

Patagonia – Feb/March 2008

Introduction - We had not been getting away as much recently as we were suppose to in my simi-retired situation, because work was rather intense with having to push to get both SDO instruments delivered before the end of 2007. However, with them delivered and some major tests going to occur early in 2008 it was time to plan an outing. From various options we selected Patagonia, at the bottom tip of South America. Decided to only take a bit over 2 weeks and to not be rushed so would only do the major/spectacular national parks that are down there; in both Chile and Argentina. Managed to get AA Frequent Flyer tickets even. Also, gradually made some hotel reservations. And I must say this was more difficult than for hardly anywhere else we've gone; primarily due to lack of responses to e-mails and web sites that were not very good. Likewise arranging a rental car was non-trivial, part of the difficulty being trying to decide if we really needed a 4-W drive or not and also being sure the rental car could go between Chile and Argentina OK. But we got all these items in place for an outing in mid February (late summer down there), and off we went.

Monday-1: Fridel took us to the San Jose Airport, we checked in, were told our bag (the one we ship in addition to our two backpack bags that we use as carry-ons) was checked through to Punta Arenas, and took a small plane to LAX. There we switched to a real airplane (LAN airlines) and had an 11-hour flight to Santiago, Chile. The switching was very time consuming (plane to bus to terminal to a different terminal to a full, including security, checkin, to bus, to plane) but we had the time and nothing better to do really.

This plane left LAX at 2:25 PM and arrived Santiago around 6:30 AM; both being local times and the time zone change being 5 hours. So it was an overnighter and we got some rest but not real sleep. Did have two seats together (aisle & window) so can't complain too much, however. Food was poor, wine was tiny, so just a so-so flight. A fun item, which I've been doing the last couple months on various planes, was tracking where we were with my new GPS. Basically we flew down Baja and the Sea of Cortez and then it got cloudy and dark so I quit tracking. Had some fun views out my window before that, although the wing was somewhat in the way. In Santiago we cleared customs, found out almost by chance that our checked bag needed to be picked up and then rechecked the other side of customs (like in the US but no one had told us and we almost didn't investigate this and thus wouldn't have had that bag). Got some Chilean Pesos at the airport ATM and bought a roll of candy in order to get some smaller bills. Then it was on to our flight to Punta Arenas. I had a window again; the GPS worked fine and was great for knowing where we were over this quite interesting countryside. The Andes were right out my window, albeit the sun angle wasn't the greatest, and we had a period of flying over many many cinder cones and volcanoes. This was followed by lakes; the Lake District north of Puerto Montt that was one of the places we considered hitting on this outing but then decided it didn't fit. Looks like great countryside, however.

Besides the nearly-left bag at the Santiago airport another item to note was that being from the US we had to pay a \$131 entry fee for coming into Chile; it was called a reciprocidad fee, signs about it were posted everywhere, and it is their way of getting even with the US (and a couple of other countries like Canada although their charge was less) for charging them an entry fee. Crazy but it is our (USA's) fault and we were expecting it (although at \$100 rather than \$131, but imagine the weakness of the dollar was partially responsible for that difference).

Tuesday-1: Arrived PA, got our bag, got on a bus that was going to the center of town (Plaza Munoz Gamero); although there were so few people on the bus they switched us to a minivan. The stop in the center of town was a half block from our hotel. Quite a windy half block, however. Checked in, room was OK and people quite friendly. Got a couple hours rest, and then did some walking around the city. As part of our walking/exploring we found the local grocery store and bought some food and wine; the latter involving a discussion with a chap from Canada who seemed to be wine connoisseur who guided us into procuring Carmenere, which I gather is a unique grape/wine in Chile. We also went into a Budget Rental Car office that we stumbled upon and arranged for the car that we'd pick up in a couple of days to be picked up there (in town) rather than at the airport, and stopped by the outfit we had signed up with for a trip to the Penguin Colony to learn the details of that outing and be sure we were onboard. In point of fact we learned that maybe half the time the boat trip to the Penguin Island (Isla Magdalena) gets cancelled due to bad weather, so we asked about going on the next day rather than the day after that but they were all booked (for both days). Turned out they were only a half block from our hotel and Budget was only about 4 blocks away; the advantage of deliberately getting a hotel right on the main plaza. Wanted an early dinner and some places weren't serving yet but one place near the closed-for-the-day major fish market was and we ate there. Small spot, friendly workers, reasonable beer, good garlic squid, not good mussels with cheese, and fine seafood (congor eel, though we wondered if it was really eel, and hake). Back to the hotel and hit the Internet for a few minutes – they had one terminal in the lobby that said you could have 20 minutes free but really it just meant after 20 minutes you should relinquish it to anyone else who wanted it. Went to bed before 8 PM local.

