

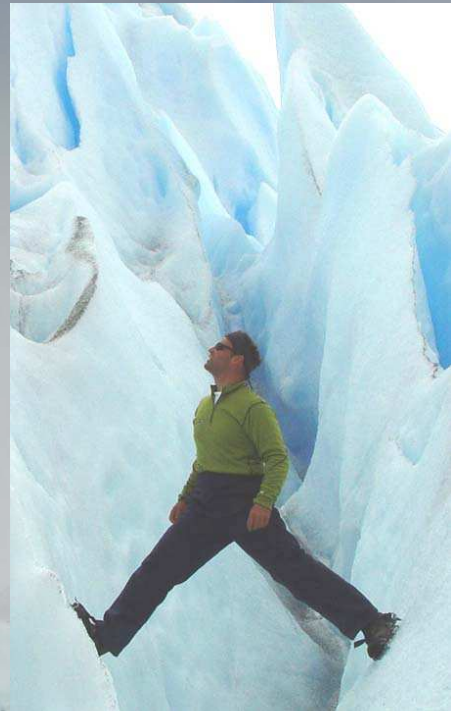
# Nice ICE

*A trip to the  
frozen south turns  
adventurer into a  
glacier lover*

Story & Photos by Robert A. Dunton

## **PARQUE NACIONAL LOS GLACIARES, Argentina –**

Having stared down rhinos in Tanzania and rafted the headwaters of the Amazon, looking at a collection of giant snow cones bobbing in a lake seemed excruciatingly tame. The thought of gawking at a bunch of ice sounded about as exciting as looking into an empty cocktail glass. If it hadn't been for the persuasive words of my trusted Lonely Planet guide, I would never have planned a side trip to *Parque Nacional Los Glaciares*. I stand before you a changed man, a glacier convert.



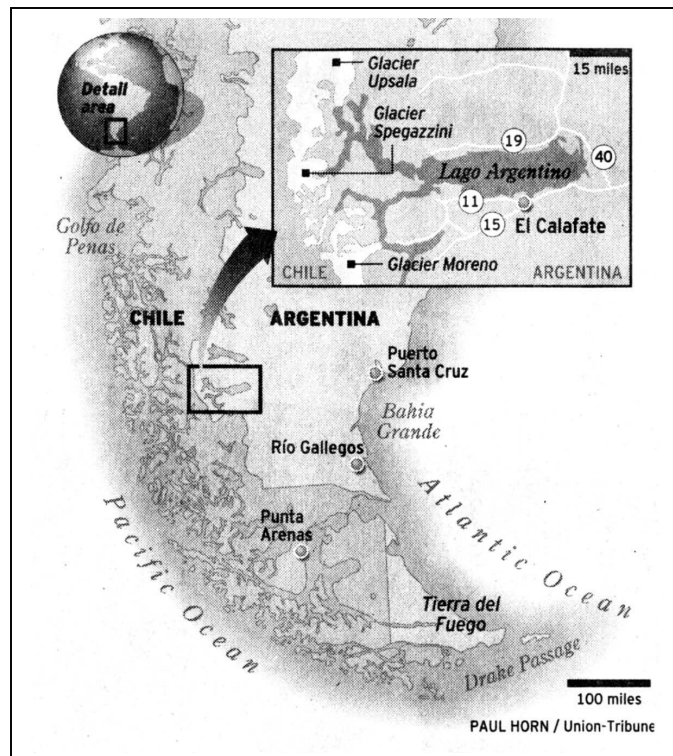
Parque Nacional Los Glaciares was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981. The park, located in an area known as the Austral Andes in southwestern Argentina, abuts the Chilean border. Friend and long time adventure mate, Mark Rauch, joined me for the adventure. Our home base was the remote lakeside town of El Calafate. After picking up a round of tourists, our shuttle van made the 45-minute drive along Highway 11 to Punta Bandera, the launching point for an all-day three glacier tour. Winds on the lake were howling at 25-35 knots, whipping a row of Argentinean national flags along the gangplank. We joined 300 other travelers on a spotless catamaran built with an abundance of viewing windows.

The lake water was opaque-jade, what the locals call glacier green. The air temperature was delightfully warm for a glacier tour, averaging in the 50s and 60s. Our first destination would be the Spegazzini Glacier, one of 47 glaciers making up the Patagonic Ice Cap, the largest contiguous ice slab after Antarctica and Greenland. Spegazzini was named after the Italian botanist and explorer who devoted much of his wilderness research to South America in the late 1800s, greatly influencing the preservationist attitude of this region.

Forty-five minutes into the North Arm of Lago Argentino, we spotted our first iceberg and a mild frenzy erupted. Passengers left their seats and packed the windows. Others rushed outside for a better view. The floating slab was bluish white and the size of two railroad cars, rounded over time by air and water. Cameras clicked. Fingers pointed. From that point on, the closer we got to the glaciers, the more icebergs we saw, migrating south with the winds.

