



# ADVENTURE TOURISM IN SOUTH AMERICA

November 1995 to May 1996

Churchill Fellowship

Account of a travelling Fellowship to explore the Adventure Tourism industry in South America under the "Adventure & Exploration" category in 1995.

**the  
CHURCHILL  
fellowship**

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## Foreword

Leaving home soon after this Fellowship, I was separated from an early draft of this report, which sat on a 1990s floppy disc and gathered dust.



*Cover photo: The author climbing the Monzino Route on the North Tower of Paine. Credit: Pablo Besser*

*This page: The author kayaking in Chile. Credit unknown*

Years later, going through the possessions of my late father, I was reunited with the disc. Now at a time when the files could, at last, be converted and translated online to Microsoft Word.

It was a fabulous reminder of trips to developing countries, before mobile phones or the internet existed. No mobile phones, no emails, just phone calls from public telephones and letters poste restante on the advent of public access to the internet.

The internet changed the industry completely, soon after my visit. But, as a consequence, I am now able to keep in touch with many of the people I met during that most precious of times. Wherever in the world they may be.

Thirty years on, and I have tried to maintain the voice of my 25-year-old-self. I am delighted that technology has given me the opportunity to rediscover, and finally publish, this report, which I dedicate to the memory of my late father, John Chester.

## Executive Summary

### Background & Context (1995)

In 1995 the UK adventure industry and outdoor sector was coming of age. Following the Lyme Bay disaster in 1993, the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority was being formed. Prior to this, the outdoor sector was largely unregulated, and this would change the commercial provision of the UK outdoor industry forever.

At the same time, an early version of the internet was becoming accessible to the public for the first time. The world was shrinking; information and marketing material was crossing international boundaries at speed; and imagery and inspiration for outdoor adventures (that previously happened “over the hill and far away”) were reaching people in their own homes, all round the world.

Certain corners of the world’s mountains were still the WildWest: the last remaining pockets of unregulated adventure travel, where clients could book mountaineering, trekking or white-water rafting adventures by the day, on the day – with little or no knowledge or information as to the safety and training, let alone qualification and external quality assurance, of the providers.

Furthermore, South America offered a cheap and unregulated way to extend the season for European activity providers. It was a hotbed of activity, opportunity and rapid evolution. But at what costs, risks and quality?

### Key research questions

The Fellowship was designed to explore a wide range of questions about how the outdoor/adventure travel and tourism industry in South America compared to the UK – and the opportunities this presented for visiting overseas providers and operators. These questions fell into several key groups:

- Natural resources and potential: What is there on offer from this huge continent? In a rapidly developing part of the world, how is the adventure travel industry developing in sync with the increasing infrastructure and opportunity?
- Human resources: all the issues surrounding the people involved, the cultural interest in adventure sports and the training available?
- Commerce and quality: What are the commercial initiatives and drivers, as well as the flow of finance? Culturally, can South America deliver products of suitable quality, safety and professionalism for European and North American clients?
- Sustainability & the Environment: What have South American countries been able to learn from Europe and the USA, in terms of developing the industry, yet protecting the unspoilt natural resources upon which they rely?

## The Fellowship

From November 1995 to May 1996 I travelled the length of the Andes. Travelling alone was a new experience for me, and I quickly realised the benefits of meeting locals (and visiting travellers) in a way that would not happen as part of a team. Furthermore, having a sense of purpose to take me off the beaten track and seek out the experience and stories of the locals, enabled me to integrate and gain insights into the adventure tourism industry, that would simply not have been possible as a paying client. I cannot thank the locals, who let me into the inner workings of their businesses, and shared their passions for adventure, enough.

## What I found

South America offers an amazing natural resource, currently exploited mostly by visiting activity providers delivering products and services for overseas guests and tourists.

An industry in its infancy, with a mixed economy: Overseas activity companies and providers bringing their guests to benefit from the cheap and freely available natural resources; mixed with more opportunistic “copycat” local providers, trying to tempt passing travellers into enjoying the same activities. A sector torn between adopting international standards versus a qualification and accreditation system of its own. Relatively new organisations competing for authority and recognition in a land-grab for both market share and authority/governance.

Of course, when travelling a continent, along one of the world’s longest and greatest chain of mountains, it goes without saying that South America offers almost unrivalled variety and wealth of natural resources. Furthermore, it sits in a perfect “middle ground” between the Alps: reaching as high as 4800m, relatively well populated, with sophisticated transport and infrastructure; and the Himalayas: up to 8848m, highly populated, but lacking in modern infrastructure (as yet).

The Andes range from accessible low altitude peaks in the South up to 37 x 6000m peaks within easy reach of Santiago – a modern capital city. The transport infrastructure is more advanced, yet not so restricted as you would find in Europe: The Carretera Austral being one of the few places in the world where one can successfully hitch-hike with a kayak – sitting in the open back of a stranger’s pick-up truck.

How the countries differ: It is not possible to generalise from one country to another – just as it is not possible to compare regions. Countries like Chile and Argentina are further ahead in their development of the economy and infrastructure; whereas Peru and Bolivia have maintained their wild un-developed charm and cultural heritage. A long country like Chile can offer a world class range and variety of adventure destinations, from the relatively low, rocky peaks of Patagonia; through the Alpine resorts of the Lake District; the easily accessible 6,000m peaks of the Central Andes to high altitude desert landscapes of the north. There really is something for everyone, and of the highest quality.

The locals are friendly and helpful: largely falling into two (simplistic) groups of indigenous people, serving the visitors and the adventure travel industry; and the local activists, bringing the culture of adventure sports and leisure travel from their parents. South American settlers who brought the “sport” and leisure model from Italy, Spain and Germany.

Whilst in a minority, at this stage in development, there are individuals, organisations and initiatives in place to help locals see the benefit of involvement in adventure sport as healthy leisure activity (like the “Cumbres de Chile” TV series, encouraging locals to visit the amazing array of mountains within easy reach of Santiago); as well as scheme to gain the very best levels of training and qualification (e.g. Peru joining the IFMGA as fully qualified international Mountain Guides).

The majority of people I met were foreign guides and clients, making the most of the amazing natural resources and low costs, to organise guided trips and tours for overseas guests. Many of them capitalising on the fact that, at this time, they were able to freely operate with lesser (or none of) the qualifications and regulation that would be applied in European Alps.

Hence a mixed economy: highly qualified and experienced international (e.g. IFMGA Mountain Guides) extending their alpine season, with existing clients, in the southern hemisphere. Combined with highly experienced and passionate (yet frequently unqualified) guides, carving out a niche as an area specialist. Slowly, we are starting to see the first generations of native guides, becoming more highly trained, qualified and experienced.

Foreign self-contained expeditions: The more specialist, the more likely it is for Europeans or North Americans to be guiding the trips and organising the expeditions. The flow of cash is largely offshore – away from South America to the home bank. Able to charge European prices to the customer, yet benefit from the low cost of living, products and services in South American countries, makes this a hugely successful business model for extending the season at home, for many providers.

Catering for tourists: the financial benefit in-country (in South America) is undoubtedly a huge secondary economy of earnings to be made from catering for the expeditions and trips organised by visiting Guides - providing the food, accommodation, travel and ancillary products and services for the guests and travellers.

The naivety of local providers: South American businesses (e.g. Cascada Expediciones) are often “copycat” models without the training and expertise (yet) of their foreign equivalents. But this is an industry in its infancy. These packages might look the same to the customer, but the quality, experience and training of the staff meant that the levels of quality and safety of the product could be sadly lacking in comparison.

Conclusions: Key learning & Recommendations:

**1. Safety and Risk Management are the foundation of reputable Adventure Tourism:**

- Safety standards vary significantly across South American destinations, and across different activity provider models.
- Opportunities to strengthen provider regulation, accreditation, and transparent risk communication will build international trust.
- Countries, regions and providers with clearer frameworks, attract more high-value adventure travellers.
- There is a clear opportunity for improved and shared best practice across the adventure tourism sector.

**Learning:** Adventure tourism growth depends on professionalisation and safety governance that is equivalent to that expected by overseas visitors.

**2. Community Integration Is Essential for Long-Term Success:**

- The most successful models embed local communities into ownership, guiding, and supply chains.
- Community-led tourism increases economic retention and strengthens the cultural authenticity that so many travellers come for.
- Tokenistic involvement can be exploited, leading to loss of *local* revenue and weaker local support.

**Learning:** Adventure tourism should move from extraction-based models to partnership-based models.

**3. Environmental Stewardship Is a Competitive Advantage:**

- South America's primary asset is its natural capital (mountains, rainforest, coastline, biodiversity). Many activity providers capitalise well on this eco-tourism trend.
- Poor environmental controls threaten long-term viability and sustainability.
- Destinations implementing visitor caps, conservation levies, and low-impact infrastructure are better positioned for longevity, but wrestle to maintain what is "core" about their region.

**Learning:** Environmental protection is not necessarily a constraint — it can/should be the product.

**4. Infrastructure and Accessibility Remain Key Barriers:**

- Transport links, emergency services, and communications are inconsistent across different regions.
- Remote regions offer high-value experiences but require greater "logistic effort".
- Strategic infrastructure investment is necessary to unlock adventure potential, but this needs to be balanced against the risk of overdevelopment.

**Learning:** Smart infrastructure enables safe expansion without compromising authenticity.

**5. Skills Development and Professional Training should be strengthened:**

- There is a shortage of formally trained guides in some areas.
- International training and qualification/accreditation improves credibility and value = pricing power.
- Ongoing CPD (continuing professional development) enhances safety, quality of delivery, and customer satisfaction.

**Learning:** Human resource development is central to raising standards and consumer confidence.

## **6. Collaboration Drives Sector Growth:**

- Travellers will visit multiple regions, using many activity providers in a single trip.
- Competition to be “first in market” threatens quality of delivery. Far better to focus on competing on quality, safety and best practice.
- Public-private partnerships are inconsistent but critical, for access and accreditation.
- Industry networks should be embraced, to help share standards and best practice.

**Learning:** Collective strategy would outperform competitive and isolated development.

## **7. Dealing with reputational risk:**

With the advent of the internet and improved international communications and information, the outdoor consumer will only become more discerning and more savvy. It is important for the South American adventure travel industry to offer products and services that can be demonstrated to be equivalent to and compare favourably with a more familiar European offer (for European clients and guests).

## **8. Educating the outdoor consumer:**

Just having a safety kayak is not enough (especially if those kayakers, like us, were naïve travellers with very little training or local experience). It is important to find out how well trained, qualified and regulated the quality assurance system is for each company, as South America evolves beyond the early “land-grab” phase of this rapidly developing industry.

## **9. The internet is coming:**

Even at this stage it was clear that the internet would have a profound effect on the education (and expectation) of the outdoor adventure consumer. There will be a rapid paradigm shift from competing on the (in-country & local) sandwich boards and shop fronts of today – to the internationally available information, brochures and online web-pages of tomorrow.