Wednesday-1: After 12 hours in bed we got up fresh and had an OK breakfast that came with the room. Then we hit the town. Lots of walking and a quite good museum (Salesiano Maybrino Borgatello, which LP says is “the most complete and fascinating regional museum in Chile”). Checked out a cemetery that was written up in all the books, and it was fun to wander around and see the quite elaborate tombs. Had lunch at a small busy place where we had freshly cooked (we could watch them) empanadas (fish type but mostly mussels in the filling) that weren't great unfortunately. But the lunch break was a good recovery period. After that we walked up a hill for a fine view over the city and the water (Straits of Magellan basically). For dinner that night we went to a place called La Luna that was rather cute/nice and I had a fish I thought was better than the prior night's (called Kingfish or something like that) and Dawna had the “eel” again (I think). A quite enjoyable meal (and day).

Thursday-1: Up before breakfast but managed to get some coffee and a piece of pastry (I think). Then to the Outfit's place by 6:50 AM for a 7 AM departure. Well not quite but better to be early than to miss it. And the weather seemed acceptable. Twelve of us involved, so I guess they weren't quite full due to a couple of cancellations. We were 4 Israelis, two French, two Polish, two from Finland, and ourselves. Half hour drive, out past the airport, and then onto our boat, which was like a Zodiac with a big motor and a cover over it. Oh, yes, per instructions we had dressed heavily including several layers as well as some waterproof gear. The boat ride was maybe 40 minutes long and "exciting" – like he flew along, the boat really slammed into the water when it crossed waves, we all hung on, and the Polish lady truly didn't enjoy it. Actually quite a thrill and fun but the viewing wasn't great since the tarp-like cover left us with poor ability for looking out; but dry. Also not a lot to see except water. We were truly going up the Straits of Magellan. At the Island we got off and visited for about an hour. There is a walk along the waterfront and then up to a lighthouse and we all wandered along it at differing slow paces. Magellanic Penguins, also called Jackass Penguins since their call sounds like the braying of a donkey, by the thousands (150,000 says one book) with about as many holes in the ground (well I suppose half as many) for their nests. Our walk area was roped off from the rest of the island although the penguins often walked across "our" walk. Certainly got to see them up close and seeing (and hearing) so many was exactly what we had come for, so a fine time was had. And the weather was quite acceptable (overcast but no rain and a relatively modest amount of wind). From there our speedboat headed to another island where one does not get off but rather you come up near quite a herd of sea elephants (adults and cute cubs who were a few days away from their first encounter with the water according to our driver/guide). Much picture taking and binocular viewing. Boy are these guys (& gals but not nearly as much so) HUGE. Then it was a boat ride back to the beginning spot with everyone happy to be back on land and no longer slamming up and down on the waves I suspect.

Back to the hotel, removed a bunch of the heavy clothing, and then out to do some more city exploring, including another museum (nice) and a variety of shops. A few non-major items were purchased including and a few rather weird selections like reflective tape from an industrial store (actually got that on the prior day) and shoe polish from a store that was selling serious fabric and leather. This was probably the day we had lunch in a nice place near the plaza but my lamb chops were not very worthwhile (small and fatty). Dawna did better with (I forget). More walking, another museum (Braun Menendez) that was basically a refurbished old mansion, and even some shopping. Having had a big lunch we had wine and cheese and crackers in the room for dinner.

