Chile: Walking with Pumas 2024 Tour Report tour 2

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It was the cubs at the lakeside that got us; leaping over each other and weaving around us – with such unalloyed joy – in the last gasp of evening light.

We stood, barely a few feet away, next to their puma mother 'Petaka' – on a shoreline encrusted with coral-like fossils.

Finally, all three turned and walked away. Until all that was left were puma specks merging with the horizon. Our last mountain lion sighting, following days of heart-stopping – and very close – encounters with these unbelievably special animals.

'Just hold it together', said the voice in my head as we walked back to the car. Conscious of the emotional heft behind such moments. And of the exhilaration in witnessing such wild exuberance, set against the precariousness of life in this unforgiving terrain.

But, as we journeyed home for the night – our cameras bursting with images – there was barely a dry eye in the group.

The Wild Images 'Walking With Pumas' tour has always been a big hitter when it comes to the kind of intimate wildlife encounters that only really occur when a powerful animal itself grants you a glimpse at their world.

Years of trust earned by the dedicated trackers and guides of the Laguna Amarga reserve – where our tour is focused – have given rise to a unique conservation stronghold, where normally-elusive wild pumas permit humans to walk alongside them as they lord over this starkly beautiful land.

The experience makes for an addictive blend of adventure and the raw power of nature; scrapbook moments of wild drama under a sky that is so wide and epic that it, alone, makes for breathtaking photography.

Magnifying this is the fact that the reserve is backdropped by the iconic mountains of the Torres del Paine National Park – an endlessly mesmeric phalanx of cloud-scraping granite shards and snowy summits: Patagonia's crowning glories that draw you in – and rarely let you go.

The 2024 Wild Images trip marked my fourth time leading this tour, alongside world-class puma tracker Jorge and our wonderful Patagonian co-guide Mauricio. And in terms of captivating behavioural displays, it was unparalleled.

Who could forget the electric encounter with the fearsome dominant male 'Dark' – stood barely a breath away from us – as we sat on cliffs over Laguna Goic while he courted prospective mate 'Sol'.

Or the remarkable displays of submission shown by nursing mother 'Dania', imploring 'Petaka' to share her kill, while she, herself, had so little time to hunt while looking after infant cubs. Or 'Blinka' – the region's ultimate puma survivor – chasing marauding condors from her guanaco carcass.

But it was the nine-month-old cubs, indefatigable in their playfulness, affection, fierceness and curiosity, that stole most of our hearts.

For days, we sat by these youngsters – or walked with them – as they wrestled and played (backdropped by the stunning 'towers' of the Torres del Paine). Or waded into the small inlets of Lake Sarmiento.

As if this wasn't enough, we were lucky enough to experience the best sightings of Andean Condor I've ever seen in Patagonia; treated to a seemingly endless air show of eye-level fly-pasts by these massive birds.

Yes, we had our challenges – most notably, this year, with incredibly strong winds; facing roaring gusts of more than 100mph, one morning. But the majesty of the mountains, pumas – and of the other wildlife that crossed our path – more than countered any

adversities.

Bird sightings included Darwin's Rhea, Magellanic Horned Owl, Crested Caracara, Long-tailed Meadowlark, Austral Parakeets, Black-chested Buzzard Eagles, Black-faced Ibis and Chilean Flamingo. While our mammal list included encounters with Big Hairy Armadillo, South American Grey Fox, and Hog-nosed Skunk.

Not to mention the most elegant of camelids – and puma prey – the guanacos themselves, standing tall in huge herds in the mountain light. Sometimes something, or nothing, scared one – or all – of them, and there'd be an explosion of hoofs. Then they'd stop, rearranged.

In total, we spent time with 12 different pumas, but – far more importantly – had 18 encounters with these incredible cats that could be considered notable and special.

Add in the warmth of our estancia 'home' by the reserve, some phenomenal Pisco Sours, a road-trip through the Torres del Paine National Park, and Patagonia herself – in all her stark beauty – and it was an undeniably incredible way to spend 12 days!

The Tour Begins: Punta Arenas – Port City of Adventurers and Gateway to Patagonia

"Try Patagonia!" proclaimed Anglo-Argentine author and naturalist WH Hudson, who saw this land as the ultimate cure for ennui, fatigue and dullness of spirit.