### **Finances**

Total cost of the trip £6,000

Total Travelling Fellowship grant of £3,536

Cost of flights: £714

I am eternally grateful to the Churchill Fellowship for allowing me to extend the Fellowship at my own expense. Given the scale of ambition (to explore the industry along the length of the Andes) and that the flights were the most significant single cost; I was able to save and generate further funds to enable a three-month Fellowship proposal to run for a full six months.

As a consequence, the trip cost around £6,000 for 175 days, demonstrating it was possible to travel around South America on a budget of £35 per day at this time, covering all food, transport and accommodation.

## Introduction

At 9am on Friday November 24 1995, some 24 hours from a cold grey autumn day in England, I arrived in Santiago. Feeling overdressed in the Chilean heat, I made my way to the nearest telephone to find the weekend had come early. I was totally alone, and people really meant it when they said “No, Yo no hablo nada de Ingles”. After all the hard work organising and planning the trip, I had finally arrived.

### Why South America? Fellowship aims and objectives

Traditionally, South America is a very important venue in the history of adventure, exploration, mountaineering and now, other more modern adventure sports. As a continent it boasts the longest chain of mountains in the world - the Andes. These mountains are also the second highest massif of the world and, running so close to the Pacific coast, provide reliable glacial rivers of a length and gradient of almost unequalled interest to the white-water enthusiast.

The intention was to spend the next few months travelling the length of the Andean Chain, in search of the South - American “adventure industry”. Over the months leading up to the trip, I had thought up a long list of questions I was now just bursting to ask. What is there on offer from this huge continent? In Chile, for example, all we ever hear about are Aconcagua and Torres Del Paine - but what other opportunities exist in the mountains and rivers of this largely un-publicised area of the Andes?

Who are the people involved? Are there locals really into these activities, are there local clubs? How does the cost of equipment and training affect the way in which these sports are practised? How does the local culture and economy affect sports that rely on disposable income and leisure time? Does this limit the sports to foreign travellers and the upper classes? How much do the foreign participants know about the sports and the countries? What do they expect from South America? What are the standards compared to Europe?

What are the commercial possibilities in this continent? Where do the commercial initiatives come from? Who are the guides and where did they get their training and/or experience? I wanted to meet the organisers and agencies; meet the guides themselves, and find out what it was like to live and work in these countries. Is it “just a job” or do they have the passion and experience to match the Europeans? Just how much did the culture of these countries affect the cost, safety and efficiency of these adventure sports? In a world where safety legislation and professionalism were becoming big business and important issues, how would that affect a continent seemingly without controls? Can South America deliver a product of suitable quality, security and reliability for European/North American clients?

What about that dirty word in adventure sports “the environment”? How are they going about the development and protection of National Parks, and how are they going to get it right? What have they been able to learn from the mistakes made in Europe and the USA. What responsibility do we have as users to help fund and educate the people to promote the protection of these natural resources? What are they doing themselves, is there government funding? Is there public awareness of the problems? In a country where all the waste is thrown into the rivers and dumped in the hills, what can we do to educate the local culture to value and protect this important natural resource and safeguard the income from adventure tourism?

### Approach and Method:

All these questions, when combined with my own desire to visit and experience these countries, made a powerful mixture to draw me to visit South America. Over the next few months I would travel the length of the Andean Chain in search of adventure. This trip would take me over 46° of latitude from Antarctica to Northern Peru. Always finding the locals so friendly and helpful meant that gathering information was to

be easy. However, it soon became apparent that I would only be able to scratch the surface of such a vast and fascinating continent.

Travelling alone meant that I was able open myself up to opportunity, with the time to adapt my plans and follow leads and networks of connections. Whilst being at the relative whim of the locals I met, this meant I was able to get beneath the surface of the industry and benefit from a perspective not usually available to short-term travellers. Hence, it was key to quickly integrate with the locals.

Having arrived in Santiago it became apparent that the language was to be a bit more of a barrier than I had at first envisaged. The people of Santiago either spoke reasonably *good* English, or absolutely



1 FNAC Membership Card

none at all. At first I was lucky, within three hours of landing in Santiago, I had met John Phillips - a man who changed my fortune - at the Federation Andinismo de Chile. John is a Chilean mountaineer of British parenthood, and a fluent English speaker. Well known and well respected by apparently everyone, John's efforts to put me in contact with the locals would prove crucial in shaping my trip.

After a weekend to relax and enjoy Santiago, I found myself in the office of Mauricio Purto and Italo Valle. This pair were working to produce a TV series entitled *Los Cumbres De Chile* - a short

weekly programme designed to encourage and develop interest in mountaineering amongst the people of Chile. More details of the work can be found in the section on mountaineering, but these two, with the help of their families, were to lay the cultural foundations for the rest of my trip.

Fairly soon I had established a routine that would form the structure of my study until Christmas. Three or four days (on average) would be spent in the mountains, filming the coverage for a programme. A couple of days in the office were spent editing the footage into the final programme - and there was little I could do despite take a healthy interest in this. This left me with plenty of time, when we weren't filming, to put my efforts into meeting more of the local guides, the instructors in the mountaineering school, and more importantly, the other climbers (from clubs) with whom I could climb in my free time (and with whom I would end up climbing in Patagonia).

This time in Santiago was more important culturally than for the time in the mountains. It was a perfect opportunity to be introduced to a wealth of characters that would in turn introduce me to their country and culture from a Chilean viewpoint. It soon became so apparent that there was a marked contrast between time on my own "on the gringo trail" and the experiences in the company of locals. This was something that I'd been aware of before, but was exaggerated to such a degree throughout my Fellowship. For me, this also highlighted the incredible value of this type of travel/study over simply being "another hassled and ripped off tourist".

During my time in Santiago, and specifically in the company of Italo and the team from *Los Cumbres*, I was rapidly developing my grasp of the language. I had to admit that this Hyper-speed slang that the Chileans spoke, was becoming increasingly identifiable as a type of Spanish - a version I would later discover, that is mocked by the rest of South America. At our first meetings Italo had spoken in his remarkable English - learnt during expeditions to all parts of the world. He was therefore a great believer in

the power of practise to learn a new language. In his role as my guide and teacher, he would insist on my speaking Spanish ALL the time, no matter how tired I was. It would also seem that no matter how tired he was, he would always remain patient with our slow and laborious conversations and always ready to step in and help me out. I have an incredible amount to thank Mauricio, Italo, and their families for. Not only the Asados, the dinners, the parties, the seat at the Cup-Final and the late night beers on the way home from the mountains. This was Chile that I was seeing, and a Chile that is never seen from the windows of the tourist bus on the way to the next famous sight or attraction.

When I finally got round to leaving Santiago I had the confidence to talk with the locals and understand the customs of the countries in which I travelled. I had been there for a long time and was keen to get going and discover all the wonderful places I now had plans to visit. The value of this period became increasingly apparent the further I got with my studies. This really had provided an introduction to everything that would follow.

## The mountains

When talking about the Andean chain, variety has to be the key word, with peaks such as Sarmiento, on the frontier of Antarctica, to the granite towers and spires of Fitzroy and Paine. From the



2 The Andean Mountains. Credit: WGBH Educational Foundation. All Rights Reserved.

remote and icy desolation of the Hielo Patagonico, to the complex and glaciated peaks of the Cordillera Huayhuash. Add to this the occasional punctuation by the perfect glacial cones of the volcanoes from Ecuador to the southern cone, and we have a variety of mountaineering unequalled by any mountain chain in the world.

Arriving in Santiago in November, my first view of the Andes was to be the following morning (before the usual afternoon clouds) of Cerro Plomo (5430m) visible from the city centre. Although it would be almost five weeks until I finally climbed this peak, my enthusiasm had been caught by this beautiful dome of snow high above the capital.

The first real shocks in this area of the Andes was quite simple: there were literally thousands of peaks between 4000 and 6960 metres that we had simply never heard of. In contrast to this, there are only a couple of dozen mountaineers in the whole country that amount to anything more than high-altitude ramblers. With easy access from the capital, stable weather for much of the year, and a certain exploratory wildness, this area is a mountaineers' dream.

On top of this, many of the peaks have only been climbed by one or two obvious routes, with many buttresses and faces left unclimbed. Being heavily glaciated, many of the mountains sport a South face that holds routes of technical interest, yet many of the peaks are quite straightforward by the traditional routes, and therefore easy to descend.

In this area of the Central Andes, I was lucky enough to get involved with the production of a TV series "Los Cumbres de Chile". This programme was being shown weekly, occupying only twenty minutes on a Thursday evening. The aim of the programme was to try and encourage the Chileans into the mountains, and to educate the public as to the wealth of quality mountaineering on their doorstep.

"In a country full of mountains, we have a shortage of mountaineers" say the team. The peaks we climbed had been selected to provide a different slant to each programme. Although relatively straightforward ascents, we would try and include a snippet of technical information each week - crampon technique on the Punta Negra, basic glacial crossing and rope-work on the Cerro Bello, use of mules for access on the more remote peaks, etc. Ultimately, Mauricio hopes that the natural progression to this series, will be to establish a mountaineering school in the central Andes. This company has also taken on the awesome task of cataloguing the history of mountaineering in this area of the Andes. As I write, a hefty volume sits on Mauricio's desk in Santiago. This has been the life work of one man over seventy years. Now donated to the team at Los Cumbres, it's been suggested that it will take a further 20 years to finish the work.

To complicate matters, there are (at last) a handful of younger enthusiastic mountaineers moving into the limelight. These would be the same crew that I was later to climb with in Patagonia. Whilst essentially inspired by rock-climbing and an alpine style approach to the mountains, these guys were breaking the Chilean mould of "Andinismo", their own form of high altitude trekking.

Developed from roots in the Andes, yet with knowledge of what's happening in the rest of the world, they are starting to look for new opportunities on more remote peaks - some interesting new routes should appear in the future. In fact, Pablo already published an article in High magazine of some routes in the Cajon Del Maipo. This variety in approach to these mountains is reflected only in the sheer diversity of climbing on the peaks in this area.

The other thing about these younger folks, was that they weren't afraid to travel to other mountains, all be it within Chile. As I set off to the South, I had already arranged to meet up again with several of the gang, to climb in Patagonia.

It quickly became apparent, that if the central Andes near Santiago seemed remote, then the further South you went from the capital, the less continuous the chain of mountains, and the fewer people you could find. In the university town of Talca, it seemed that the members of the University mountaineering club were the most Southerly mountaineers in Chile, until you finally arrived in the world-famous Patagonia. In fact, we had only one brief scurry into the mountains in this area, and that was to climb Volcan Tinguiririca.

This peak had been made famous by the Air-Uruguay plane crash some years ago, and subsequently brought to the attention of the public by the film of this story "Alive". To me, it will always be remembered for its remoteness, and the two-day jeep - winching, bush - whacking nightmare to gain access to the initial slopes of the mountain. Were it not for the view of a 2000m face (as yet un-climbed) at the head of the valley, I would be happy never to endure such a jeep ride again.

This face is the South face of a peak called the "Brujo". In Castellano, this is the masculine version of bruja - witch in English, and so translates pretty closely to ogre. It is no coincidence perhaps that the face has the

appearance of the famous North face of our European ogre, or the “Eiger Nordwand”. It just happens to be unclimbed, and twice the size.