Friday-1: Up at a casual pace, finished packing, probably hit the Internet (as I actually had done almost every day), and walked over to get the car. We had finally given in and gotten a 4-W drive car as it seemed like the thing to do for our visit to the Parks. Well they had a "free upgrade" from our Susuki SUV to a Toyota Pathfinder and it had an automatic shift. Dawna disliked both aspects but it would have been so painful to try and get something else, at the airport for example, that we took it. Bought some groceries, went back to the hotel and got our luggage and also arranged to stay there our last night in Patagonia, and hit the road. As always, Dawna was driving and I was guiding; we had

picked up a reasonable map at a tourist office near Budget after we asked them for one and they said NO but go over there. A new feature for this foreign country car trip was my GPS, of course, which I was constantly using to be sure we were headed in the right way, and things like that. Although when I bought it I only knew it contained a US map it turned out to have a World Map where the rest of the world is not as heavily detailed as the US but it's still pretty darn useful. For example, not only was Punta Arenas on it but so were dozens of other nearby smaller places as well as the major roads. By the way, there are only a few roads down but they are in quite good shape and they are working on nearly all of them to make them better; in anticipation of a lot more tourism. I suspect the way it has grown the last few years indicates they'll likely get it.

Took the main road to Puerto Natales, enjoying seeing the countryside (called pampas or steppe or desert depending on which book you are quoting from). PN sits in a fine setting below the Andes and we had lunch at a place in the book noted for its spit-roasted lamb. But they only do that at night it turned out. However, we had lamb and steak done on a fire grill that we could observe and they were fine. From PN one heads toward Parque Nacional Torres Del Paine, the first of the two super famous national parks that were to be the highlights of our trip. The game plan here was a bit unorthodox. We had made reservations at an Estancia (big ranch) right on the edge of the park as it turned out that none of the ones in the park had 3 available nights plus they cost nearly twice what this one did and this one did sound interesting. It was the fact that we "had to drive across a river" to get to it that pushed us into the 4 WD drive vehicle by the way. There were no real instructions as to how to get there. Instead we were to go to an Estancia in Cerro Castillo that is operated by the same consortium and they'd tell us how to do it. We had some directions for getting to that first Estancia but they didn't make much sense so we asked people at the main "trading post" and they told us what to do. Got there, talked to the folks, everyone was quite nice, things progressed slowly, and eventually they said they'd lead us to our place; which they did. A rather long drive (56 km). Oh, yes, we were on gravel roads by now and had been for quite awhile. I got more serious with my GPS to be sure we could retrace our steps as we were driving off into nowhere it seemed, although really most of it was on a relatively major road into the park. Where they turned off to go the last few miles to our place sure wasn't on the map, however, and that's where we drove across the river. Wouldn't have liked doing it with a regular car but fine in our monster car. To be honest, the monster car worked out quite well on the whole trip as it made some of the gravel roads more comfortable and safe and this wasn't the only water we drove through by any means. Checked into our new digs, rather rustic; and we were the only guests there that night. Another fun thing about driving into this place was going across a couple of cattle guards made simply with tree limbs. Did some walking on the ranch seeing rabbits, foxes, birds (including an eagle), and the usual guanaco and rehas/nandues (ostrich-like birds). I say usual because this park is noted for having so many of both Southern America unique animals and we saw them here and basically everywhere. Neat. Also wonderful sky with the setting sun lighting it up late in the evening. The meal was in a ranch-style building with super views of the Torres out the window. Unfortunately the food was no good – cod that probably just came out of some freezer. But the chap running the place was friendly, even giving me his map of the park when I asked about a good map, and the setting was certainly excellent.

Saturday-1: Breakfast in our fine setting; food acceptable with plenty of coffee and then we headed on into the park. Turned down the chaps offer to guide us across the river as we figured we had it all under control now (and we did). Spectacular scenery heading into the park. We drove to the end of one offshoot road for our chosen hike. The start of the offshoot involved driving through quite a long stretch of river/river overflow as well as across a VERY narrow bridge. So, narrow you had to tuck back in the side view mirrors and be damn careful to keep right in the middle so as to not hit the side rails. The hike we had picked out was one that started at Hosteria Las Torres. It went up a valley toward the Torres peaks, well actually we weren't down in the valley but rather uphill from it and constantly getting higher and higher. Super views, nice trail, slow us, and onward and upward we went. Weather had some overcast but neither too windy nor any rain. Darn lucky. After about 3-4 miles we got to where backpackers can stay and we ate our lunch sitting at a picnic table looking at the excellent scenery with the Sun actually out and warming us up. Pretty soft living. Then we retraced our steps with Dawna claiming next time we needed to be able to sleep over and continue onward – I'm skeptical. At the bottom we had a cold beer in their dining room. Excellent, and very expensive, beer from Buenos Aires. Sure did taste great. Then we retraced our steps back to our Estancia. Did have the sense to stop at the entrance place where we had purchased our tickets and ask if we could use them to come in the next couple days and the answer was yes if they so marked them; which they did. Back at our place there were now a couple other sets of guests and dinner (shepherd pie) that night was better. In addition, the chap running the place and his wife did an after dinner performance of singing and strumming a guitar and a different instrument. They were quite good and the whole setting was very folksy; much more so than if we had been staying at one of the fancier places (like where we had our beer) in the park I'm sure.