It's hard to disagree with him. There's something about flying over the Andes and landing in Punta Arenas that immediately pulls at the soul and foretells of the adventure ahead.

As the last region of South America to be colonised, Patagonia is shared by Argentina and Chile – largely because neither country gave it much thought until the late 19th century. Barren, thinly-populated, windswept in summer and bitterly cold in winter, Patagonia really shouldn't be as enthralling as it is.

Thankfully, its political geography is less relevant than its physical reality: jagged mountain summits plunge down to ice-cold turquoise lakes, under huge skies laced with lenticular clouds. In the lowlands, rain-lashed islets merge with tundra while its steppes are stalked by pumas.

Patagonia is the closest landmass to Antarctica; a triangle-shaped full stop on the distant edge of a mysterious continent. And – for travellers and romantics – the very embodiment of "Out-There."

Our gateway to Patagonia – and tour meeting point – was the port city of Punta Arenas. As the largest city south of the 46th parallel (south) its streets push up against the shore of the Strait of Magellan and echo with the stories of Antarctic explorers from days gone by – most notably Sir Earnest Shackleton and Ferdinand Magellan (after whom the region is named.)

Punta Arenas itself boasts a grand central plaza, overlooked by Shackleton's former HQ, while the cemetery is lined with the tombs of sailors and adventurers.

The open-air nautical museum has full-size replicas of Magellan's ship, the Chilean schooner Ancud; HMS Beagle, and the tiny boat that saved Ernest Shackleton and his men when the Endurance was trapped in drift ice off Antarctica.

We based ourselves here at a shoreline hotel, for two nights. Before our first dinner – and meeting our forever good-humoured and knowledgeable co-guide Mauricio – many of us strolled along the city's sprawling coastal road.

Here we could photograph Imperial Cormorants, Southern Lapwings and Kelp and Dolphin Gulls- while scanning the horizon for a glimpse of a Southern Storm Petrel.

Along the Seno Skyring and to Estancia Olga Teresa – In Search of Condors, Owls and Seabirds

Heading out of Punta Arenas at first light, we trucked 50 miles north in our two vehicle 4WD convoy with Mauricio. Our target species – Chile's national bird and undisputed apex predator of the skies: the majestic Andean Condor.

As the city roads quickly morphed into country roads, some of Patagonia's most notable bird species began to line the verges and fence-posts: Black-chested Buzzard Eagle, Upland Geese, Crested Caracara and Darwin's Rhea, to name a few.

This swathe of steppe, with its low-slung bluffs and squat hills, can initially appear empty. But it doesn't take long for wildlife to emerge; the coiron grasses and spiny bushes providing a habitat for birds such as the Long-tailed Meadowlark and the Tawny-throated dotterel.

Before heading to Estancia Olga Teresa – home to a vast rock face renowned for being the world's most accessible condor roost – we slowly headed down the coast road along the Seno Skyring, a large inland sound that connects to the Pacific end of the Strait of Magellan through fjords that cut into the Andes.

Down at the lapping waves of the inlet, we spotted the handsome Flightless Steamer Duck, Magellanic Oystercatchers, circling condors and small flocks of handsome Black-necked swans.

At a nearby colonial-era estancia – atmospheric in the darkening skies and in no small part thanks to the creepy addition of a Black-chested Buzzard Eagle carcass nailed to a fence – Mauricio found us a Magellanic Horned Owl: Patagonia's largest owl species, roosting in a nearby conifer. Behind us, our first Fire-eyed Diucon flitted in the trees.

As we headed over for our afternoon session on 'Condor Cliff', I spotted a Hog-nosed skunk scampering around the hedgerows opposite – with some of the group quick enough to get some decent shots.

Over at Estancia Olga Teresa, recent heavy rains meant that we couldn't drive up to the famed 'Cerro Palomares', and so slowly made our way up on foot – after a short stroll through the ranch's mistletoe-strewn woods in search of Austral Pygmy Owl.

Undoubtedly, the ferocious winds made this 30 minute climb harder than in previous years. Yet we preserved and all managed to reach a position along the cliff, with a great view. To our good fortune, the high winds produced a stunningly good condor session.