Heading further South into the Lake District, we suddenly find ourselves arriving in Switzerland or the Bavarian alps. As often happens with these colonial towns, the locals strive to hang on tight to their roots. The result is an area more typical than its origin, with steep roofed chalets, lush green lawns and coniferous forests. There exists some good trekking and climbing here, although the area is more renowned for its skiing in the winter.

Here for once, the main attractions are on the Argentinian side of the frontier, and centred around the picturesque little village of Brioché. Once famous as a haunt for exiled war criminals, it is hard to imagine anything sinister about this town now. For many climbers in Buenos Aires, and further north in Chile, this provides some of the most accessible serious climbing, as opposed to the small and inadequate sports crags found elsewhere. Most of the climbing is centred around the peaks and towers of the Cerro Catedral range, and the club Andino’s ideally placed “Refugio Frey”. This little oasis in the mountaineering desert of the Argentinian Pampas is comparatively, and justifiably, popular. For many visitors from abroad, it also provides a welcome break from the relentless weather further south, and a good area to meet other climbers.

South of the Lake District, the Andean chain skirts the Pacific with its jagged edge of fjords and inlets. Densely forested, much of this terrain is inaccessible, with access always complicated. The newly built Carretera Austral penetrates as far south as Puerto Yungay near the northern tip of the “Hielo Patagónico” or Patagonian ice-cap, but travel further South requires the use of boat or plane, or in my case, a wide diversion into the Argentinian Pampas by bus.

And so I finally arrived in Patagonia - a dream of some 12 years standing. As famous for its atrocious weather as it is for its impeccable climbing, Patagonia has been described as the “uttermost place on earth”. In fact, the majority of Patagonia - the Argentinian Pampas - is one of the bleakest and most windswept landscapes I have ever seen. Having made the mistake of travelling from Bariloche to Punta Arenas by bus, I had over 30hrs to appreciate the full scale of this wild environment.

One cannot travel in Patagonia without recognising the history of exploration and adventure that has taken place in the frozen south. From Darwin’s early voyage of the Beagle, Tilman’s exploits in Mischief, Shipton’s heroic early explorations of the ice-cap, one was reminded at every step that you were not the first Brit with an interest in the area. This was carried through to the mountains as well. Finding myself sleeping in the “Bonnington bivouac” en-route to climb the north tower, we were reminded of the famous clash in 1962 when the Central tower was climbed for the first time.

On arriving in Torres del Paine, I suffered the only setback of the whole trip as I discovered that some of my climbing equipment that had been packed in Santiago, was now missing. It later turned out that it had been stolen by one of the University club members in Talca - perhaps too much of a temptation in an area where climbing equipment is so hard to come by.

Climbing in Patagonia, revolves around two key areas. The first I was to visit, was the Paine national park in Chile, the other being the Los Glaciares (or Fitzroy) national park in Argentina. The Paine national park, is



*3 Pablo Besser climbing in Paine. Credit: Author*

one of the oldest and most visited national parks in South America (see the section on the environment). In fact, more tourists visit the Torres del Paine than any other natural sight in the continent. The main attraction for most tourists is the famous five-day trekking circuit, however, the park is a mecca for serious mountaineers from all over the world and plays an important role in the history of mountaineering.

Whatever your passion (and it has to be passionate to tolerate the appalling weather), all adventures

in Torres del Paine start and finish in Puerto Natales. This little fishing village is accessible by boat up the restricted fjords and inlets that give access to the Pacific Ocean. The one thing to mention about Puerto Natales is that, small as it may be, it is possible to buy everything that you may need from last minute shopping, to hire of tents and trekking equipment, to buying one month's food for a serious expedition to the towers.

Having arrived at 10pm, I was presented with a bus ticket to the park for seven the next morning. In the meantime, I had to get everything ready before turning in to sleep. At about midnight, I was able to find a store open that could sell me all the food I needed for 20 days climbing in the park. It later became apparent that it is possible to buy and reserve bus tickets to virtually anywhere - with substantial competition keeping the costs down. This healthy competition is a stark contrast to the way in which things are developing in the monopoly of the National Park.

Once you step off the park bus (after your bumpy journey that started at 6.45am) you are required to sign in with details of your intentions and duration of stay etc., and pay your park entry fee. For mountaineers however, the park authorities have introduced a new fee for climbing expeditions - currently \$800.

Since its sudden and un-publicised introduction in 1995 it has been causing quite some controversy with locals and foreigners alike. Having been caught out last year, it seemed that this year, folks had "wised-up" and everyone had their own way of avoiding the full cost of the permit. It was hilarious to sit in base camp and compare the prices that individuals had paid for their share of the permit that allowed them to climb here. (See section on Expedition climbing in Patagonia.)



*4 Climbing on the South Tower of Paine. Credit: Dario Arancibia*

During my relatively short stay in the Paine national park (17 days - as compared to the Americans' three months) we were lucky to climb anything at all. I was also blessed with the full "Patagonian experience" with all extremes of weather, often in one day, and able to meet a wide cross section of people visiting the park.

It was interesting to climb with the Chileans, and compare their techniques, and appreciate their perceptions of climbing in Patagonia. They seemed to approach even the easier routes in the park, with the seriousness of the expeditions they had read so much about. Brought up on a different scale of mountaineering, their judgement regarding time, speed of climbing, and essential kit, was very different to the European way of thinking.

This was also reflected in the fact that their standard of climbing far outweighed their standard of rope-work. Despite all of this, we were able to make a successful ascent of the North Tower of Paine, by the classic route, in appalling conditions. We also made several attempts on the South Tower, but were turned back by the weather each time.

Running out of time, and keen to see more of the park, I joined a German and an Australian climber, and we set off to spend a few days exploring the French Valley and other sights of the park, before I returned to Puerto Natales.

After booking my ticket for the boat trip in a couple of weeks, I made a short trip to Los Glaciares national park, where I was accompanied by Pablo, and his Icelandic girlfriend Sigga. This couple had met on a recent expedition to the Patagonian ice-cap with the German explorer Arved Fuchs.

Experiencing the first good weather of the season, it was interesting to see the meteorological study of Pete Gallagher, a well-known American mountaineer. Pete had been tracking the barometric pressure in base camp for a couple of months, in the hope of developing a way to predict the approaching (and elusive) spells of good weather. Given a rare view of the spectacular Cerro Torre, it was good to hear that it had just been climbed by the American Greg Crouch after 70 days of patient preparation.

In the village of Chalten, I went to visit the head of the local guides, information service, and mountain rescue, Alberto Castillo. Instantly made welcome, we sat drinking tea in his house, discussing the history, current state and the future of mountaineering in this area of Patagonia. Alberto is an incredible character, and a good example of an experienced explorer and mountaineer, bringing the wealth of his experiences into his work. Working completely free of legislation or qualification, Alberto simply knows his stuff, and runs one of the safest and most professional guides services in South America. His stories of trips on the ice-cap, and epics on the mountains were an inspiration, and the reason that he had given up working in the city, to live and bring up his family in the mountains he still loves with a passion.

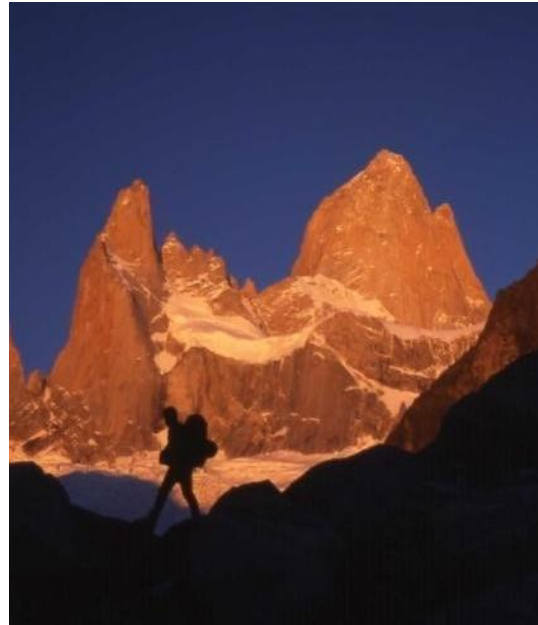
With the break of the weather, it was time to head back to Puerto Natales, for the four-day boat trip up the west coast. This was to give some enticing views of the glaciers pouring to the sea from the Patagonian ice-cap, as I vowed to return for some of these remote peaks. As I headed North, I was not to be in the mountains again until I got to Bolivia, as my attentions turned to Kayaking and the rafting industry. However, as I returned to Santiago, I was invited to join Pablo and Sigga for a night of beers and a chance to see their slides of the ice-cap expedition.

The more beers we got through, the more inspirational the slides became, and the easier it seemed to correct the mistakes made by the last trip. By the time I finally left Santiago, we had put together most of the plans for a repeat crossing of the ice-cap. Watch this space. Sad to leave my mountaineering friends in Santiago, it was time to head further north, but it would be mid-March before I was back in the mountains again. With the rainy season explaining its name in Peru and Bolivia, it became apparent that I would be unable to get any serious climbing done before I got home. This didn't stop me trying however, and certainly didn't stop me meeting some of the important characters in these countries to help with my research.

No trip to South America is complete without a visit to the Inca Trail and Machu Picchu near Cusco in Peru. Like all the best tourist attractions, this single location is the icing on a cultural cake - with Cusco being the cherry in the centre. Having bought an excellent book by Peter Frost, entitled "Exploring Cusco", I ended up spending far longer here than I originally intended - just like everyone else! Cusco is wonderful, and I was already lucky to have Peruvian friends here. Chando, the raft guide on our trip to the Bio-Bio in Chile, runs a tourism agency in the Plaza de Armas.

After ticking off some of the more predictable sights, I was lucky to have the time to travel a little further from the beaten track and, joined by a girlfriend from England, we set off to explore the area around the 6000m peak Ausangate. Luggage securely stashed on the roof, the first stretch of the trip out to Urcos was by bus, where we waited in the plaza for a truck to arrive. Ushered into the back of the first truck, it took us a while to ascertain that it really was going in the right direction. Until now I had been fairly confident in my ability to speak Castellano with the locals, but it took me ages to realise that here in the mountains, the first language is Quechua.

Once the driver was suitably content that he had enough passengers, we set off on the main carretera to Puerto Maldonado. If that was a main road, I'd hate to see some of the backstreets. It soon became



*5 Pablo Besser en-route to Fitzroy. Credit: Author*

apparent we were on a relatively short journey compared to those that would spend the next two days in the back of this dusty, bumpy ride. After spending a night in the sleepy little village of Ocongate, and a quick game of football with the local policeman, we finally arrived in Tinquí - the end of our road.

We set off up the myriad of paths and tracks that criss-cross the route to the mountain, hailed at every corner with cries of "Dame dulce" (give me a sweet) from every local kid. The day dragged on as we plodded on up the hill - the rainy season producing its routine storm in the afternoon. By the time we crossed the ridge to enter the final valley, it was getting late and dusk was falling. We watched in awe at the local farmers herding their Llamas off down the alley in the fading light, and set off for the distant plume of steam that marked the hot springs.