Sunday-1: Casual breakfast and then out for a morning's worth of horseback riding. We two, plus a chap who was our leader and was also breaking in a colt (according to Dawna), plus the wife of the chap I've already written about. Not sure why she went. We wandered up into some foothills where the views of the ranch area and over into the park kept getting better and better with elevation. Stopped for a bit of exploring at an old ranch site where there was lots of flint in the dry river bottom. Saw the usual assortment of guanaco, birds, and rabbits, and generally had a fine time. Although Dawna said her horse did not have a nice gate and she's had her fill of such rides for quite awhile. Me, I couldn't tell a good gate from a bad one so my ride/outing was fine. We then got into our trusty monster car and headed back into the park. By now we were interested in gasoline and had been told by the chap running our place, and it said so on his map, that at the far end of the park near the administrative building and visitor center and an Estancia, there was a gas station. Entered the park where we had gone in and out yesterday; no problem. Gave in to a couple kids from Switzerland who wanted a ride down to about where we were going, and headed southward. SPECTACULAR views along the way, which we stopped for as desired. Dropped the kids off, got to the area we were headed to, found a gas pump, but it was only diesel. We weren't in terrible shape but had wanted to get super secure by filling up. And it was a little frustrating that they said the only gas in the park was at the place we had been the prior day (and not noticed any gas). Drove up

another offshoot to where there was yet another hostelleria, this time on a lake where at the far end there was a glacier. There is a boat that you can take from the hotel to the glacier but we passed that up. The view across the lake to the glacier, especially with binoculars was quite nice. Did a small walk along the river to a viewpoint where one sees a few nice blue icebergs out in the lake relatively near us. Also did a short walk to a different place to gain elevation for viewing everything but it first went flat and by the time we got to where it would go up we/I figured it was time to retreat. So, backtracked all the way to our Estancia, having well more than a quarter tank of gas left so no real concern providing we could gas up in good old (but tiny) Cerro Castillo the next day. We had told folks we'd not be doing dinner that night as we didn't want to be rushed since one had daylight till way after 9 PM. We had snacked for lunch and now we snacked some more (in our room) for dinner.

Monday-2: Breakfast and then hit the road. Back to Cerro Castillo we went, seeing on our GPS that we were retracing ourselves from a few days earlier; but really it was straightforward so didn't need that assurance. Asked where the gas station was, found it, and it was literally one hose coming out of a tiny wooden shack. BUT IT HAD GAS and we filled up, at a high cost. Gas in general in Chile was a little more than in the US and here it was quite a bit more than "in general." While on this subject, it was about half the cost in Argentina as it was in Chile, or even less than that. With our car full we headed onward, crossing into Argentina quite soon. Rather painful with paperwork to get out of Chile and then another stop and paperwork to get into Argentina. Both times with long lines and never sure if we were in the right line. But we made it and I suppose it really only took an hour or so. It was a bit unnerving when upon leaving Chile they took our entry forms that we had gotten in Santiago as we sure didn't want to have to pay the big bucks again when we came back into Chile, but hey, if the border people want a piece of paper, you give it to them. Took the wrong turn right after getting across the border but figured it out quite quickly with the GPS helping to make me sure. Although I had expected this part of the drive to be all on gravel about half of it was on new pavement. As noted earlier they are improving the tourist-used roads.