As we turned into Spegazzini Canal, we passed a beach choked with hundreds of parked icebergs in every shape and size. I began to feel silly for having photographed that first insignificant lump of ice, and quickly became an iceberg snob, saving my precious film for the most massive, radiant or exquisitely sculpted.

Spegazzini Glacier loomed into view, noted for having the highest ice spires and walls of any glacier in the region, up to 400 feet – the height of a 26-story office building. We stayed clear of the minefield of ice refuse and paralleled the mass from a distance. With only 10% of an iceberg generally visible, unseen dangers were real. The massive river of ice was moving at a snails pace of three-feet per day. Yet with this advancement, the glacier was still receding as the outer edges splintered off faster than it could descend. Sometimes small patches dropped quietly with a



splash. Other times, battleship size hunks peeled off, thundering into the bay, kicking up waves and pushing the ice-debris soup away from the wall. One could spend a day and not see a large chunk calve into the lake, or with luck, spot many. At our great distance, if I was looking in the wrong direction, by the time I heard a crash and spun to look, the ice had fallen.

Next we motored toward neighboring Onelli Glacier. The boat docked and we disembarked, allowing us 2-3 hours to enjoy lunch in a forested restaurant and a hike to nearby Lake Onelli. The small lake looked like a giant ice bucket, overflowing with icebergs fed by three distinct glaciers: Onelli, Bolados and Agassiz. If an iceberg was near shore, you could get your picture taken on top of it, or take your chances hopping from snow patch to ice-block. Most passengers wandered peacefully along the shoreline and through the serene forest of mossy *lenga* and *coihue* trees, while an ornithology group from Britain tracked a pair of rare South American Condors that soared above us.

The finale was Upsala Glacier, the largest in the Patagonic Ice Cap. 180-feet above the water's edge, it spread 6-miles between two mountain ranges and ran 30-miles up the valley. From a distance, the surface looked like an arctic version of a massive lava flow, inanimate yet alive, melting gracefully into Lake Argentina. The winds had died down. The flat gray sky had cracked letting in bright sunlight. Gray and brown trails of pulverized stone were highlighted within the vibrant white ice. Returning to Punta Bandera, a sunbeam lit a glacier the size of a city block, illuminating a sapphire-rich blue from within. Even this iceberg snob knew this was an exceptional moment, and I happily invested half-a-roll of film trying to capture it – for unlike monuments I have visited in the past, this iceberg would be gone long before I ever returned.

### **Moonwalk on Moreno**

Ask Neil Armstrong if there's a difference between staring at another planet and walking on it. While safely boating near glaciers the day before, I was yearning to get closer to the ice – to touch them and explore their surreal surface. The owners of our hotel recommended an all day adventure called *MiniTrekking* that included a 2-hour hike on Moreno Glacier.

The next morning, Mark and I bussed about an hour to the glacier. Phase one of this excursion started at a collection of viewing balconies built for watching Moreno's imposing ice-wall slowly decompose. From our perch on a rock cliff, the massive glacier spread out as far as we could see in both directions, and stood dauntingly just 100-yards in front of us. We spent an hour under overcast skies hoping to witness a mammoth calving and the huge waves that accompany it. To our dismay, our one-hour visit did not include one of these once-in-a-dozen year events.

The MiniTrekking portion followed. We took a boat across the *Rico Brazo*, or Rich Arm of the lake. The waters here were relatively clear of icebergs, allowing us to motor much closer to the face of Moreno Glacier than we had Upsala or Spegazzini.

We disembarked on the opposite shore, and enjoyed lunch (not provided) next to a *refugio*, a handsome wooden cabin used in inclement weather. Mark and I feasted on sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs and cake our hotel had provided for us. Lush trees lined the top of the glacier-smoothed hills that rolled down to the lake. Five-hundred yards from our picnic table, the

dramatic skyline of Moreno Glacier cut across the horizon. After lunch, we followed our guide through a rich forest toward a small beach where he diagramed the glacial process in the sand. Two-hundred yards further, at the base of the glacier, we were fitted with crampons – long cleats fashioned from bent strips of steel and nylon strapping. In single file, groups of ten proceeded up a mild glacial trail, one well-planted foothold at a time.

Within 30-minutes I felt transported to another planet. Crystalline towers mixed with wind whipped ridges of ice shooting up like giant frozen flames. The carving hand of the elements had sculpted a labyrinth of fluid shapes. Pools of otherworldly blue water formed in crevasses. Mountain peaks capped with snow were in the distance, while below rested the creamy, jade waters of Lago Argentina. We crunched along on granular, decomposing ice on the surface, supported by solid ice below.