Things never are quite that simple. Slowed by the poor conditions underfoot, and my weakened state (bad belly again) we were caught out by the approaching darkness. With my head-torch playing up, this was becoming the last straw. Thankfully, a local - Genaro Crispin Gonzalo - who lives in Upis, rescued us from the boggy quagmire, and took us back to his adobe hut for the night. This sort of hospitality was typical of the wonderful people we met all over this area of Peru. As if to make up for this disastrous start to the trip, the following day was spent wallowing neck deep in a steaming thermal pool, with nothing but llamas for company, and spectacular views of the mountains in the background.

We were able to repay Crispin for his hospitality by hiring horses from him when the time came to return to the valley. In my poorly state, I was glad to be free of my rucksack, and glad not to have the long walk out of the hills. However, the horses being saddled with nothing but a blanket, I was saddle sore long after my stomach had recovered.

Just as there is more to Inca ruins than Machu Picchu, there is more to the Inca trail than the usual starting point of Km 88 of the railway. This area is extensively covered by two very good books on trekking in this area. One is the famous "Trekking in Peru & Bolivia" by Hilary Bradt, the other is an excellent book entitled "Apus and Incas" by the American Charles Brod. Brod enthusiastically suggests many variations on the Inca trail, including a trek around the base of Nevado Salcantay. At 6200m, this is a serious peak that justifiably attracts climbers from all over the world to climb in this quite beautiful area.

From Cusco, I went off on a side trip to Bolivia, via the spectacular train ride to Lake Titicaca. Lake Titicaca is quite simply incredible. At almost 4000m above sea-level, it is situated in the strangely flat land of the high Altiplano. Being so big, and so high in such a clean atmosphere, when the sun shines, the lake is very, very blue. Whilst it is a wonderful place to visit and relax, Lake Titicaca has very little to do with the adventure industry.

However, I found the time to spend a couple of days relaxing on the island of the sun. In the company of a mountain guide from Huaraz, and a Mexican friend, we walked the length of the island to stay in a hotel high above the Southern bays. In the morning we were rewarded by the views we had come to see, as the whole of the Cordillera Real stretched out along the horizon. The peaks piercing through the thin veil of cloud, high above 6000m, to catch the first rays of the sun.

Although the rainy season prohibited any climbing in Bolivia, I was able to meet and chat with Yossi Brain, who is at the centre of mountaineering developments in the country. An Englishman living in La Paz, Yossi is the climbing secretary of the Bolivian Club Andino, and has a contract (with the mountaineers, Seattle) to write a new climbing guide to the area. He has spent the last couple of years climbing in almost every region of Bolivia, documenting existing routes and adding first ascents of his own.

As he pointed out, there is simply no point in even trying to climb at this time of the year. The mountains are covered in a chest deep layer of unstable and sludgy snow, and it rains every afternoon. Fair enough - I

was back off to Peru. Just before leaving La Paz, I was lucky enough to bump into one of the American climbers that had been with us in Paine some three months earlier.

Returning to Cusco felt like coming home. Having been so transient for so long now, it was nice to be somewhere that felt so familiar. Unfortunately, it was not to last, as I bought a flight to Lima for the following day, in my enthusiasm to make the most of my last fortnight - in Huaraz. Being Semana Santa, I was lucky to find any available transport out of Lima. Despite all advice to the contrary, I was able to buy the last seat on the last bus of the day, and travel to Huaraz overnight.

Huaraz was a bit of a Mecca for me, having wanted to visit the mountains in this area of Peru for many, many years. At the gateway to the Callejon de Huaylas, Huaraz is the starting point for trips to the Cordillera Blanca, and (via Chiquian) the remote wilderness of the Cordillera Huayhuash. In an area regularly hit by natural disasters (earthquakes and avalanches etc.) Huaraz has been built up, with the help of foreign aid, into a surprisingly well-developed town. Having been travelling with Nilo, one of the locals, in Bolivia, I was presented with the key to my house, and instantly taken in by the local climbing community. Unfortunately, my time of arrival could have been better, as the crowds of tourists filled the town for the whole of Semana Santa, and the banks were closed until the following Monday.

Having had so much exposure to foreign expeditions, the climbing scene in Huaraz is surprisingly well-developed and equipped. It's certainly different to the rest of South America. The Casa de Guias for example have a list of all the registered guides in the area. Guides that are well - trained and experienced, often having trained and climbed in Europe, and some even have their UIAGM carnet (see section on Guides, Schools and education). An area of hot debate at the moment, is that of mountain biking in this area, and I was lucky enough to meet Julio Olaza. Julio is famous in the climbing fraternity as the proprietor of the "Tasco Bar" in Huaraz, but has recently set up a new mountain biking agency.

As with many of the locals when Huaraz came under terrorist threat, Julio was unable to make ends meet. He sold up his bar, and set off to travel in the USA for a couple of years. Having learnt a lot about the standards of operations in North America, he eventually returned with the aim of introducing mountain bikes to Huaraz. Sadly misunderstood by the locals, he has stood his ground, and for the first year, mountain biking is included in the policy of the National Park for this coming season. Julio now operates a fleet of some 18 bikes that he has imported especially from the states, complete with all the safety and repair kit he needs to run a top quality outfit.

The mountaineering in the Cordillera Blanca is fantastic. Superb and quite beautiful peaks, with all levels of difficulty to choose from, with some of the most technical faces at heights up to 6768m. It was here that, despite the tail end of the rainy season providing afternoon storms, I made a last attempt to go climbing before coming home. Having met a number of keen, but sadly inexperienced trekkers in Huaraz, we were able to rent suitable kit for them from my friends at Montrek.

We set off enthusiastically the following morning, taking a micro to Puente Paltay. From here we hadn't been walking long, before a pick-up gave us a lift to the village at the road head. From here, it was relatively simple to hire a couple of burros for the kit, and we set off on the long steady slog to basecamp (stopping only to share a beer with a local drunk - but at 10am!?).

Unfortunately, our luck lasted only a few hours, as we were hit by a monster storm, earlier than usual in the afternoon. Tired and almost hypothermic, our "arriero" announced that he would go no further with the horses, and we were on our own. This was understandable as we examined his soaking clothes and frozen sandaled feet. With the sleet now turning to heavy hail, we threw up a tent and all covered inside to regain a little warmth.

We were two hours away from base camp, and if this carried on for long, we would be unable to climb with all this fresh snow anyway. Finally, after I had a chance to make a quick study of the way ahead, we had enough of a break in the weather to move. Making the next horizon in the valley, we were able to get within half an hour of the standard base camp before the weather pinned us down again.

As we settled down for the night, it became apparent that the others had allowed their clothes, and more crucially their boots, to become soaked by the storm. To make matters worse, the weather showed no sign of following its regular daily pattern, and the mountains remained swathed in this thick blanket of cloud. As I fell asleep, I was almost certain that we would be unable to climb the following day, but still I set the alarm for 3am - just to be sure. At 1am, I awoke from my disturbed sleep to find my Spanish climbing partner equally restless.

“Do you fancy a brew?” I asked in sketchy Spanish as I reached for the stove. We were camped high above 4000m in the Cordillera Blanca. Opening the door slightly, I gazed out at the layer of warm clouds that sealed our fate. The mountains would be covered in a warm blanket of fresh snow, as the frost we so desperately needed had not arrived. Having run out of time, we would set off down the valley in the morning. But for now, as I lay peering out of the tent in the faint blue glow of the stove, I could make out the ghostly towers swirling in and out of the clouds. I was happy, and in the morning I would start the last journey of this trip. A journey that would begin as I set off down the valley, and wouldn't end until I arrived to a cold grey spring day in Heathrow.

## Expedition climbing in South America

There are a number of areas in South America that are traditionally popular with private and commercial climbing expeditions. Throughout my trip I was interested to discover who was on these expeditions. Who the clients were, who the guides were (if any), what impact they made on the areas, and what they bought in the way of local goods and services. I've decided to cover this aspect of my trip from the South (in Patagonia) to the North (in the Cordillera Blanca).

### **Patagonia - permits, fees and icy wilderness:**

I was first made aware of the introduction of Peak Fees in Paine last year, when some friends went on an expedition to the Pingo valley in the Paine National park. The European climbing fraternity were appalled by this new legislation, and the controversy was subsequently well publicised in the climbing press. Part of the problem was that there was a new fee, and very few were warned. This meant that the atmosphere in Paine was sour to say the least, with everyone complaining about CONAF, the administering body. The Chileans feel that they have even more grounds for complaint, as the land belongs to the state, and not to CONAF, who simply administer the parks.

It is easier to understand the trend towards peak fees in the Himalaya. There are after all, only 14 eight-thousand metre peaks in the world, and people are going to want to climb them. With current trends for charging to climb in Torres del Paine, it is likely that climbers will simply climb elsewhere, increasing the impact on other parks such as Los Glaciares (the Fitzroy region) and the towers near Bariloche. On a world-wide level, with areas such as Greenland, and the Trango towers in Pakistan becoming ever more popular, these peak fees could be the last straw in the demise of Patagonian popularity.

To fully understand the impact on the climbing world of these recent developments, it is important to know a little about the history and tradition of climbing in Patagonia. The way in which the climbers live in the park, is very different to that of the trekkers. They traditionally, live in these cabanas in the woods for months at a time. Have bugger all money, and just hang out and climb when they can. This is the nature of the expedition as dictated by the awful weather - you have to wait and wait and wait.

The latest plans for CONAF are to strip down these rough and ready cabanas (wood shacks) and replace them with purpose built refugios in the style of Alpine huts. These would provide a base for CONAF staff throughout the park, and the cost of staying there would produce more revenue for the park. The problem here is that whilst this would serve the “plenty of cash but short of time and kit” trekker, it would absolutely cripple the finances of any climbers who hoped to stay for the season. Not least of all the worries, are the facts that these cabanas are a permanent legacy to the history and tradition of the mountaineers that have come before. The beautiful wood carvings of new routes are being burnt as firewood by the park officials.

In Los Glaciares, the problems are slightly different, but things are going the same way. As of May 1<sup>st</sup> 1996, NO fires will be allowed ANYWHERE in the park. This is a progressive move which will slow down the deforestation of the popular camping areas, and hopefully mean that drastic measures (such as closing an entire base-camp) will be a thing of the past. It is interesting to see here that help is available, to make it easier for expeditions to obtain and transport fuel for burners, and this is being understood and happily adopted by the climbing fraternity. It really is too late to continue cooking on wood fires.

It is interesting to contrast and compare the developments in the two areas, especially when we consider who are the people in control. In the Torres del Paine, the park is controlled by CONAF, a large government organisation, based in Santiago, with seemingly little understanding of the way in which the park is used. They have facts and figures for tourism, and talk in purely commercial terms to match. Los Glaciares however is cared for by the local guides and people of Chalten and the priority here is for the preservation of the park, with a genuine understanding of the needs of the users, and the tradition of the area. Whilst all these things are changing the nature of a climbing trip to Patagonia, they are important considerations.