The goal of this movement was to visit Glaciers National Park in Argentina and since the park has basically a southern and northern section we were going to spend two days in each. Excellent views coming into El Calafate, the town on the edge of the southern part. The main (basically only) attraction in this part of the park is the Moreno Glacier, one of the few glaciers in the world that is still moving outward and one of the most assessable glaciers in the world. The town is there strictly for all the tourists visiting the glacier and thus full of places to stay and to eat and to spend money. Stopped at the tourist office to find out where our hotel was, went to the hotel (a couple miles out from the center of town, new, and not crowded at all), checked in, and then went to town to obtain some Argentinean money and gas (several stations!) and dinner. Ate at a small Italian place that was in both books and recommended by the person at the hotel. Fine but nothing great. Walked the streets a bit (so nice to have this late sunset, which had gotten even an hour later because Argentina is one time zone further east than Chile even though down there they are really at the same longitude). And then to bed.

Tuesday-2: More elaborate breakfast spread than we'd been having so we took advantage of it. Then off to the glacier. A non-trivial drive since it is 80 km or so away but again the road is now mostly paved. And the glacier was as SPECTACULAR as the books said it would be. They have boardwalks you can explore from with differing views across a little bit of water to the glacier wall itself. The Sun was playing in and out with the clouds in a manner that it swept across the glacier front like a spotlight. Simply wonderful. So, we took our time viewing it, including watching it calve hunks off that then crashed into the water with a loud roar followed by bobbing up and down a couple times. It began to get more socked in so we were glad we had gotten there when we did. After our fill of this splendid viewing we went to a spot a mile or so away and took a one hour boat ride out to even closer to the glacier. Bit of a drizzle now but still plenty clear for viewing and although Dawna stayed inside and looked out through some excellent windows I spent a fair amount of time on deck with even better viewing. Then it was back toward town, stopping at a nice place for a coffee along the way, and taking a round about different (and gravel) road to get to town. Fun countryside. That night we had dinner at a parrilla (grilled meat place), eating lamb and/or beef that were quite good.

Wednesday-2: Fine breakfast, some gas, and then off to the north end of the park, a village named El Chalten. Although not far away as the crow flies you again have to go eastward to get away from the mountains, then north, the back west into the mountains. Mostly new pavement, however, other than the last bit into Chalten where it is still the old gravel (but they're working on it). We had reservations at a B&B/Inn place but didn't know where it was so stopped at a visitors bureau and found out, plus getting a local map. Went there, small place, mainly for hikers since that is what this area is all about. There was only one (quite new) high-class hotel in town, and lots of places like where we were staying. Just fine by us. Settled in for a few minutes and then headed out on a well-known hike, simply starting from our front door. Quite windy but not rainy and although clouds on some of the mountain tops the viewing was in general quite good. Nice hiking but in reality we ended up overdoing it because when we got to one fine viewpoint and discussed having that be our end point we decided let's head onward towards a glacier we could see in the distance and off we went. Ended up being further than we thought but of course we couldn't turn around now that we were getting close. Eventually, we did turn around and retraced our steps and when we got back to town we were pretty wiped out; probably a 9 mile outing with 1000 foot of elevation change. Not heroic but plenty. Went to a brewpub (in all the books) for dinner. Kind of a dump, but that was OK but they didn't have any of their dark beer so we both had a lighter one and it was not great at all; nor was the pizza. But it did give us some relaxing and some food. Back to our B&B and to sleep with the wind blowing amazingly hard. Like it blew fine sand into the building so the floor was thinly covered by morning.

Thursday-2: The breakfast was just Continental but for a small price one could have eggs and we opted for that and they were good. Got in the car and drove out of town northward on a gravel road to a different trailhead. Had a rather hard time finding it but did so by getting some advice from someone driving by a spot where we stopped. Then a splendid walk/hike. Wherein the trail on the prior day had had lots of hikers on it this one was basically empty (and peaceful), the difference being I guess that the former could be

accessed straight from town with no transportation needed, plus it was more famous. The views on this one were probably better than the prior day, however, with glaciers a plenty and one with a wonderful small lake in front of it. Also a roaring stream along part of our walk. Both walks gave us views of the most famous part of the park, by the way. And today our total distance was more sensible. Picnic along the trail (as was true the prior day too) and then back to town and eventually to dinner. Went to the best place in town according to the book and had a quite nice meal in a very homey atmosphere with a nice waitress. We ate venison that was thick and soft and accompanied by a raspberry sauce, albeit we'd have liked it to be more gamey. Tried to find some souvenir stores but pretty thin pickings in this for-hikers village. Also tried to get gas at the only station in town but it was closed.

