

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Opp page: the view from every room at Tierra Patagonia.
This image: the majestic Cascada del Rio Paine Waterfall

Patagonia. No matter how it's spoken, the very word conjures up intrigue. The end of the earth, where gauchos gallop across windswept plains studded with turquoise glacial lakes and sculptured mountain peaks jut straight into the clouds. Bruce Chatwin country. Lonely. Adventurous. Mysterious. Patagonia is all of this. Add exquisite food paired with famed Chilean wines in ridiculously beautiful remote lodges and time here is nigh on perfect.

"Our food is summed up in five words," says Chef Mariano Salaberry in Spanish (kindly translated into English by our waiter). "Simple, delicate and made with love."

We're sitting in the dining room of The Singular Patagonia surrounded by sheer ingenuity and style. An open fire roars in the exposed rustic brick fireplace, bronze pendant lamps hang from tree trunk beams two storeys high, leather couches with plump cushions surround the bar and cow hide covered chairs fit neatly under heavy wooden tables accented with white china and crystal glasses.

Mariano guides us through the menu, saying, "We don't have to go far from the kitchen door for our produce."

From centollo (King crab) to wild hare, lamb to salmon, food is sourced from local fisherman and gatherers.

"But you can't come here without trying our signature dish, guanaco. You know, four legs, long fluffy ears, shaggy coat," he explains, his dark eyes dancing as he acts out the animal.

It takes me a few seconds to twig he's talking about the same

animal I'd fallen in love with that afternoon during the 2.5 hour drive from Punta Arenas. Guanaco – South American llama-like camelids with huge brown eyes that freely roam the Patagonian plains.

"Oh no, they're way too cute to eat," I say, wishing I'd feigned vegetarianism. After Mariano explains hunting of guanaco is illegal in Chile except on the island of Tierra del Fuego where they need regular culling, I agree for him to 'surprise' me.

My Filete de guanaco de Tierra del Fuego is served with locally grown husked wheat with tomatoes, mint, carrots, onions and olive oil. Lighter than an eye fillet steak, but just as tender, the texture of the wheat complements the flavour, as does a noble Chilean red (Montes Alpha Cabernet Sauvignon). The dish is as elegant and interesting as the hotel itself.

A SNIPPET OF THE PAST

Originally built in 1915 as a frigorifico (cold storage plant), Frigorifico Bories processed around a quarter of a million sheep each year. After closing in the 1970s and laying idle for years, a group of descendants of the original pioneers set about restoring the buildings to create five-star luxury with a twist. Instead of moving the machinery, they made it a feature.

A funicular railway leads from the meet and greet area down to the soul of the hotel – the museum. Here amid the handmade brick walls, a soaring roof criss-crossed with heavy wooden



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Clockwise from top left: the stunning architecture of Tierra blends in with the environment; hiking the French Valley; dinner at The Singular is a grand affair; Chilean wine is well loved.



Clockwise from left: the spa at The Singular brings the outside in; Gaucho Chechin; glaciers make for a dramatic landscape.

rafters is everything that made the frigorífico tick. Victorian steam engines, elaborate systems of compressors and cast iron furnaces – all meticulously maintained. A walkway winds through the equipment to the 57 guestrooms, each decked out in Europe-meets-South American style and featuring a huge picture window to take in the water views of Last Hope Sound.

Exploring further afield (once I manage to drag myself away from the machinery), there's plenty on offer. Full and half day guided excursions take in the beauty of Patagonia from all angles – fishing, kayaking, boating, hiking, riding, cycling. With weather that changes quicker than a chameleon, it's a matter of being ready for anything.

Fulfilling a childhood fantasy, one afternoon I take to the saddle and ride a Criollo, a tough horse breed that feels more like riding a rocking horse. We canter over pampas grass scattered with calafade – wild blueberries that simply must be eaten to, as the saying goes, 'ensure returning to Chile'. Afterwards, we sit around sharing 'mate' a traditional herbal tea served in a pumpkin gourd mug sipped through a metal straw. 'Chechin', a gaucho who looks straight off a movie set, tells stories of the trail and how he hand-stitched his clothing and gear.

A PEEK AT THE PEAKS

Although it's possible to take a day excursion from The Singular to the UNESCO listed Torres del Paine National Park, we pick up a private transfer to spend two nights at Tierra Patagonia

located close to the park entrance. All the lodges within the region work closely with each other, making it easy for travellers to move between the different locations.

As The Singular is to restoration brilliance, Tierra Patagonia is to contemporary genius.

On approach, it's invisible. Cradled in the grasses on the bank of Lake Sarmiento, the long, flat curved masterpiece folds into the environment and was designed to shelter from Patagonia's greatest act of weather – wind. Created mainly from local lenga wood with a simplistic interior featuring hand crafted furnishings and textiles inspired by the Tehuelche indigenous people, it feels like being in a friend's home. And then there's 'the' view. Each of the 40 guest rooms and all the common spaces have giant picture windows framing the mountain range with glimpses of the torres (towers). But as easy as it would be to sit and gaze out the window to watch the mood of the terrain change with the light, Tierra is geared up for outdoor action.

Most people come to Tierra to hike, although there are a couple of scenic vehicle tours. Daily consultations with the coordinator of excursions helps people make decisions based on the weather conditions and fitness levels. With two half days

and a full day, we're able to fit in three excursions and cover a fair bit of ground. There's no doubt the 'Base of the Towers' hike is the most revered, but it also requires an excellent set of knees. So, after great deliberation, we settle on the slightly less demanding, but still challenging, French Valley full day hike that makes up the middle part of the famed set of three Torres del Paine hikes commonly called 'The W Circuit'.

A PLACE TO REMEMBER

Charmed with a calm overcast day, after a short ferry ride across Lake Pehoe, we start ascending a narrow trail that meanders around the slopes of Paine Grande up the valley to the French Glacier. Our small group is multicultural and lingual. "We get people from all corners of the globe," says Monica, a young guide following in the footsteps of her father, who guided in the park for 30 years. As we walk through a large forest of beech trees that look like they've been spray painted silver, Monica tells us the story of how this whole area was destroyed by a wildfire started by a tourist camping illegally in late 2011.

"He tried to burn some toilet paper and it blew out of his hand," she says. "The fire wiped out 16,000 hectares. All these trees are dead." Although there's an eerie beauty about the forest, the hairs on my arms prickle as I think of the fragility of the environment.

Condors soar above us and clumps of wildflowers dot the trail as we go past lakes, over a suspension bridge, mesmerised by the magnificent 'horns of the paine' as we climb to the viewpoint of French Glacier. At the top, Monica and our other guide, Nacho, crack out a lavish picnic lunch in true Tierra style – finger food, dips, sandwiches stuffed with prosciutto and salad, fruit and house made energy bars. We eat balancing on rocks and listening to the thunder of the glacier calving behind us. "Blue thunder, we call it," says Monica.

That night (after a soak in the heavenly outdoor hot tub), tinges of red and pink streak across the sky as we dine on more guanaco (this time as a risotto with tomatoes and red peppers). As at The Singular, all meals are included and focus on using local produce. Imaginative dishes in an extraordinary setting.

In the words of Charles Darwin, who said as he reflected on his travels late in life, "In calling up images of the past, I find the plains of Patagonia frequently cross before my eyes."

I too know that images of this incredible landscape and its people will never leave me. It's that type of place.

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