#### The Central Andes:

As I mentioned earlier on, this is a relatively un-tapped area with plenty of future potential for climbing. So far, commercial expeditions are run only to Aconcagua - at 6960m this is the highest peak in the continent, and indeed the western hemisphere. Many climbers to this peak start their trip with an ascent of an acclimatisation peak such as Cerro Plomo in Chile (5430m). In fact, the area around Cerro Plomo was the only massif in the whole area where you could find substantial and well-used paths.

There are in fact 37 peaks over 6000m in the Central Andes, yet the only other peak that is popular with climbing trips, is the Nevado Ojos de Salado, in the North of Chile. At 6768m, this is the highest peak in Chile, and for a while was thought to be over the magical 7000m mark. Climbs to this peak tend to be small and private expeditions, although it features in the brochures of some of the trekking agencies in Santiago.

The characteristics of climbing in these areas tend to be similar - a long and dusty approach, often eased by the use of mules, followed by some serious height gain on scree. Only on the summit days are you likely to come across good quality rock, and snow. Glaciers on approach, stable snow conditions and penitentes late in the season. Because of this, climbing in the Central Andes is an acquired taste, but the results are worth it for those who find out. I hope that we may see many more of these remote faces being climbed in the future.

#### Cordillera Vilcanota (& Urubamba):

Despite its proximity to one of the most popular areas in South America - Cusco & Machu Picchu, the Cordillera Vilcanota feels remarkably remote and unspoilt. With Quechua the first language in the villages, and trucks providing the only transport, it almost feels like a different country. That's great!

Perhaps the most well-known peak in this area is that of Nevado Ausangate at 6223m. This is the venue for an aptly named and popular trek - the Ausangate circuit. From the village of Tinquí, it is possible to rent mules and guides at reasonable prices. Whilst the approaches to base - camps in the Vilcanota don't

require too much in the way of height gain, the distances are long. As always, they feel even longer with the necessary kit for climbing in this area.

### **Cordillera Blanca & Cordillera Huayhuash:**

Whilst the Cordillera Blanca has seen numerous expeditions over the years to pick off the “new routes” on unclimbed faces, the Cordillera Huayhuash is the trendy place to head for this year. With wilderness and remoteness like nowhere else, there are still plenty of virgin peaks, let alone new routes, to be climbed in this area. But you don’t think I’m gonna tell you where do you?

### **Bolivia & the Cordillera Real**

Yossi Brain was a great example of the “expert” by local experience, rather than training and qualification. An Englishman in La Paz, Yossi was the go-to contact for all Bolivian Mountaineering, and went on to write the definitive “Climbing Guide to Bolivia” two years later. The mountains in Bolivia have always attracted their fair share of private and commercial expeditions alike.

Part of the reason for this is the easy accessibility from La Paz, the capital city. Starting from the Bolivian Altiplano at about 4000m, as long as one takes time to acclimatise properly, it is relatively straightforward to reach base camp - often close to 5000m above sea level. This means that once you’re up and acclimatised, it’s possible to tick off ascents on 6000m peaks with comparative ease (Okay, I said comparative!) Several of the peaks in the Cordillera Real are commonly guided to a wide range of standards, and a wider range of clientele. All the food you need can be bought in La Paz, in the “American superstores” as they know them. It is, however, difficult to buy good quality white gas or “Bencina blanca”, but Epigas (and standard butane) is obtainable.

Although the most accessible peaks are those in the Cordillera Real, recent trends take exploratory expeditions to the less accessible cordillera Apolobamba, Occidental, and the recently discovered Quimsa Cruz. The benefits of climbing here are the opportunities for new routes and first ascents. This is balanced against the difficulties of access - ideally requiring that you have your own four-wheel drive transport.

## **Guiding, training and qualifications**

As with all these adventure sports, the quality of mountain guides varies enormously across the continent. My first contact with commercial mountaineering was in the national mountain school of Chile in Santiago. Unfortunately, this provoked a reaction of disappointment. The school was not very busy, and what courses it did run were of a very low standard - guiding youth groups on high-altitude treks. I wouldn’t normally be so snobby, but this is as good as it gets over there. The Escuela Nacional de Montaña (ENAM) do, however, train and assess the only guiding qualification in Chile. This seems encouraging at first, until you hear the reaction to it from other climbers in the area.

The school, Federation de Andinismo, and in fact the whole institution of mountaineering in Santiago, is regarded as a joke. They’re seen as a bunch of rambles in suits who sit behind desks pushing paper around and giving each other worthless badges. Whoops!

It is no wonder perhaps that all the keen and serious climbers are members of foreign clubs i.e. the Chilean section of the Club Alpino Italiano, or the German DAV. This stems back to the fact that this generation of climbers are perhaps the first true Chileans, with European grandparents. The culture and traditions of mountaineering and climbing come from their ancestral and cultural heritage – and are not part of Chilean culture historically. Unfortunately, the young climbers still look to Europe for their inspiration in climbing. I hope that in the future we will see the necessary development of Chilean clubs and associations with a pride in Chilean mountaineering - it has so much to offer.

The Federation de Andinismo, is the first to admit that they see Andinism as being distinctly different to Alpinism. The problems being those of altitude and logistics rather than technical difficulty. This is obviously going to have to be brought up to date pretty quickly. Because of this approach, and the favourable weather and snow conditions throughout the season, Andinism is really very safe. The guides at present receive basic instruction in rope skills for glacier crossing, basic client care at altitude, and little else. Due to the nature of the work, this has always proved to be adequate, but how long will that last? Already, we see many foreign expeditions bringing their own guides to peaks such as Aconcagua, and Chilean guides will soon be in direct competition.

As with all these things, there are good exceptions to the rule. Azimut 360, a Santiago-based adventure agency, run a very tight set-up with an excellent track record. They are also happy to employ foreign mountain guides alongside Chilean nationals. Despite the lack of any control over guiding, it is companies like this that are leading the way.

One of the best examples of this are the guides in Chalten, Argentinian Patagonia. Alberto Castillo runs one of the most professional guiding services I've ever seen, based purely on the results of his own experience of the area. Offering commercial trips into the hostile environment of the Patagonian ice-cap, he has gone to the lengths of building refuges, specifically placed and full stocked for emergency use. Not only would this be impractical in Europe, as one traveller put it: "some bastard would rob your food, use your fuel, and burn your floorboards for warmth".

In Bolivia, the organisations are desperately trying to address the problem of inexperienced guides and introduce some controls. The only problem is that, like Chile, the people who have taken it upon themselves to judge the rest, have little respect from many of the mountaineers. Everyone is involved in a big power struggle rather than striving for excellence. In a recent test set by a number of guides, 24 of the Bolivian guides were examined. Nine passed, six were deferred and asked to re-sit after further training, and nine were so dangerous that they failed outright - for good.

This looked like progress until we realise that now, over a year later, nothing has happened as the government fail to impose any restrictions. Today, all 24 guides are still taking clients into the 6000m peaks of the Cordillera Real. In the mid-80's, the DAV paid for 15 Bolivian guides to train in Germany with UIAGM guides. Of this 15, only two are still working in the industry. This was a great initiative that, frustratingly, wasted valuable resources on people that would not stay in the sector and ensure the system was sustainable, repeatable and scalable.

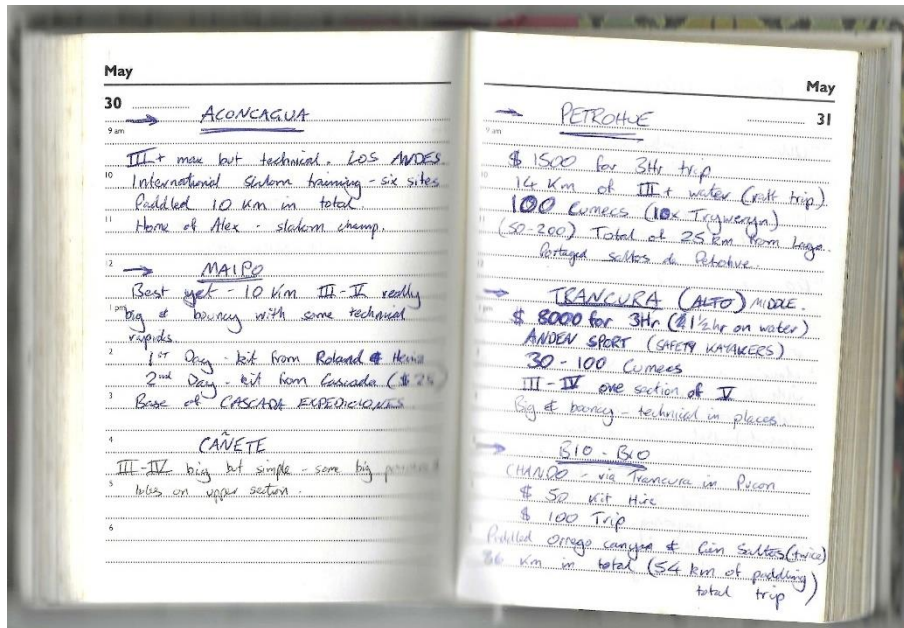
In Peru, we see a contrast that changes with the area. In the remote peaks of the Cordillera Vilcanota, many of the local guides are little more than Arrieros, horsemen without any mountaineering experience outside their local peak. This contrasts sharply with the guides of Huaraz, for example, who are often trained, assessed and qualified by the UIAGM as international mountain guides. The peaks in this area are relatively serious, with complex glacial approaches, loose unstable patches of snow and poor rock, and all at a serious altitude. It is therefore essential that the guides are well experienced as compared to those in the Central Andes. The area is also so well visited by foreign expeditions and guides, that the influx of better information is inevitable.

This ought to be true of the guiding services in Ecuador, but as Yossi pointed out, they are very similar to the Bolivians. The history of guiding in Ecuador was one of the things that first interested me in taking on this project. Several years ago, a huge avalanche wiped out a group of French clients on one of Ecuador's volcanoes. Since then, the French government and the French Alpine Club, have provided funding and expertise to train the Ecuadorian mountain guides. This means that there are now 90 registered guides in the country, of which 50% are aspirants training for the qualification. There has been a new qualification introduced - a UIAGM (Ecuador) carnet which qualifies these guides to work in their own country. It is not

international, as they are unable to complete the ski requirements for the full international qualification. This now means they have been able to arrange suitable professional insurance for the guides, and by the end of 1996 any guides operating in Ecuador will have to be qualified. It will be interesting to see how this develops, and how soon the others will follow.

## The rivers

The Andean chain runs fairly close to the Pacific coast for its entire length. On occasions, the watershed is within 300km of the sea, and these mountains rise to a maximum height of 6960m. Combined with the substantial winter snowfall, and glaciation of many summits, you can imagine this gives a substantial volume of water and a serious gradient. All the makings for some wild paddling and rafting.



Whilst the first couple of months of my trip were spent mountaineering, I was subjected to some pretty exciting views of the rivers in the Central Andes. During the months of December and January, they were running at their highest levels of the season, and were simply huge in volume. Although I was encouraged to see so much good water to paddle, my initial reaction to the paddling "scene" was one of disappointment.