Our guide toted two ice axes, both as a tool and for safety. He carved steps into the steeper embankments to ease our climbing. He demonstrated the axe's use as a climbing tool, stabbing each blade deep into the packed snow as he scaled the face of a sheer ice wall, unaided by ropes or a safety harness. We did not follow.

Our group consisted of hikers age 10 to 75. We trailed behind our guide on an inexact route, exploring ravines and pools that caught our eye. The greatest danger I experienced was nicking the inside of my calf with the cleats as I walked and hopped over small ice cracks. After almost an hour of exhilarating hiking, we headed back down through a small ice canyon. In it sat a rough-hewn table set with a row of glasses, a few bottles of whiskey and water, a box of chocolate truffles and a bucket of freshly chipped glacier ice.

“Thousand Year-Old Cocktails” were poured onto ancient ice. Toasts were made as laughter and cheers echoed off the walls. As we walked back toward the mundane world of dirt and rock, my mind swirled with visions of a return trip: a week-long hiking and camping trip deep into the interior of this alien ice world. Sure sounded like a good idea at the time, but I’m starting to think the glacier ice might have gone to my head....

## **If You Go...**

**When to Go:** Our winter is Argentina’s summer. Best time to visit is from November 1<sup>st</sup> through March 31<sup>st</sup>. We went over Thanksgiving, and found it busy but not crowded. High season rates are in effect (quoted below). Weather is unpredictable, so always bring a range of clothing.

**Getting There:** Fly Delta, United or American Airlines (all end up connecting with Lan Chile Airlines) from San Francisco to Santiago or Buenos Aires (\$830RT). Connect via Aerolineas Argentinas to El Calafate (\$200 RT). Trying to book such an obscure destination can be a challenge (e.g., flights to El Calafate are not available via Expedia or Orbitz). I used Americas Travel, a California based agency specializing in Latin American. They arranged an affordable South American air-pass plus accommodation, excursions and hotels: (888) 703-9955.

**Where to Stay:** There is a pleasant range of accommodations in El Calafate, from charming 4-star (\*\*\*\*) hotels to friendly hostels (\*\*). We stayed at Los Barrancos, and were delighted.

\*\*\*\* Kau Yatún – Hotel de Campo. Cozy yet upscale. Charming. \$96 double occupancy.

Estancia 25 de Mayo, El Calafate, Provincia de Santa Cruz (9405) Argentina. phone: (54) 02902-491-059 [www.kauyatun.com](http://www.kauyatun.com); [info@kauyatun.com](mailto:info@kauyatun.com)

\*\*\* Los Barrancos Hosteria. \$55 double occupancy, includes breakfast. Quaint with great views. Villa Parque Los Glaciares. – El Calafate, Provincia de Santa Cruz (9405) Argentina. (54) 02902-491-380; email: [losbarrancos@cotecal.com.ar](mailto:losbarrancos@cotecal.com.ar); website: [www.losglaciares.com/losbarrancos](http://www.losglaciares.com/losbarrancos)

\*\* Calafate Hostel. \$8-\$15 per person. New, immaculate and friendly. Gdor. Moyano 1296, El Calafate, Provincia de Santa Cruz Argentina (54) 02902-492-451; email: [calafatehostel@cotecal.com.ar](mailto:calafatehostel@cotecal.com.ar) website: <http://www.hostelspatagonia.com/>

### **Where to Eat:**

Wander Avenida del Libertador General San Martin, the main street, and you will find more dining offerings than you will need, including excellent shopping and desserts. Meals averaged \$10-\$20 per person, including wine and dessert. Superb steaks are offered everywhere and cost \$5-\$8.

La Lechuza: A tasty pizza joint when you tire of filet mignon. Av. Libertador 1301, phone: (54) 02902-491-610.

El Hornito: Well-known for homemade pasta, brick-oven baked pizzas and excellent vegetables. 155 Buenos Aires Street 155(54) 02902-492-429

Don Diego de la Noche: Food, live music and dancing in this family run establishment. Steak platters, salad, soups. On the edge of town at Av. Liberator and ACA (54) 02902-493-270

### **Activities:**

Horseback riding, 4x4 tours, fishing, and, of course, glacier excursions. Exploring the glaciers by kayak is not an option here – though it is available in Chile near smaller and more stable glaciers. Most hotels and hostels can book any of these activities, as can booking agents on the main road.

MiniTrekking: High Season: \$90, low season: \$75 includes RT transportation, equipment and bilingual guides. Bring your own lunch. Offered exclusively by Hielo y Aventura S.A., Av. del Libertador 935, phone: (54) 02902-492-205.

### **Good Resources:**

<http://www.losglaciares.com/en/parque/>

<http://www.argentrip.com/e/glaciares/ederglaciares4.htm>

Lonely Planet's guide to South America or Argentina.

© Robert A. Dunton is a freelance travel writer based in San Diego.