

RUTA CUARENTA

TAKE AN EPIC ROAD TRIP IN THE HEART OF
PATAGONIA AND FOLLOW THE PATH OF CHE
GUEVARRA'S FAMOUS MOTORCYCLE JAUNT

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RUTA CUARENTA, OR NATIONAL ROUTE 40, IS ONE OF THE LARGEST ROADS ON THE PLANET. It is also one of the roughest and least-traveled routes in the world. The road stretches from one end of **Argentina** to the other, from the small city of La Quiaca in the north to the southern towns of El Chaltén and Río Gallegos. The route has varied picturesque sights that are an extraordinary mix of isolation and majesty. Be it on foot, bicycle, motorcycle or rickshaw, this is the epitome of the road less traveled. The things that you'll spot aren't common either, like condors wheeling high above the Andes, the occasional Patagonian fox and—well, not much else, apart from clouds whipped into amazing shapes by the ubiquitous winds.

Leaving our luxurious lodge in Perito Moreno National Park, we headed to **El Chaltén** with the hope of catching a glimpse of the elusive Monte Fitz Roy. After a few hours on the gravel roads that stretched out as far as the eye can see and with no mobile phone signal, I finally realized that this is what a real adventure is—not really knowing what lies ahead. We passed a number of isolated *estancias* or ranches. There were the occasional *guanacos* crossing in packs and more gravel roads ahead. For more than three hours, we did not come across a single car.



The peaks of
Cerro Torre
and Monte Fitz
Roy are simply
overwhelming



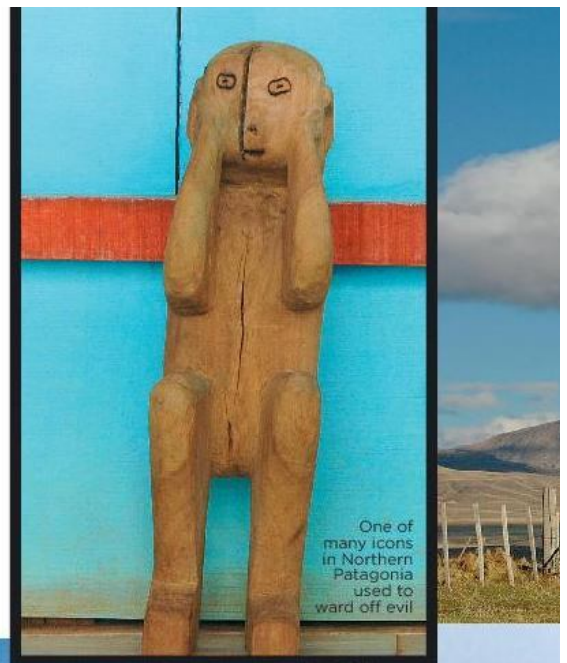
feature PATAGONIA

To the north of this stretch, the Ruta 40 has a couple of strange attractions. The **Cueva de las Manos** (Cave of the Hands) belies the incredible emptiness of Patagonia. Near the small towns of Los Antiguos and Perito Moreno are caves containing thousands of human handprints, made between 13,000 and 9500 years ago in the beautiful canyon of the Río Pininturas. It was a mind-blowing sight. Just to the north, near Sarmiento, is a petrified forest with huge trunks of monkey puzzle trees turned to stone 140 million years ago.

When at last we arrived in El Chaltén, I was in awe at one of the most magnificent sights in the whole country: **Monte Fitz Roy**, whose great turrets of granite can be seen rising up from the flat grasslands 100 kilometers

away. It was made all the more spectacular by a seemingly unending horizon of flat lands.

After the long drive, we settled into the common room of our ranch-style hotel. We were joined by fellow adventurers in swapping stories while passing around *mate* (pronounced as mah-tay), the traditional beverage of the nation. *Yerba mate* is apparently infused with ingredients that bring vigor and life to its drinkers. There is a rather unusual ceremony in drinking the national drink: the server fills the gourd with water then passes it around clockwise, with each person drinking from the gourd. Being invited to take part in drinking *mate* is a cultural delight, although the drink may seem bitter and piping hot to first-time drinkers. It's better to sip it slowly.