The ranch at Olga Teresa protects and researches a population of more than 100 Andean Condors that soar, socialise and roost communally along the crevices and ridges at Cerro Palomares – a 20 metre tall, vertical rock face that itself is embedded in a towering 200 metre high hill.

One-by-one, these magnificent birds started to soar by us – sometimes passing us at eye-level and sometimes below – as they plunged, talons out, to land on the ledges and crevices of the rock.

At one point, I counted 29 condors within view in the sky in front of us, buoyed by air currents.

Considered the largest flying bird in the world – by combined measurement of wingspan and weight – Andean Condors are not only a national symbol of Chile, but were also believed, by the Incas, to carry the dead to the afterlife on their wings.

These new world vultures take on a slightly different plumage each year, for the first six years of their lives. This sees their colouration transform, from the rich mottled browns of their juvenile form, to the striking black and white plumage of adulthood. So it's wonderful to be able to photograph these birds in all these morphing stages.

Both the male and females share the distinctive black-and-white upper wing patterns, with males sporting a comb, large neck wattle and yellow/brown (rather than the female red) eyes.

As anyone watching on the estancia cliff could attest, condors glide seemingly effortlessly – sometimes only flapping their wings once an hour, while soaring and surveying.

Fingers on their wingtips enable them to make fine adjustments to their flight path. Full adult wingspans can reach 11 ft and Andean Condors can live for up to 70 years.

For almost two hours we stayed on the cliff and watched this panorama of ascending or straight-pathed condors; surely watching one of the greatest vulture displays in the world.

Driving back to Punta Arenas for a hearty dinner and – for some of the group – a well-earned Pisco Sour cocktail – we were treated to some gorgeous light over a distant mountain range. And our first guanacos and Chilean Flamingos by the side of the road.

Into the Mountains: North towards Puerto Natales, Torres del Paine and 'Puma Land'

While it's true that pumas can be found all over Patagonia – and it's possible to catch glimpses of them within the 700-square-mile Torres del Paine National Park – a policy shift here in 2013 effectively curbed off-trail hiking, bringing an end to any meaningful close-up puma tracking.

Enter Laguna Amarga, a former 6,200 hectare sheep ranch and private estate that borders the national park, and has become not only a safe enclave for these incredible cats, but is currently the best place in the world for puma photography and documentary filming.

Recent studies indicate a general Patagonian density of 3.4 pumas for every 100 square kilometres. Yet numbers in the Amarga reserve – with its healthy prey base of guanacos – are significantly higher: one part of the reserve reportedly boasts up to three pumas per square kilometre

To get to our puma-tracking destination, we first headed north from Punta Arenas to the outdoor-lover's city of Puerto Natales, stopping to search (in vain, on this particular day) for the rare wader, the Magellanic Plover.

After a coffee-break in a rustic cafe, we headed on into Puerto Natales, driving past the city's famous statue of the Mylodon (a giant prehistoric ground sloth whose remains were found in nearby caves) and on towards the coast road that looks out towards the Last Hope Sound.

High winds meant that we didn't stop for long at the scenic boardwalk and jetty, with low cloud obscuring much of the mountains that make up the southerly extension of the Andes.

Briefly, the clouds parted, for our first glimpse of the Southern Patagonian Ice Field – the largest of the South American icefields and home to some of the fastest flowing glaciers in the world. And with an approximate area of more than 6,000 square miles, the crystalline ice glinted a light blue.

After lunch at one of the best pizza restaurants in Patagonia, we headed onwards, towards the small farming settlement of Cerro Castillo that would become our base for the next seven days.

En route, we stopped to photograph Chilean Flamingo, lit up briefly in a valley lake, and Great Grebe. Then, while we still had some light, we drove past Cerro Castillo until we caught the first glimpse (for most of the group) of the iconic 'Torres del Paine' mountains.

Some hurried fieldcraft enabled some of us to get a shot of quick-as-a-flash Andean Hairy Armadillo – surely one of the world's most obscure looking mammals, but no less charming for it.

Finally, before the day faded completely, we made it to our cozy and warm estancia – with its lovely staff and amazing wines – that would be our home during our puma tracking days. Over dinner, a welcome from the charismatic Jorge – quite simply, one of the best puma experts in Patagonia, and our personal tracker for the tour.

