The Art of GLAMOROUS CAMPING

By Cecily Mabasa

Luxury marries adventure in Patagonia.

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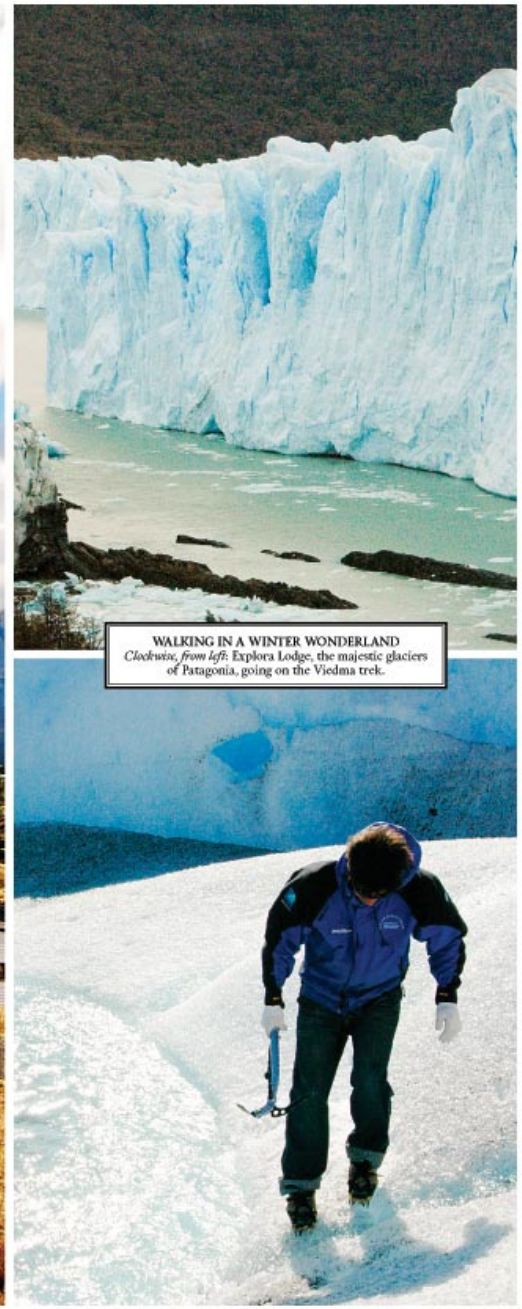
Surrounded by an incomparable landscape, with views that require superlatives to do justice to its beauty, Explora is the best place to get to know the untamed Torres del Paine region.



WALKING IN A WINTER WONDERLAND
Clockwise, from left: Explora Lodge, the majestic glaciers of Patagonia, going on the Viedma trek.

WITH A WARM mattress and goose down comforters, gourmet picnics and sit-down dinners, no one would think this was a hiking trip. In Patagonia, all these, and more, are at hand. Luxury lodges with cozy living rooms, built-in fireplaces, and even Wi-Fi connections have become hotspots. Glamorous camping—glamping—is gradually becoming a travel trend.

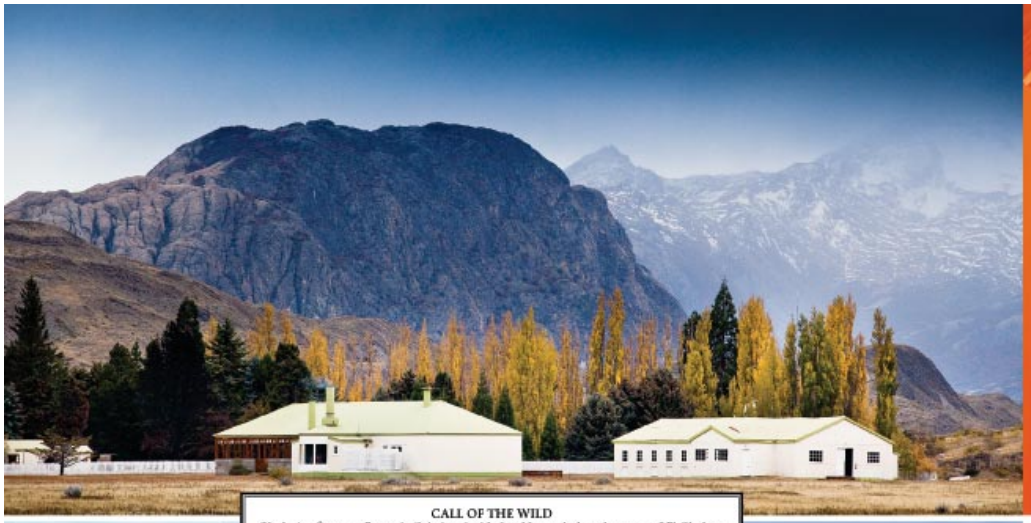
Glamping in Patagonia makes it possible for you to trek alongside glaciers, lakes, and enormous mountain formations during the day and revel in the little luxuries, such as a soak in a steaming tub at night. Without having to worry about the usual camping concerns, it's easier to take in and ruminate on your surroundings in an unhurried and meaningful way. Here, I list down five of the best luxury lodges in Patagonia.