One of many icons in Northern Patagonia used to ward off evil



Conquering the peak of the Perito Moreno Glacier

An attempt to capture the massive Perito Moreno glacier—one of the three growing glaciers of Patagonia

WHEN TO GO

- The best time to visit Patagonia is from November to April. Its climate varies from one region to another, so make sure you read up on the regions you intend to visit.
- Visiting Argentina requires a visa for Philippine passport-holders. You may process your visa at the Embassy of Argentina and Embassy of Chile in Manila—the former is on the 8th floor, while the latter is on the 17th floor of Liberty Center, 104 H.V. de la Costa Street, Salcedo Village, Makati City.

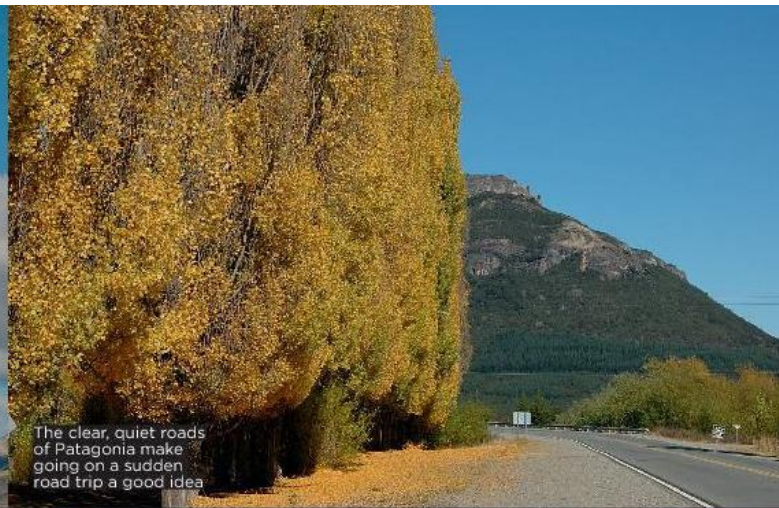


The contrast between the seemingly warm mountains behind the chilly Perito Moreno Glacier is astounding





A typical sight in El Calafate, a town whose name is derived from a bush of yellow flowers and dark blue berries common in Patagonia



The clear, quiet roads of Patagonia make going on a sudden road trip a good idea



Trekking through the trails of Poincenot gives you the colors of autumn, snow, and on good days, a view of the Fitz Roy



Afternoons on Ruta 40 are for gauchos to herd their cows back to the estancia



Searching for ice caves on top of the Perito Moreno Glacier



A 4x4 adventure on the rough terrains of the Glaciares National Park

El Chaltén is a hiker's paradise. Our days were filled with hikes in the foothills of Monte Fitz Roy, one of the most challenging mountains to climb with its huge granites and icy slopes. We spent a majority of our trip trying to catch its grand peaks from different viewpoints, from Poincenot Needle (a granite spire named after a French alpinist who died in Fitz Roy in 1952), Laguna de los Tres (the closest area to Fitz Roy which boasts of a magnificent view), and Condors Viewpoint. All promise breathtaking views and if you are lucky, a full panoramic sight of the peaks of Fitz Roy.

In the evenings, we swapped stories on our days' adventures while indulging in

Patagonian lamb or *asado* over oaky Malbec wine. We ended the day with a sweet note, thanks to the famous *dulce de leche*. With many miles to go before the end of Ruta 40, we set off a few days later to our next destination. We decided to cross over to **Chile's Carretera Austral** or Route 7, just to take the mandatory being-in-two-places-at-once photo at the border. While Ruta 40 was all about endless flat roads, the Carretera Austral offers steep, narrow, and curving gravel roads. It was there where we ended our trip, heading back to the northern part of Ruta 40 filled with a handful of historic sites and extraordinary photographs. ■