Puma-Tracking Begins! Braving High Winds and Hills in Search of Patagonia's Iconic Mountain Lion

Our puma days typically started at 6 am, following a warm breakfast, and a pre-dawn drive into the reserve – usually with the planets Mars and Venus still visible to the naked eye in the night sky, above the dark hulking forms of mountains.

We'd then make a westward turn along the shores of the 14-mile long Lake Sarmiento, at the first murmurings of dawn. Mauricio, myself – and all of the group – scanning the landscape for pumas, while also waiting for dedicated tracker, Jorge, to call in a sighting over the radio.

That first hour of morning, dubbed 'puma hour' is a favourite time of day to photograph these formidable cats – although great images were taken (and phenomenal encounters had) at all times od day, during our tour.

Given their level of camouflage (with pale coats blending well with the colours of the Patagonian steppe) the best way to find pumas is to monitor the behaviour of their biggest prey – the incredibly canny and well-organised guanaco, who post herd sentry guards that loudly 'neigh' at any hint of a mountain lion.

In recent years, trackers such as Jorge have realised the advantages of a thermal-scope – particularly in dense shrub areas, where the thorny Calafate and Mata Negra (black shrub) provide perfect cover.

Pumas are largely territorial, with the Laguna Amarga reserve home to an estimated 20-30 most frequently seen cats, including some particularly charismatic individuals made famous by the BBC wildlife documentary series 'Dynasties' and other natural history shows.

While the puma's Latin name *Puma concolor* means 'cat of one colour' – it's a misnomer, actually, given that coat shades can vary a great deal, from tawny and rufous to the increasing pale grey colour of cats seen in the reserve: a legacy of 'Dark' the fearsome alpha male, whose genes still dominate.

Added to this, is the fact that pumas have been named and renamed constantly by both native peoples and explorers to North and South America – amassing, as a result, more than 80 different monikers, more than any other animal. Appellations include: 'cougar', 'mountain lion', 'catamount' and 'red tiger.'

Despite days of horrifically-strong winds, including one morning where the gusts were so powerful we could barely hold our cameras straight – and I could only open the driver's door of the 4WD by bench-pressing it with my legs – we were also treated to some beautiful skies.

And then there's the majesty of the mountains that backdropped some of our puma encounters – and need little introduction. To our backs, the edges of the Sierra Baguales ('wild horse' mountains) and to our west, the granite marvel of the Cordillera del Paine, with its centrepiece of the three Torres (towers).

Unanimously, our puma highlights were these (below):

A Rush of Cubs: Puma Matriarch 'Petaka's' Ever-Playful Youngsters delight in front of the Towers of the Paine Massif and at the Lakeside

Almost without question, this year's tour belonged to Petaka's nine-month-old cubs. We spent time with this incredibly charismatic and acrobatic brother and sister on four of our seven puma-tracking days – and each time their playfulness stole our hearts a little bit more.

It was three days into our puma-time that we had our first encounter, on a day that Jorge had portentously dubbed 'hell day' the evening before, due to the forecast of torrential rain and hurricane-force winds.

As it turned out, the worst had blown-out by late morning, when we got a call over the radio from Jorge that 'Petaka' and her cubs had crossed the road that curves along Lake Sarmiento, and were playing in the marsh.

As the light around us turned golden, we headed towards them, spending more than two hours watching the three of them tear around the pampas, wading into the shallow inlet ponds and leaping the network of streams.

The size difference in both bulk and length of Petaka's male cub, compared to his more dainty sister, was immediately apparent. But both had the same captivating traits: at times affectionate, then impish, then fierce, then needling for their mum's attention.

We stood, just metres away, as they wrestled – before padding through the long grass, chasing and grabbing at each other's comically long tails.

The cubs passed so close to us that most of us could no longer focus on them with our lenses; we just had to hold our breath and enjoy the moment.

At one point, the female cub played with a stick, batting it around like a toy; at another, mother Petaka locked eyes on a possible interloper: dominant male 'Dark' initially approaching from the bankside opposite – ever watchful until he somehow melted away.

Later that day, we returned to the road – currently under construction (although, thankfully the workers took a week off in the last half of our tour) – to photograph Petaka and her cubs padding along the concrete highway.

Comically, the cubs showed an unusual fascination with our vehicles; one standing on its back legs to peer into the passenger seat, the other tugging at the tape wrapped around the newly-built bollards.