Friday-2: Got up and it was quite overcast and had done some raining during the night and was spitting at present. Filled up at the gas station (inexpensive even here out in nowhere) that was open this morning thank goodness and then headed east, away from those wonderful mountains. Did some exploring off the main road a couple of times (like to see a wonderfully blue iceberg) but mainly just kept moving onward across the steppe/flat land. Much of the road was gravel but it was good gravel. Continued to stop and examine birds as they appeared at different places. Stopped out in nowhere for a picnic lunch in the car. Eventually got to the coast and filled up our thirsty car; then headed south. Took in Parque Nacional Monte Leon, which only became a park in 2002 so is not highly visited. It was quite enjoyable including an excursion of about 50 km or so down to the ocean where the coastline was very nice and there were lots of seabirds as well as some penguins. On the drive down and back we saw lots of Y and N as well, plus some excellent geology. A quite worthwhile side trip.

Onward to Rio Gallegos we went. I had only a tiny bit of information on RG but enough to know there were a couple of businessmen's hotels and we took one of them. Not great but adequate and it did seem like we might have gotten the last twin room since the folks right after us had quite a discussion. Cleaned up a tad and then went to a highly recommended restaurant (named Lagunacazul I think and one author said it was the best thing about RG). Place was almost empty and many tables had reserved signs on them, but they did seat us. Of course the "problem" was we were early at 8 PM as the place got many more folks by the time we left. We both had lamb and I'd say it was just OK although Dawna liked her's better than I did. She also had a side dish of wild mushrooms. Quite a fun waiter, it was his first night working and he gets these non-spanish speaking people! Had a good time, and a fair amount of wine. Then "home" to bed.

Saturday-2: No breakfast with the room this time so went out looking for coffee and a pastry. Pickings were slim and after asking a local we ending back at our hotel as the best bet. Next we did some souvenir shopping and then hit the road; primarily south now. Crossed into Chile, after filling up with cheap Argentinean gas of course. Speaking of which as we were getting gas into our car we noticed that the attendants were rocking a minivan that was gassing up next to us. Turned out they did the same thing to us (and I guess everyone) in order to get the absolutely maximum amount of gas into the vehicle! The boarder crossing was painful as always, taking more than an hour, involving several

lines, and never knowing for sure if we were doing the right things; but guess we did since we made it through. If they want more tourism in this part of Patagonia I'd suggest they improve the border crossings, not just the highways.

Next detour was another non-famous Nat'l Park, named Pali Aki. Drove in a ways and then did a mile (each way) hike to and through a nice crater/lava flow area in a quite strong wind. Did another shorter walk to an area with a neat 30 foot high lava ridge around an old crater and within the ridge is a cave where bones of a prehistoric ground sloth and horse were discovered a bunch of years ago. Another highlight of this side excursion was that the ranger who was manning the gate when we entered the park had a baby G that was basically a pet so Dawna got to play with it a bit, and she was very impressed with its coat. She did this playing on the way into the park. On the way out she tried to give the ranger some money for milk as he was feeding the baby many liters a day but the ranger was not there now and the young chat who was watching the gate for him wasn't willing to accept the money.

Enough playing around, so onward to Punta Arenas we went - having some fine views of the Straits of Magellan along the way. I opted to not take some extra time to see the narrowest part of the straits because it sounded like there was really nothing special to see. Arrived town around 6 PM and checked into our (old) hotel, did some Internet, had a drink, went to "our" grocery store, bought some salami and cheese, and had a picnic in the room for diner. We had a "cuter" room at the hotel than before, by the way, although the prior one was fine as well. Repacked our world for airport travel rather than a spacious car.

Sunday-2: Pushed the system a little bit to get coffee and a bit to eat before the official 7:30 breakfast starting time, then headed to the airport with our trusty big car. Gassed up along the way. The airport was really dead as our flight was the first one out for the day. No obvious place to deposit a rental car but an information person told us to just leave the car in the short-term parking lot, which we did. No one was at the rental counter (but we figured there would be by 9 or 9:30 AM). Checked in (slowly) . Still no one at the rental counter so we put the keys in a key box (no sweat) and pushed all the official paperwork that had let us in and out of Argentina through a slit in what looked like part of a fold-down desk.