LOS CERROS
El Chalten, Argentina

EL CHALTEN IS HOME TO THE ELUSIVE MONTE Fitz Roy, one of the most challenging mountains to climb. On my first visit to Patagonia, we drove across the unpaved Ruta 40 from El Calafate. It took us a grueling eight hours, with not a single car sighting, to reach the virtual ghost town of El Chalten. For an entire week, the shy Fitz Roy refused to make an appearance but on my return, we were welcomed by its majestic peaks. We were all smiles as we settled in the only luxury lodge in the area, Los Cerros, which is perched on top of a now bustling town.

• PEAK OF LUXURY:
My room, like the rest of the 44 rooms in the lodge, had large windows that gave me a breathtaking view of lakes and valleys, including Monte Fitz Roy, surrounding El Chalten. Each room in the lodge has a Jacuzzi settled on a deck, where you can enjoy the beauty of nature while submerged in warm, relaxing water. With the lodge's facilities, like the upstairs TV den and a spacious yet cozy sitting room, it was tempting to just stay in and lounge around the lodge, but the slew of outdoor activities was a bigger lure.

• BEST DAY ADVENTURE:
To have a full grasp on the beauty of El Chalten, you must participate in several day activities. A trip to the base of Fitz Roy allows you to see an extraordinary view of the mountain, known by most as the Hikers' Paradise. Another activity I enjoyed was the lodge's



CALL OF THE WILD
Clockwise, from top: Estancia Cristina, inside Los Notros lodge, the town of El Chalten, the ferry at Punta Banderas, one of many adventure trails at Estancia Cristina.

Torre Lagoon walk, where we trekked along the Río Fitz Roy valley toward the Laguna Torre. It was an easy climb from the base, then after a walk through quiet forests and a final climb, we got to Laguna Torre. It gave us a splendid view of snow-capped Cerro Torre, peeking out of the valleys. The lodge also offers glacier walks, and one of my favorites is the Viedma trek. From Laguna Torre, we trekked using crampons and climbed with pickaxes and harnesses. It's one of the most popular mountain routes.

◆WHEN TO GO: Mid-September to April, but still no guarantee to see the peaks of Fitz Roy. Most lodges are closed for the winter season.

ESTANCIA CRISTINA

Parque Nacional Upsala Glacier, Argentina

ON A PREVIOUS TRIP TO PATAGONIA, I CHANCED UPON A couple who had just come from a day trip to Estancia Cristina. After their amazing account, I immediately put it on my bucket list. A few years later, I was on board the ferry across Punta Banderas port toward the Estancia Cristina. The remote lodge serves as a base for exploring another face of Patagonia inaccessible by car: the Upsala Glacier.

◆PEAK OF LUXURY:
The Estancia, which can only be reached by ferry, used to be privately owned. Its positioning as the only point to experience the Upsala Glacier, one of the largest glaciers in Los Glaciares National Park, makes it a gem. The most noteworthy of Estancia Cristina's many offerings is the mouthwatering regional cuisine. During our walks, we were sent off with gourmet picnic lunchboxes filled with country bread, grilled meats, homemade butter Figazza, a variety of cold cuts and cheeses, corn pie, and local *alfajores*. Our tour guides carried flasks of warm soup. For dinner, we were served Patagonian lamb, fresh salads, homemade breads, and my favorite chocolate lava cake.

◆BEST DAY ADVENTURE:
One cannot take part in the activities at Estancia Cristina without being a guest. Its program offers alternatives for those who prefer a quiet day of touring and history, as well as for those who look forward to adventure such us trekking and riding horses or a four-wheel drive. The best among the bunch is the Cerro Carnero walk. Beginning at the Estancia's farmhouse, we walked southeast towards Hill Carnero and entered a forest of waterfalls. A brief, breezy walk after, we reached the summit and saw the stunning views of the Andes Mountains, the Southern Patagonian Ice Field, and the Mariano Morena range.

◆WHEN TO GO: October to March

LOS NOTROS

Perito Moreno National Park, El Calafate, Argentina

LOS NOTROS IS THE MOST LUXURIOUS LODGE IN THE PERITO Moreno National Park. No matter how many times I return, the view from my room never fails to amaze me. Every morning, I am greeted with a glorious sunrise and a jaw-dropping view of the Perito Moreno glacier walls. No photograph can ever capture such moments.