The following morning, we found the cubs feasting on a fresh guanaco carcass in the hills, seemingly hunted down by Petaka just a few hours previously.

Then – as Petaka guarded their kill – the cubs retreated to a nearby knoll, overlooked by the majestic, and inimitable, 'towers' of the Torres del Paine.

As a shot that is possible, here in the reserve (but by no means inevitable) this one is perhaps my most-treasured; cubs grooming and padding around in front of one of the world's most recognisable mountains.

It's the kind of widescreen environmental image that, I believe, makes this Patagonian tour so special, and the photographs perhaps some of the most eye-catching I have ever taken.

A further encounter with the cubs happened the next day at the carcass. In early afternoon light, the cubs and Petaka indulged in their most acrobatic display of play-fighting yet. Perhaps buoyed through two days of food, the three of them tussled and brawled and leapt onto each other from atop bushes. What a fantastic display of puma agility!

Just before we called it a day, the male cub – adorable in his youthful bravery and curiosity – strolled over to sit just three metres from us. Head-cocked to one side, he checked us out; so close we could almost have reached out and touched him.

As if this wasn't enough, our last full puma day in the reserve served up two more exemplary cub encounters. In fact, our last morning and afternoon was so spectacular – with sightings of the cubs and an electrifying encounter with dominant male 'Dark' – that many in the group remarked that the sightings in just that one day alone would have made for a fantastic tour.

Catching up with Petaka and the cubs as they padded down from a rocky outcrop (with one cub physically brushing past group member Peggy) we followed closely until they came to a stop, sprawling out on a lowland ridge and backdropped by some of the lower ridges of the Torres del Paine peaks.

Filling our camera cards with fantastic images of this sight, we then walked alongside the pumas as they padded down the hillside, until, finally, Petaka called for her cubs to follow her across the road and out of sight.

Later that day, as the evening sun was about to set, we had our last encounter with this mesmerising puma family, down amongst the white thrombolites of Lake Sarmiento.

Thrombolites are living calcium carbonate fossils that began to form with the last Ice Age around 10,000 years ago, and that grow just one millimetre a year. We stood amongst these living fossils, just a few metres from the cubs, as they weaved about us and each other. At one point, one of the puma siblings swung the body of a White-tufted Grebe from her teeth, batting it like a toy.

We stayed that way – Petaka and her cubs so accepting of our presence – until all three padded away, down the lakeshore beach – leaping and playing without a backward glance.

Locking Eyes with 'Dark': Patagonia's Notorious Lord of the Pumas

Perhaps the most infamous pumas in Patagonia is Laguna Amarga's dominant male 'Dark' – a brooding, intense-looking cat, cited by most trackers as the one cat in the reserve of whom they are fearful.

His name comes from his notable shadowy-grey colouration, although it also suits his reputation as a killer of cubs that are not his own. In previous tours, I have witnessed 'Dark' crunching bones, the sound ricocheting across the valley in a none-too-comforting manner.

Instantly recognisable by his hulking form (he is estimated to weigh in excess of 90kg) Dark is now more than a decade old, with many trackers believing that his era is almost over, and a younger male set to challenge his dominance.

Dark is also renowned for being something of a ghost; he is famously hard to get close to. Which was our experience, when we first tried to catch up with him as he stalked the hills over Laguna Goic.

Twice we tried to approach close enough for a shot where this iconic animal was anything more than a puma-shaped smudge on a long-lens. But both times retreated to the car with not much to write home about.

Then Jorge – stationed at a look-out post almost a kilometre across the lake – radioed that Dark was courting female puma 'Sol' on the rocky ridge, and we had a chance of a closer encounter.

The hill climb needed to get from the lakeshore to the top of the bluff was the toughest hike of our tour, but we managed it, advancing slowly in stages.

Our reward was the best encounter with Dark I've ever had – and the closest even Mauricio had been to this phenomenal animal. Sitting down in the cliff grass, we stayed motionless as Sol crept slowly towards us, intensely followed – one carefully placed paw at a time – by Dark.

At one stage, he stood just a few metres from us, looking straight into our eyes, and backdropped by the blue of Laguna Goic. To be this close to such a powerful animal, but with a tracker and guide so attuned to their associated behaviours that you feel safe, is nothing short of electrifying.

