

ESCAPE

to the land of stillness

Former EDP reporter Nick Parker emigrated to Argentina more than a decade ago. Now he runs an eco-tourism company offering tranquility, starscapes and monster trout in the Patagonian wilderness.



If, like me, you have a hatred of crowds that burns hotter than a thousand suns, the likelihood is that you have a sadly dwindling list of places to go to escape them. North Norfolk's out nowadays, as are the Andes, most of Nepal... even Bunwell can drum up an intimidating Bank Holiday throng. But there's a problem with that holy touristic grail, the #HiddenGem: no sooner has some smug, Anthony Bourdain wannabe blogged about the newest undiscovered corner of paradise than it's deluged by thrill seekers and bucket-listers who have run out of endangered species to molest elsewhere. Imagine my irritation at

discovering that I am that smug Anthony Bourdain wannabe about to bring down some unwelcome attention on some armadillos. Take a bus out of Buenos Aires heading south-west, cut a swathe through La Pampa and at some point deep in the night you will rumble across the Rio Colorado and into Patagonia. If you crack open your eyes at this point you begin to realise that maybe you are not in a bus but a rapidly reversing time machine hurtling nonstop into The Past. Patagonia is many things to many people - kingdom, mindset, lost world, brand - but one thing it is rarely to be accused of is modernity. At some point on the timeline

between Ferdinand Magellan and Bruce Chatwin Patagonia diverged from the continuum and decided it felt better standing still. And in many ways this is no bad thing. Stillness is incompatible with most of the established aims of modern life. When was the last time you experienced it? When was the last time you looked around and realised nothing had changed for centuries as far as the eye could see? When was the last time you stood on a particular rock and contemplated, not without legitimacy, the possibility that you were the first person in recorded history to do so? In the Linea Sur - Patagonia's desolate heartland - you waver between two closely related extremes: pioneer and pawn. On the one hand you are a great trailblazer pushing the boundaries of human resilience as you explore the unknown and carve a niche in the dusty heart of darkness. On the other you are utterly at the mercy of a whimsical wilderness that would just as soon consume you as embrace you. Or more likely blow you over and stuff fistfuls of grit in your eyes. The true Patagonia is light years from the chocolate box alpine playground of Bariloche, or the organic honey fields and dreadlocked flea markets of El Bolsón. The people who settled this land have never seen a Southern Right Whale or a sea lion rookery, nor do they wear expensive anoraks and beige hiking boots they snapped up for a song on Black Friday. They don't hustle or bustle, make reservations or swipe left. There are no apps here, only a vast stillness and the sort of routine that can only be achieved by the

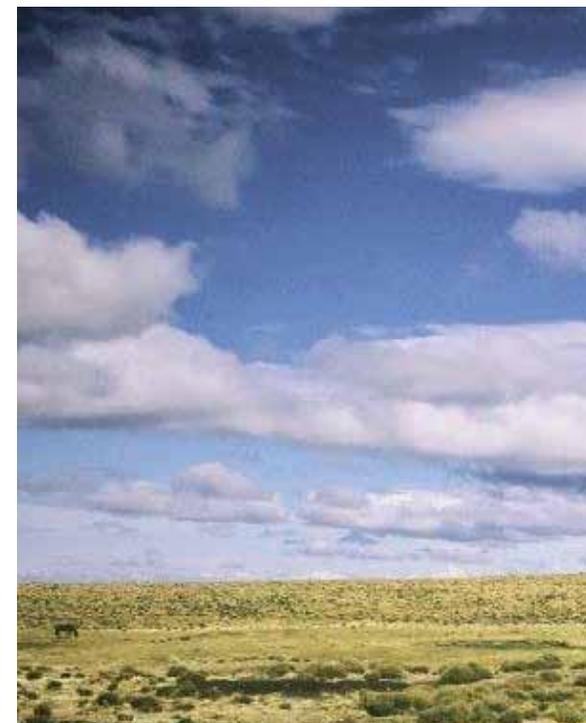
complete abandonment of time and all its psychoses. To make the most of this place you must sit still. Watch that crest and the guanaco or rhea may appear. If you're quiet enough, a grey fox may trot across your path, or a dwarf armadillo may amble by. A peregrine falcon may pluck a leveret from its hiding place in the meadow. Then the sun goes down; behind you someone starts cooking supper over coals while the Milky Way hoves into view unfettered by amber street lights. All you can hear now are your own thoughts, your heartbeat, the crackle of the open fire, the sizzle of barbecued lamb and a long, rejuvenating silence of the soul.



ABOVE:
Fly fishing on the Limay

BELOW LEFT:
A fresco kitchen bell fridge

BELOW RIGHT:
Big skies, open spaces
Pictures: Nick Parker





Hidden Patagonia offers tailor-made off-the-beaten-track wilderness, dark skies and fly fishing excursions in the company of a bilingual guide.

Tours start from US\$200 a day for two, with a two-night trip being a good starting point.

Tours are not limited to the Linea Sur region; Hidden Patagonia can be your Passepartout, smoothing the way for you throughout the Argentinian leg of your Latin American odyssey.

For more information visit www.hiddenpatagonia.com.ar or email info@hiddenpatagonia.com.ar

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Prices are correct at time of going to print, all subject to availability and based on maximum occupancy. Prices excludes £10/adult Norwich Airport Development Fee payable at the Airport.



ABOVE: There are no apps here...

MIDDLE: Get close up to an armadillo

LEFT: Big skies open spaces
Picture: Nick Parker