◆PEAK OF LUXURY:
Being the only upscale lodge in the park, Los Notros gets fully booked easily. It sits right in front of one of the world's most popular glaciers, Perito Moreno. The whole lodge is strategically designed with the spectacular view in mind—each room has reclining areas that boast of exceptional scenery. Few places in Patagonia, or even in the world, can top the views of Los Notros.

◆BEST DAY ADVENTURE:
One simply cannot go to El Calafate without getting up close with the Perito Moreno. From Los Notros, a van takes you to the viewpoints right in front of the three-mile-wide glaciers. With seven levels of viewing decks, we saw different sides of Perito Moreno—from the surface of the glacier, seen at the highest balcony, towards the lowest level, where we got close to the glacier and where, on occasion, we heard loud exploding sounds as the ice calved. Another must-do: the Big-Ice trek. During the walk, we learned about the different features of ice, and saw huge ice caves and crevasses. The hike took about three hours, so our lunch was served somewhere in the middle of Perito Moreno. When we got back to the lodge, we were welcomed with warm drinks and canapés.

◆WHEN TO GO: Mid-September to May

PATAGONIA CAMP

Torres del Paine, Patagonia, Chile

FIFTEEN MINUTES AWAY FROM THE TORRES DEL PAINE National Park, Patagonia Camp is nestled in unspoiled, immaculate wilderness. The Camp's 18 yurts, or simulated tents, are situated right by a crystal blue lagoon and deliberately placed in wooden slopes. The yurts are connected to the salon lounge and dining room through wooden walkways.

◆PEAK OF LUXURY:
Put together all the trappings you'll usually find in a top-tier hotel room or a luxe resort cabana and combine it with all the incredible facets of camping. The essence of the term glamping is in the heart of the Patagonia Camp: the yurts, or the large dome-shaped tents. Every detail is well thought of—even the bathroom essentials, such as the hair and body treatments, are of the camp's exclusive line. Each yurt has a magnificent viewing terrace, overlooking Lago Toro and the Torres del Paine peaks.

◆BEST DAY ADVENTURE:
You can stay a week in the Patagonia Camp and not be done with all the activities, especially since Torres del Paine National Park is just nearby. The National Park has the famed W Circuit Walk. It's usually a multi-day trek that requires glamping it out in several lodges. Because we were staying in Patagonia Camp, we opted for a day tour. Paine Tower Base is one of the most challenging treks, but also one of my favorites. We started ascending the Ascencio River Valley, and walked through forests until, finally, we reached the campground, where the real challenge awaited. Some people turned back, but we went on to climb a glacial moraine until we reached the Towers vista point at the lake. It was another steep 350-meter climb. When we got to the lagoon, a picnic lunch was prepared by the guides. The only downside to this walk is we returned walking back on the same steep path.

◆WHEN TO GO: Mid-September to April.

EXPLORA LODGE
Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia

I HAVE VISITED THIS PLACE COUNTLESS TIMES YET it always astounds me, like the experience is something new each time. Surrounded by an incomparable landscape, with views that require superlatives to do justice to its beauty, Explora is the best place to get to know the untamed Torres del Paine region.

◆PEAK OF LUXURY:
The Explora Lodge houses the key spots for the best views in Torres Del Paine. Combining luxury and adventure flawlessly, the white structures of Explora mimic the glaciers that surround it. At the end of every day of exploration, the lodge becomes a place for you to recharge

by pampering yourselves with gourmet dinners and soaks in the Jacuzzis under the night sky.

◆BEST DAY ADVENTURE:
My most memorable excursions were the personalized adventures not on the main activity list. For several days during one of my stays in the Lodge, the weather would not cooperate and the Torres del Paine peaks remained hidden. On our fourth night, Rosario, Explora's general manager, gave us the good news: the weather had cleared and the lodge had organized a sunrise trip to photograph the peaks. The next day, after a sumptuous breakfast in bed, we set off for one of my most unforgettable experiences—seeing the Torres del Paine peaks for the first time in all its splendid glory, under the colorful hues of the sunrises, was just an otherworldly moment.

◆WHEN TO GO: All year round.

How to Get There:
The writer traveled with her luxury adventure group Sea to Summit Explorations. *(917.868.7971; ces@seatosummitadv.net; seatosummitadv.net*

Without having to worry about the usual camping concerns, it's easier to take in and ruminate on your surroundings in an unhurried and meaningful way.

ROAM OF THE BRAVE
From left: The Explora Lodge in the midst of the majestic Patagonian landscape; clouds waft over the Torres del Paine peaks; personalized activities are available at the Explora camp.