Pumas and the Art of Reciprocity – Submission and Co-operation in the Fight for Survival

Although puma behaviour is still under-researched, they are the only solitary big cats who are known to share their kills; an act of reciprocity many believe has ecological, biological and social benefits.

We witnessed one of the most remarkable displays of submission I'd seen on any tour when 'Dania' – a nursing mother with very young cubs (hidden from view) – dropped to her side, paws in the air, amd adopted a 'pleading' pose in front of snarling Petaka, who was fiercely guarding her kill.

Nursing pumas like Dania have so little time to hunt themselves, that asking to share a kill has become a vital survival tool for these animals – as long as suitable deference is shown.

Female pumas spend 80 percent of their time either pregnant or raising cubs, so any act of generosity is reciprocated when they – too – need to feed.

Just a day earlier, Dania appeared on a hillside while we were photographing the particularly beautiful puma 'Escarcha' (Spanish for 'Frost' due to her silvery coat) eating a fresh guanaco carcass. Known for her placid nature, Escarcha swiftly gave up her place, before appearing behind Dania at the kill, looking almost like a 'ghost puma' in our images.

However, Petaka – with her own cubs to feed – was much tougher about bidding rights to her kill. She grudgingly allowed Dania to eat, while never straying more than a few feet away herself. And at one point, she slammed her paw down on the guanaco, hurling grass into Dania's shocked face, in a move clearly intended to reassert her authority.

The whole display was a fascinating insight into puma power dynamics.

'Blinka' Guarding Her Kill from Thieves in the Sky

One of the most iconic pumas who chooses to make her home in the reserve is the female known as 'Blinka'.

This nine-year-old mountain lion lost her right eye at around three months old and has sustained several injuries since then – one of which still leaves her with a noticeable limp. Despite this, Patagonia's 'Pirate Puma' is a fearsome hunter and ultimate survivor.

We spent the majority of our first two puma-tracking days with Blinka as she feasted on a fresh guanaco carcass on a low-slung hilltop; made all the more interesting due to the fact that she repeatedly had to rush back to her kill to guard it from marauding condors and caracaras.

Even as she tried to rest in a hollow nearby, every sound from the sky above prompted a defensive reaction, showing that kill-guarding is as exhausting as it is vital.

Last Wonders: Birds, Foxes, Sunrise Skies and the Torres del Paine National Park

As well as the pumas, our time in the Laguna Amarga reserve allowed us to photograph some wonderful bird species – such as flocks of Black-faced Ibis, Crested and White-throated Caracara, the scarlet-chested Long-tailed Meadowlark and a Short-eared Owl, lit up against the shadows as the sun began to sink.

We had several lunchtime forays, either to the national park or just outside; to Cascada Rio Paine and to Laguna Azul, where White-winged coot, Flightless Steamer Ducks and Chiloe Wigeon – as well as landscape shots – filled our memory cards.

Additionally, a few happy hours – over the course of our puma week – were spent photographing herds of guanacos against the mountains, or mountain reflections in the lakes, and even a South American Grey Fox – one of Patagonia's other notable mammalian predators – that scampered in the grass nearby.

Finally, it was time to leave, and after a last breakfast in Cerro Castillo, we headed out for our final day – a mini road-trip through the justifiably world-famous Torres del Paine National Park.

This is often a favourite day for landscape-loving clients, who delight in the chance to photograph the reflections of the Paine Massif in Laguna Amarga and in the spectacular Lake Nordenskjold.

After stopping for a beautiful pair of Great Grebes – and a stone-skimming competition in Lake Pehoe – we enjoyed coffee in a tiny lakeside cafe, while photographing a Tufted Tit-Tyrant, Chilean Flicker and tame Caracara in the cluster of beech trees.

We tried several times to find the eye-catching Magellanic Woodpecker – both in the trees by Lake Grey and strip of Southern Beech Forest that led to the shore near the rapidly-disappearing Grey Glacier. But sadly, to no avail.

However, we were luckier with the flock of Austral Parakeets – the world's most southerly parrot – feeding in a copse.

The drive through the national park marked a wonderful end-point to our journey. After stopping once again for pizza in Puerto Natales, we headed back to Punta Arenas, at the end of a successful (and startlingly beautiful) puma tracking tour.