Very nice airplane but we had a middle and isle seat. Many empty seats, however, so as soon as the door was closed I moved to a left side (no Sun) window. Nice flight with more clouds than ideal but many breaks in the clouds and then some clear time. Many many mountains and glaciers, some quite excellent. I, of course, was tracking our location with the GPS. I also had my binoculars with me and used them on some of the glacier flows, lakes with icebergs, and prior to landing in Puerto Montt there were various fish farms to check out. Plane landed at PM but we who were going on to Santiago didn't get off. When I first booked our flights there was no stop at PM but later I had noticed it was now on the itinerary. Back to my proper seat I went and then a zillion kids (perhaps high school seniors or early college) got on and the plane was absolutely full. And noisy. Also took awhile to board the masses so we left a bit late and arrived Santiago late as

well. Followed the book's advice of taking a bus to a far out subway spot and rode the subway to the stop near our hotel. Fine in concept but it was HOT so we arrived sweaty but OK and our room had air-conditioning (not the greatest but reasonable), so after awhile we were recovered. It is a nice metro system by the way, Sabina, including mist-making machines to cool you a bit in the hot station stops and some Japanese-style pushers at prime stations during rush hours.

Headed over to Old Town via the subway, checked out all the action (street performers, people relaxing on benches, etc) at Plaza de Armas as well as the large colonial buildings around the square. Wandered a few blocks north to where the fish market is in the daytime to see if any of the eating places were still open. Only a couple were but figured if we didn't eat then we'd end up not eating at all due to laziness so eat we did. Excellent swordfish (best in years) and quite good sea bass; plus even some dark beer for D (and Pale Ale for me). Friendly waitress too, so all in all did quite well. Subway to "home" and to bed we went - temperature was reasonable what with our AC.

Monday-3: Up casually. Quite an extensive breakfast buffet with good scrambled eggs among other things. Then we took the subway to nearly as far as where we had been with the airport activity, and got the next bus to Valparaiso. A bus leaves about every 20 minutes or so, so no sweat getting one. It had AC and was quite nice. Nearly a two-hour ride but it let us see some new scenery (olive trees, vineyards, etc). And, of course I tracked the route with the GPS, which even showed gaps when we went through a couple of rather long tunnels in these coastal range hills/mountains. Actually, the countryside was a lot like going from Route 101 over to the coast in southern California.

Santiago had been rather smoggy, like an average LA day, and we expected V to be coastally clear. Instead it was very smoggy - as if a forest fire was near by. Off the bus and onto foot we went. One is supposed to checkout the upper and lower part of this city/village moving between the two by a variety of lifts/ascensores/funiculars. Did 4 of their most impressive ones and they were each interesting. Also, saw interesting houses in the upper city. Many are now hostels. There were a lot of small hotels up there. Wonder if they every fill up? But V is after all a declared world heritage city and lots of tourists spend a significant amount of time there so we probably weren't getting a proper feeling for the place both due to the smoke/haze and the fact that we were "only" doing a day trip. I was, however impressed with how huge so many of the building were; it was quite an important port city in its day, that's for sure. The harbor looked fun, but again the combination of smoke/haze and our day trip meant we didn't take advantage of that. About now is when we learned that there was a major forest fire at the edge of town and it was what was producing all that smoke; and that it usually is blue sky and blue ocean clear. Had lunch in a small upstairs spot picked at random and it was probably deep fried fish but very good; as were the french fries. Went through a hassle to get dark or pale ale (red) beer and basically failed. Since we had migrated a fair ways in our walking and exploring we took a local bus back to our starting point, having a relatively long discussion with a local chap who had spent several years in LA 15 years ago. No sweat catching the next bus back to Santiago (great how frequent and how cheap they are), and home we went. After freshening up and my typical Internet stuff (and probably a drink or

two), we went out and checked out the neighborhood. Things were hopping and we had a small pizza and some beer at one of the local sidewalk cafes.