As with mountaineering, the Chilean participants seemed few and far between, yet apparently even harder to contact. This time however, without boats, equipment, and transport of our own we would be totally at the mercy of whoever we could find, and what we would be able to beg, borrow, or blatantly scrounge. It was therefore with reservations that I arranged to meet a friend (travelling from England) in February, for a month of kayaking.

As was proving normal for South America, I needn't have worried. Once we made the first break into the industry, the Chilean hospitality took over, and we were on a roller coaster ride to the best rivers I'd ever paddled.

Having met up in Puerto Varas, a beautiful lakeside town with our first views of Volcan Osorno - we got chatting to the staff of "Aqua motion". This local company had been recommended to me all the way down in Patagonia, and I was beginning to understand why.

From their office in Puerto Varas, they radioed through to their base in Petrohue, to announce our arrival. The following morning, we were on the first bus out to Lago Todos Los Santos, and raring to go. Arriving at the lake (too late to paddle that day) the regular afternoon wind was providing entertainment for the windsurfers, as we crossed the top of the river to the campsite. It was idyllic - a beautiful lakeside camp in the trees, right under the beautiful Volcan Osorno. On the other side of the water, several rafting companies had their offices, nestled in amongst the few shops, the post office, and the hotel. For only a couple of pesos, a local fisherman would ferry you across the gap.

However, once we realised how warm the water was, we were happy to swim the few hundred metres, towing our change of clothes in a dry-bag (much to the amusement of the locals).

The next morning saw us up bright and early and ready to paddle our first river of the trip. Joining a rafting trip, for transport and river information, we got on to warm up on a play wave whilst they had their safety briefing. Despite the fact that the river could obviously hold plenty more water, it still proved far bigger than anything I'd ever paddled in the UK or the Alps. I also couldn't get over just how clear and warm the water was. The trip that followed was relatively straightforward, through very enjoyable grade III water, with fantastic scenery. We'd started.

With a head start to make the most of any play-waves, we were soon met by the rafts at the fourth rapid. Here we had been tipped off that an inflatable had been pinned on a rock the day before. Meeting up on the river bank, it was part of our cheap deal that we would help the raft guides retrieve the boat. In the end, it took more effort than expected, as we set up a complex pulley system from the bank. It soon became apparent that these gringo kayakers with their fancy rope tricks, were worth having along. On the flip side, however, it was another example of a lack of technical skills and training that the locals should really have had.

Job done, we set off to "play the river" to the take-out point. After meeting up with the rafts at the bottom of the river, we set off back to base, via a very nicely set out lunch break. From my point of view, it was useful to be able to chat and have lunch with the (very satisfied) clients from the rafts.



6 The author kayaking on the Rio Canete. Credit unknown

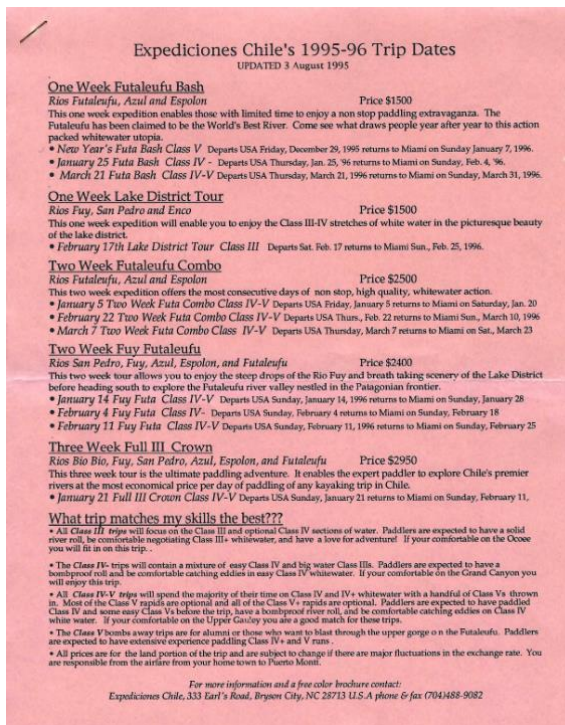
Back up at the lake, we decided not to wait for the afternoon trip, but to paddle down from the lake, with the intention of catching them up further down. As we explained our plans to the staff they each looked at us quizzically in turn "You're not actually thinking of *paddling* the Saltos are you?" They were glad, if only for the sake of their kit, to hear that we planned to portage this section, "but can anyone tell us where it is?" What followed was like something out of a Foxy cartoon. After the running the first section in the boats, we got out to

inspect the first of many rapids to follow, never sure what lay around the corner. This grade IV rapid was relatively simple, though it looked more intimidating than it was difficult.

We continued, running many great rapids, and always taking that "just one more eddy" before getting out to inspect. Despite our constant neurosis at each horizon, we managed to successfully identify the lead in to the Saltos. Something to do with the coach loads of curious and jeering sightseers perhaps. Finally, we found ourselves on familiar water, and had only one hour to demolish the mornings paddle if we were to

catch our lift. Only ten minutes late, they had left without us. Thankfully, this gave us time to rest our aching limbs - having paddled a total of 40Km that day. We had definitely started.

That evening, despite our fatigue, we were invited to join the staff of Aqua-Motion in their house above the campsite. A typically hospitable evening rich in wine, food and conversation. With staff and guests representing six countries of the world, it was a truly international affair. What a place, what a river, what a scene.



7 State-of-the-art promotional material from 1995

planning to hang around for long with the river so low. Whoops! We put that week down to experience and continued our hitch North up the Pan-Americana. This time we were heading for Pucon - a Mecca and central point for the Chilean adventure industry.

Pucon was everything we could have wished for, and everything Choshuenco wasn't. A thriving centre for the tourist industry, and ideally nestled on the banks of Lago (and under the spectacular Volcan) Villarica. Every other window in the high street is a bar or a trekking agency, and Pucon has a superb nightlife and social scene. Popular, for once, with Chileans and tourists alike, it is a superb venue for a holiday. Thankfully, it even has access to some good rivers for paddling and commercial rafting.

Of the dozen or so rafting agencies in the town, only two or three are at all professional by European standards. Having arrived in Pucon one evening, we managed to secure some work as safety kayakers on a rafting trip for the following day. We would be "checked out" on the first run, and have a job for the season by lunchtime. The young lad who checked us out, was resigning that day - totally fed up with the whole company. This was not a very promising start. However, he was a handy paddler as he led us (totally blind) into one substantial fall and rapid after another.

We learnt to trust him pretty quickly. After portaging an un-descended rapid, and watching some pretty sketchy tricks with the rafts and some throwlines, we were anxiously inspecting the grade V rapid at the bottom of this stretch. Adopting the "better the devil you know - or at least can see some of" approach, we missed the safer line down the far side of the river. After grappling with a rock in the middle of the

Having finally dragged ourselves away from the Petrohue, the next objective on the trip North was to meet Chris Spelius, and paddle the river Fuy. Chris is featured in more detail in the section on guiding and commercial trips. At 43yrs old, Chris has made Chile his escape from the Northern winter. His trips to world class water, and his safety record - guiding on class V rapids - have earned him world-wide fame. I was looking forward to meeting him, and learning from watching him work.

After several days of late starts, poor buses, but excellent hitching, we arrived in the sleepy village of Choshuenco. Despite having a wonderful beach and a beautiful price per day of paddling to any kayaking trip in Chile, it didn't take long before we doubted our chance of getting any paddling. After early exploratory trips and serious interrogation of the locals, we discovered that Chris and the gang would arrive in a couple of days, but there was no chance of finding any other kit, and no water in the river anyway.

When they finally arrived, they had brought just enough kit for their small and self-contained trip, and weren't

mayhem, and thankfully going the right way, I missed the crucial eddy and paddled the bottom section on reactions. Hugh Pritchard was soon to follow and, despite getting the line right, his old and sketchy spraydeck popped off in the first big hole. Struggling to stay above water, he did well to hang in there until, fearing a pin on the river bed, he took his first swim in thirteen years. Even Sebastian, our guide, took a series of committing rolls on this section. Oh dear, we were supposed to be the safety cover for this trip!

After the surprise of the morning, the biggest surprise was to be invited to stay on for the afternoon, without Sebastian, and paddle it all again. This time we made a decent and respectable job of the bottom rapid - as the photos of the concentration show. At the end of the day we were delighted to have paddled the river, but with shaky confidence in my paddling, and even less confidence in the company, we declined the offer to stay for the season. Phew!

Whilst hanging out in Pucon, I had been hoping to visit the famous haunt of the Hotel Ecole - a trendy gringo hangout and a great place to meet other adventurers. This is more than just a restaurant and hotel, having been set up by an action group involved in fighting for the protection of Chile's indigenous forest. It was here that I was finally able to pin down Alan - one of the 37 associate partners in the business - and quiz him about the adventure industry (and specifically rafting) in this part of Chile.

He was able to confirm my fears about the lack of legislation and controls of these rafting companies. It seems that rafting had been introduced by professional foreigners to existing high standards, and several local outfits set up in competition later on. On the face of it you appear to be paying the same price, for the same product. It soon becomes apparent that the quality of these trips varies wildly.

One of the luckiest contacts I made in Pucon, was to meet "Chando" a Peruvian raft-guide who runs his own company in Cusco, and works from Pucon during the Chilean season. He runs three day trips to the world class Bio-Bio for several of the Pucon agencies. Spoken of with respect by everyone, Chando is the old man river of the rafting scene. In a discussion about river safety, and the differing companies, Alan explained that "Chando is just Chando. He simply knows what he's doing, based on years of experience". And so it was, that we happily joined Chando on one of his legendary Bio-Bio trips - having rented boats and kit in Pucon.

This trip - through the hard work of Chando and his team - turned out to be so much more than just a river trip. As we stopped for lunch by an idyllic pool en-route to the river, we sensed this would be a little different. After half an hour to swim in the clear warm water, we were called to a lunch of freshly made salads, meats and water melon. All good food and fantastically presented. This was just the beginning. After arriving at the camp - site, a team effort had the bus unloaded, and a suitable collection of fire-wood for the three days. As Chando's team busied themselves preparing the tents and dinner, it was time to relax - the clients' swimming, and us giving kayak rolling lessons - in a nearby pool. After a short warm-up paddle on the camp-site rapid,

It was time for dinner, content that everything was ready for the next day. What followed was the most fantastic Asado (Barbeque) with superb steak, sausage and more fine salads, all washed down with gallons of red-wine. This was service beyond the call...! After such a feast, we slept well in preparation for the following day on the river.

The plan for the first day was to paddle from the campsite, down the section of the river known as the cien saltos. This section gets its name from the myriad of waterfalls that cascade down the steep banks of the gorge into the river. It really is quite beautiful. With the maximum difficulty at class III to IV on this stretch, this was to provide the clients (and us) with a gentle introduction to the volume and power of the river, before tackling the more committing sections the following day.