Tuesday-3: Our go-home day, but not until 11:30 PM. Talked to the folks at the front desk and like so many places you can stay later for half a day's price and we took that option making checkout time be 6 PM rather than noon, thereby giving us a more relaxing day to do things. The something was to go back near the central area by subway and then do a walk written up in one of the books. One highlight was an old and super sturdily built (5' wide support columns) Iglesia de San Francisco cathedral (Catholic of course). Quite neat. Along the walk we got to the best museum in Santiago and probably Chile (the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino). Excellent, lot of good stuff, lots of English descriptions, a fine permanent exhibition that covered many many different aboriginal tribes from throughout South and Central America, and a temporary exhibit whose title had to do with Sex and the Mochi culture. And it certainly did, while doing it quite well. We then went over to the Fish Market, which was open this time, had lunch at a place in the book, and it was not nearly as good as that first evening. Just goes to show something. The fish stalls were beginning to close up but it was still fun to see all the fresh fish, as is always the case at these places. The building itself was quite neat, what with lots of ironwork, by the way. But definitely too touristy with pressure being applied by folks trying to get you to eat at their spot.

Speaking of such pressure; a very nice aspect of the entire trip was how little hassling of any type we encountered. This fish market people's attempts to get you to eat at their cafe was probably the most, and it was pretty modest actually.

Decided that rather than finish our walking tour we'd go back to the hotel for a bit of relaxation before being forced out; and did just that. Checked out at 6 PM, killed some time with me on the Internet and Dawna just hanging out and relaxing in the lobby and then hit the road/subway again. Considered a taxi because we knew the subway would be crowded and hot, but that's not our (her?) style. Worked out fine, albeit sweaty. Got to the airport hours early but others were actually there before us. SLOWLY checked in and found out (a) our plane would be an hour late, (b) that would mean we'd miss our connection in Dallas to SJC, and (c) they'd rebooked us on a two hour later Dallas-San Jose flight. Checked out other options, like ending up in SFO rather than SJC but nothing worked better than what they planned for us, so we took it. We now had even more time to kill at the airport (and information needed to pass on to Fridel who would be picking us up). Did some of that by getting a pitcher of dark beer and a table where I did a couple day's worth of trip report draft typing; along with finishing off the beer as they were closing the restaurant doors at 11 PM. Our flight had been for 11:25 prior to the hour slip.

The plane did leave about on (the new) time, the dinner they served was weird/bad but we weren't really hungry - we'd finished off some salami while drinking our beer. Had a two seat, window-isle, deal on the plane and tried to get some rest. Dawna, unfortunately began to not feel great, perhaps food poisoning from the fish that afternoon? Arrived DFW about 15 minutes earlier than they had anticipated which meant about 45 minutes before our original plane would leave for SJC. But had to clear customs, of course,

including picking up the one shipped bag and taking it through customs and then giving it back to the airline. This all went reasonable well and we had a chance at getting to our plane. Even had to go through security again but still a chance. Basically got to the gate as the plane was pulling out (on time). Oh, well, a good try but clearly our checked bag wouldn't have made it anyway. Had to then go to a different terminal (sky train) for our real departure gate. Did all this relatively slowly since Dawna was feeling pretty lousy plus we had more than an hour available. Made our phone call to Fridel and then boarded that plane; having again obtained an isle-window combo. The DFW-SJC route is not one I do very often since I usually go east on United not American and it of course has the potential for some nice SW countryside. And the clouds cooperated pretty well as we crossed 4 Corners, Monument Valley, and such. I had programmed in waypoints for Escalante and Page in recognition of the up and coming SAG-group trip. Came within 14 miles of Escalante, where we'll be staying, in fact. Went across the White Mountains and good old Bishop. Coming up on the Sierras on a clear day this time of year is spectacular and makes you almost ask who needs to go to the Andes.... Great fun/views and I apologize for spending so much time writing it up but I was doing this typing in real time and thoroughly enjoying it. Fridel picked us up at the airport and soon we were home.

Summary: The Andes down at the bottom of SA lived up to their reputation and we lucked out on the weather. People were friendly and helpful everywhere. Although one doesn't go there for the food we actually ate in more good restaurants than we often do. The monster rental car worked out quite nicely; and we drove it about 1300 miles, about half being on gravel. And as you gathered the GPS is great fun in an airplane, was useful in the car, and did its assigned task when we were out hiking (which is what my unit is really for.