The volume of water was certainly greater than anything I had paddled before, but we were on good form as we blindly ran every rapid on the river - with occasional advice on the important lines from Chando. Paddling a river like this, in such a relaxed manner was SO rewarding, and we arrived at the take-out raring for more. After yet another wonderful dinner, we made the short walk to the hot-springs just down the road from our camp. As we lay there in the dusk, all the stars of the Southern hemisphere filled the sky as Signa serenaded us with traditional Swedish folk songs - sung with an angelic voice.



*8 Kayaking "Jug Buster" rapid on the Bio-Bio. Credit: Chando*

The next day saw us anxiously preparing at the top of the river. With a history of damaged shoulder joints, and stiff from the day before, I was carefully warming up and stretching before I got on the water. Nervous as hell, I mentioned to Hugh "If we weren't here, and it wasn't now or never, I wouldn't go paddling today". I was gripped!

The first rapids went Okay as we approached the first inspection of the day - Jug Buster - everyone got out for a look. It looked like an obvious line, but so committing and intimidating. The first raft paddled it okay as Willy commented "All the kayaks get nailed in this one". Watching Hugh put our theory into practise, I felt sick and somehow detached as I got onto the river. Thankfully we became the first kayakers they'd seen to have paddled the drop without falling in. The real fun had just begun.

Without time to inspect any other rapids, we eventually arrived at the top of lost-yak rapid. At a dangerous water level, Chando insisted on the clients walking this one as they paddled the rafts through alone. Having decided to carry round, I jealously watched Hugh make easy work of the rapid. Sure it was serious, but it proved easier than

many other sections. So we continued, always given concise advice from Chando on the lines, removing the need for any inspections.

This proved fine until we paddled into Lava South - one of the biggest rapids on the river - without any warning. I paddled blindly into the biggest hole I have ever seen in my life, got instantly back looped, and after a couple of failed attempts to roll, I swam out of the boat. I was quickly on the bank, having lost nothing but some pride and some confidence, as we set off to the campsite for lunch.

After a wonderful lunch of pasta salads, I realised that my shoulder was worse, and I was absolutely exhausted - I wasn't sure if paddling the cien saltos a second time was a good idea. We set off anyway, and I was about to learn the biggest lesson of my paddling career. In my exhausted state, what had been a simple paddle the day before with plenty of chances to play, was soon becoming a fight for survival. Failing to react to the water, I was getting the line wrong time and again - each roll sapping my resolve even more. I got trashed down the entire stretch, and eventually took a second swim after a devastating error in reading the water.

As I paddled into the second biggest hole I'd ever seen, the boat was flung skyward with such force that it completely cleared the water. Hugh, and Chando's son Leo, were never going to forget this one as they swapped stories later "I saw the whole boat man", said Leo as Hugh just burst into another fit of giggles at

my expense. Tired, sore and relieved, I eventually reached the take out in one piece unable to do anything but soak up the sunshine and grin insanely. It was quite simply the best day's paddling I've ever had. It would be a long time before Hugh could look at me with a straight face again.

Returning to Santiago was a bit of an anti-climax after such a wonderful trip, but Chile never left me down for long. Little did we know it, but the best was yet to come. Having decided that it was now too late in the season to climb the mountain, our attention turned instead to paddling the Aconcagua river. This just happened to coincide with the news that the UK slalom team were currently training in Chile. It was no coincidence that we all ended up at the house of slalom champion, Alex Olguin Severino.

Last year, Costa Rica was the trendy venue for winter training - this year it was definitely Chile. At the high point of the season, they had been host to 42 international paddlers from eight different countries. With six independent training sites (from class II - III+) on the one river, each team could get plenty of quality time on the water. The location is ideal with good fell-running and cycling for fitness; reliable glacial fed water in the river; and great weather without stuffy nights or problematic humidity.

The following afternoon, in time for the second session of the day, we were leant all the kit and dropped off several kilometres upstream. This gave us a great chance to enjoy the river, while the athletes got some work done. After paddling our way through the training sites, we joined the others, who were training on the last set of gates. Hugh and I had both been serious slalom paddlers for a while, but our absence from any form of training definitely showed. It had been a long time since I last handled a competition boat, let alone paddled gates on white-water. Thankfully we still had enough technical skill to look okay, even if we were seriously slow.

Returning to Santiago a second time felt like going home, as we were inundated with invitations to lunch, tea, dinner, and slides. After finally meeting the guys from Cascada in their Santiago office, the final

KAYAK	ESCALADA	BUCEO
		
<p>El Kayak es uno de los deportes más atractivos practicados en la naturaleza. Lagos, ríos y mares pueden ser recorridos en kayak en cualquier época del año. El curso se compone de una clase en piscina, una en lago y dos clases en río. Durante todo el año.</p> <p>Duración: 4 días Requisitos: Saber nadar, edad min 12 Incluye: Equipo completo Mínimo: 5 alumnos Valor: \$ 63.000 por persona</p>	<p>Vivimos en un mundo de tres dimensiones y normalmente usamos sólo dos. Nos sorprenderemos al descubrir la escondida capacidad que tenemos de desplazarnos en un mundo vertical. Las clases se realizan en muro artificial y en las palestras del Manzano.</p> <p>Duración: 5 días Requisitos: No hay Incluye: Equipo completo Mínimo: 5 alumnos Valor: \$ 65.000 por persona</p>	<p>Estamos preparando un curso de buceo para los meses de noviembre a febrero orientado a principiantes. Realizaremos en 1996 viajes en Chile y el extranjero para intermedios y avanzados. Nuestro instructor vendrá desde Estados Unidos y entregará certificación internacional a los alumnos.</p> <p>Invitamos a los interesados a inscribirse y a informarse en Cascada.</p>
<p> Para reservas y mayor información: <b>CASCADA EXPEDICIONES</b> Orrego Luco 054, 2ºP, Providencia Fono: 234-2274 232-7214</p>		

9 Promotional material and credit: Cascada Expediciones

invitation was to spend a weekend at their centre in the Cajon del Maipo (the main wine producing region of Chile). Having driven alongside it on almost every mountaineering trip from the city, it was good to head out to paddle the infamous Maipo at last.

I knew that it looked like a good river, as I admired it from the road, and I knew that the water had dropped a long way since December, but I didn't know it was going to be "that" good.

We were staying at the wonderful, if comparatively expensive, riverside campsite of Cascada de los Animas - Site of "Cascada Expediciones" rafting centre and kayak school. With a campsite, picnic site, swimming pool, and a restaurant/bar overlooking the river, the complex is pretty ideal.

And so it was that we were able to borrow some kit and paddle the Maipo. This river was of equal volume to the other classics, but felt steeper and certainly more continuous than anything we had paddled. Hugh enjoyed it so much he went back to paddle it again the next day, whilst I nursed my wrenched shoulder - keen not to repeat the lessons of the Bio-Bio.

Finally, the time came to leave the Maipo, and Santiago, way behind and head for Peru. Whilst on the Bio-Bio, Chando had given us a tip-off that the place to go was the Rio Cañete, so within a couple of days we

were on our way to the Peruvian border and San Vicente. After negotiating yet another frontier, we eventually arrived in the charming plaza of this small town. Our hotel was a fantastic colonial building fronting the plaza, and we soon found a good restaurant. After chatting with the owner, he showed us a poster advertising the “adventure sports pentathlon” that would be taking place at the weekend. With a couple of days to spare, we went off for a stress-free visit to pick up mail and messages in Lima, before returning to the Cañete valley. Based in the

village of San Geronimo, the event had drawn quite a crowd whilst we were away - we returned to a party in full swing and were soon introduced to everyone. Before closing time, if such a thing existed, we had been invited to join a team in Sunday’s competition. One of the team, Claudio, wasted no time in finding us somewhere to stay, and the paddlers had arranged for us to go kayaking the following afternoon. It was an incredible atmosphere and we were re-united with old friends (Chando’s team from the Bio-Bio) and made many more. One of the most important paddlers there was Gien Marco Vellutino. He comes from a well-known family in Peru having hosted many important expeditions from North America and Europe. A talented paddler, Gien Marco has accompanied the American John Foss on many important first descents in Peru. John is currently near completion of a new guide book to the rivers of Chile, with plans for an extensive guide to the whole continent.

With sponsors ranging from Ocomare rum, to Cristal beer, to Hi-Tec, this event was well organised and got a lot of publicity. The competition seemed like a good excuse to bring all the young, outdoorsy Limeñans together in a campaign for cleaner rivers in Peru. On the Saturday afternoon, we took part in the “ecological flotada” where hundreds of people took to the river in anything from rafts to kayaks to rubber rings.

The main event took place on a hungover Sunday morning. I had the first leg for our team, running 1700ft up a hill to hand over to a parapente who flew back to the park. From here, a cyclist took the baton up the valley to Hugh, who kayaked down the river to where we all met up in a raft to the finish. At the end of the day we came fifth and qualified for an international event in September - and invited to bring a team from England for the re-match. More importantly, it had been an exceptional weekend of enthusiastic outdoor action with wonderful participants - all in an exceptional setting. Top that.

Thankfully this was not to be the last time I would meet Chando. Whilst I was in Cusco (on the numerous occasions) I had visited the other guys in his office, but Chando was enjoying a well-earned holiday. With the end of the rainy season a few weeks away, the rivers were still too high to raft commercially. Just three weeks before the end of my trip we finally met up again - the third time over two months and several thousand miles. Instantly invited on his next trip to the Apurimac, it was good to know that I could always return to work on the rivers of Peru for a season.

### Commercial paddling in South America

“Raft Guide - cook and cleaner who rafts 20Km to work each day” From the start of my research into the commercial operators on South American rivers, the most obvious fact was the wide range of quality offered by competitive companies. In many cases, it became apparent that the original initiative to paddle these rivers came from North America. Many of the Chilean rivers were first used by companies such as Mountain Travel Sobek and Nantahalla outdoor centre. Bringing clients from North America meant that they were required to bring the level of experience and safety that was required.

In this way they established the patterns that would later be copied by Chilean companies that set up in competition. On the surface, these competitors would offer an identical package, often having worked for the American firms for some time beforehand. What they could not offer in many cases, was the American

punctuality, quality of service, history of safety, and most importantly - experience. As always, however, there are exceptions to the rule, in varying degrees.

Cascada Expediciones are pretty unique amongst the Chilean rafting companies. The two partners have been paddling for several years, slowly developing a passion for the sport, that became more important than their work in the city. The campsite at Cascada had been running for ten years, and acting as an agency for trips on the Bio-Bio and the Maipo. One of the family daughters got involved with an American paddler, and went off to work in the states for a few years. Her return coincided with Yerko and Javier's decisions to "get into the business" and they started running courses. Having spent a season safety kayaking in Pucon, they decided to establish a mobile school that could operate in the two different locations. Since then, they have become increasingly involved in the Chilean industry as a respected voice, and now employ up to 25 staff in the height of the season. In 1993 they hosted and organised the first South American Kayak championships on their home water, and are now instrumental in campaigning for tighter controls on rafting operators in Chile. Keep up the good work boys!

Perhaps the most refreshing thing about Cascada is, despite speaking English and having many foreign clients, they are primarily interested in the Chilean market. "Foreigners come, enjoy, and leave" they say, but "Chileans are like the USA 20 years ago. Drive for progress, work harder, work longer, get greater success - all the time. It's not only the environment that suffers from that". These guys want the businessmen to see the benefits and stress relief of a different way of life. "We're not in it just for the money, we're not fighting progress, just trying to create concern".

In Pucon, there are many companies competing for clients on the same stretches of water. Some are better than others. Despite the fact that they are not actively involved, as Cascada and the team at ecole, in campaigning for tighter controls, they do offer a high quality and safe product. Generally, it is easy to suggest that those companies with foreign influence are operating to higher standards. Aqua Motion for example, were set up by a Swiss partnership, and attract raft guides from all over the world in the Northern winter. Because of this, the employees tend to operate to the same exacting requirements of a European company, with all the legislation involved.

At present, the only controls on any rafting companies in the whole of South America are in Chile. If nothing else the Chilean Navy administers a basic qualification in river safety and boatmanship. They also require a certain degree of experience before raft guides progress to the more serious rivers. The only problem with this is typically South American - it sounds great in practise, but is nigh on impossible to administer. Without the respect of the majority it rapidly becomes a joke in certain areas.

With certain companies, for example Chando's team in Peru, it is always encouraging to see good results born from experience, without the need for legislation. I believe this is ideally how it should happen, but it's the exception rather than the norm. Thankfully, companies like Cascada are developing the clout to take the initiatives in leading the way to better education.

At the moment, they are paying to bring experts from North America and Europe, to lecture in river safety and first aid - for Chilean staff in the winter period. If only the whole country could come together in one agreement, and develop this system of training and qualification that Cascada are striving for, then standards would tighten across the continent. To date, there have only been a few fatalities on the more serious rivers of Chile. It's no co-incidence that these have been with inexperienced Chilean companies, operating outside of normal practise. Let's not have any more before people take action.

#### **Environmental impact of the adventure industry**

Soon after the start of the trip, I was sat in a bus behind two middle aged and smartly dressed women. Finishing their glass bottles of soft drink, one leaned over asking the other to open the window. Out went

the bottles, smashing in the roadside hedgerow and scrub. As I started to witness more of this kind of environmental attitude, I became increasingly concerned about how the adventure companies coped with this in the wilds.

I find the adventure industry a bit of a paradox at the best of times. Attracting the people who have a genuine love for being outdoors, we are normally the first to care about delicate and beautiful areas of wilderness. At the same time, it is ourselves who attract our clients and hordes of tourists to see the very things we wish to protect.

I feel we therefore have a huge obligation to think carefully about our actions, and minimising our impact, without denying access. How then do the companies in the wilds of South America cope in a continent where refuse ends up in the rivers or blatantly dumped anywhere. Do we have an obligation to educate them as to our mistakes before it's too late?



10 The advent of "Ecotourism" in Chile. Credit: Sernatur

Whilst I could never get upset about ignorance, rather feel a need to educate, I was upset by what I found in the Chilean Lake District. Realising how important the environment had become to foreign clients, the trendy term "Eco-tourism" was coined. It seems that all the companies try to fit some environmental significance into their name to give them "Eco-credibility". These same companies would then exploit the same stretches of river, using the same points for access and egress, uncaring for the erosion they were all causing. Long after the rafts and clients had left, a legacy of toilet paper, nappies and sanitary towels were left behind to mark the changing area for the next trip.

Eco-publicity without giving an Eco-damn. I was lucky to get further information from "Raleigh Coburn" in Petrohue, an American girl who had recently written a report on "Eco-tourism in Chile".

As I started to enquire about the National Parks and protection of the countryside, I started to learn more about the attitudes of people living in these areas - a balance still juggled by our own authorities. It is fascinating to compare different Park policies, and then look deeper as to who actually takes the responsibility.

For example, Chile boasts a large and well organised system of National Parks, all under the care of CONAF - a governmental department. Whilst this does at least give them financial and authoritative clout, it means that the decisions are made on paper a long way away. Compare this to the National Park of Los Glaciares, and we see a park under the protection of the locals in the village of Chalten.

Most of the people moved there because they love the mountainous region, and they understand the needs of the park users - farmers, trekkers, climbers - and act accordingly. Here we see, for example, a ban on open fires - not from a government policy caused by threat of forest fire, but because the locals are worried about the lack of remaining dead timber available. They simply want to protect their trees and forests.

One of the most exciting areas of environmental concern, centres on the Hotel Ecole in Pucon. This concern has been set up by 37 associates from all over the world, all devoted to protecting the indigenous

forest of Chile. More than just a hotel, Ecole act as an agency for all sorts of adventure packages, the main selection being the level of environmental care taken by the company.

Further North, in Peru, the situations were worse than in the Southern Cone. There are no proper facilities for waste disposal in many of the villages, and in the capital city of Bolivia most of the refuse ends up in the river. Where do you then start to clean up the industry, and meet foreign clients on a level that they expect if nothing else? Thankfully, there are enough suitably educated folks in Lima that are well aware of the problems. The struggle now is how to let the population know. We were lucky to have a chance to take part in a campaign for cleaner rivers in Peru. In a flotilla of varied craft, from rafts to rubber rings, over 200 people took to the river Cañete - just South of Lima in an event that was covered by TV and radio. I felt glad to be involved, and wish them the best of luck with their upstream struggle in the future.

## Conclusions

Throughout this report, I've tried to draw relevant conclusions to the information learned at the relevant point in the text. There are so many points to draw from a trip like this that it is almost impossible to condense them all at the end in one section. However. . .

See the Executive summary for a bullet pointed summary of key lessons and recommendations.

It very quickly became apparent throughout South America, that most of the adventure industry were involved in "selling adventures to travellers". Whether it be guiding first time trekkers up Aconcagua, or taking first time rafters down the Bio-Bio. They were still able to climb the highest mountain of the western hemisphere as part of their backpacking tour round the country.

I found it quite incredible that people could (safely I might add) do these things without owning any specialised kit, or having any technical experience of the chosen sport. This is quite simply a fantastic situation, and proof to the many of wonderful opportunities that exist in this vast continent.

On the other side of the coin, I was concerned by the lack of interest (quantity of participants rather than individual enthusiasm) from the local people. Essentially quite middle class sports, they do, I admit, require both leisure time and disposable income, but they should be more accessible to the locals. This is a topic at the heart of the team at Cascada Expediciones in Santiago. Worried about the state of the people and of the environment, they were keen to promote the benefits of a weekend getting away from it all in the great outdoors.

As South America continues to develop at such a rapid rate, I think we will see a lot more of the country becoming more accessible to the traveller. Despite interests in other un exploited countries, I think South America will enjoy another bout of popularity as the last rivers are paddled and the virgin peaks and faces are climbed.

There is no doubt at all that there are many more areas ripe for commercial development in the not-too-distant future. I just hope that the people of these areas develop the interest and ability to make this development themselves. Maybe this way, South America will reap for itself, the rewards of a continent so rich in opportunity and adventure.

Finally, the biggest conclusion of all is how incredibly hospitable the people are in these wonderful countries. It was easy to read all the horror stories from travellers in Peru, and become totally neurotic. By staying vigilant it is still easily possible to travel and enjoy local company without any hassles at all. Travelling as I did, with an excuse to meet so many interesting people, knocked spots off any previous travel experiences on the "tourist trails" of the world.

Finally, it turned out to be so important to speak the language. I would dearly love to learn some Quechua to compliment my Spanish, and remember that I had very little Spanish when I arrived. Things could have so easily turned out differently, and for that I will remain eternally grateful to Italo Valle for having such a profound effect in preparing me for the rest of my trip. Thanks as well must go to the Churchill Fellowship and Winston Churchill – it really was the opportunity of a life-time.

## Acknowledgements and thanks

Without the following people, this trip would not have been possible, nor nearly so rewarding. So I would like to thank:

- Sir Henry Beverley and the whole team at the Churchill Trust
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- Italo Valle & Mauricio Purto for being such an inspiration, teaching me castellano, and showing me their world through a lens.
- Pablo Besser and Dario Arancibia, for tying on to some unknown crazy Englishman in Patagonia.
- Chando and Mayuc Adventures for taking a chance on us, as safety kayakers.
- Nilo from Huaraz, as a travel companion, Mountain Guide, and for the excellent hospitality and network of support in Huaraz.
- South American Explorer's Club – for making Lima a safe and relaxing place to stay.

## Epilogue/Afterword

I look back at my time in South America, now 30 years ago, with fondness, as a pivotal point in my life and career. I still keep in touch with many of the people I met and travelled and kayaked with.

Yossi Brain published his climbing guide to Bolivia in 1998, but lost his life in an avalanche in September 1999, whilst climbing in Bolivia's Apolobamba range. Pablo Besser went on to work in medicine, but became one of the most prolific polar/icefield explorers of his generation. Dario Arancibia went on to be the Technical Director of the Federación de Andinismo de Chile and Cuerpo de Socorro Andino de Chile; as well as the President of the Asociación Chilena De Guías de Montaña y Escalada. We would make contact several times throughout our parallel careers, delivering our respective national training schemes.

It transpires that, if we had been successful on the South Tower of Paine, it may well have been the first British Ascent. It is tempting to think, if I had known that, we might have tried a bit harder. But we tried as hard as we could, with the limited skills and challenging conditions we had at the time.

Hugh Pritchard was my kayaking companion in South America and a lifelong friend and inspiration. Hugh went on to race for Team GB as a biathlete in the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics in 2002; before racing for Team USA in the White Water Racing World Championships in Slovenia in 2019.

As a reminder to those who live in the digital generation, I once sat in the square in Cusco, and waited three days for Hugh. We had neither internet, nor mobile phones. We simply honoured a commitment some months before. And waited . . .

After travelling in Peru with Nilo (a mountain guide from Huaraz) and his Mexican friend Oscar, we left him to pursue a love interest on the Inca Trail. Despite staying at Nilo's house for several weeks in Huaraz, expecting his imminent return, we never met again. I went on to become an international Mountain Guide and level five kayak coach. My outdoor career punctuated by numerous expeditions and return trips to South America.

I first made use of the lessons I learned a year later, as a leader on a Raleigh International trip to Patagonia, where I met my future wife. Before returning for expeditions to attempt first ascents in Peru (e.g. SW face of Huantsan in the Cordillera Blanca). In total, I have now spent more than two years of my life pursuing "exploration and adventure" in South America, and the adventure tourism industry has evolved almost beyond imagination.

I didn't know it at the time, but my "pre-internet" Fellowship took place at a pivotal time in the development of the sector across the world. This report highlights many of the key themes in South America at the time: limited infrastructure and a sense of remote isolation, leading to safety concerns, reliance on overseas operators, emerging community involvement, and largely untapped (and unprotected) natural assets. Since then, the industry in South America has evolved significantly, in particular due to the growth of the internet and worldwide digital travel platforms.

In 1996, poor transport links made many destinations feel incredibly remote and hard to reach. The time-consuming and serious nature of access (along with limited emergency services) were barriers to commercial growth. Adventure tourism was concentrated in a few key areas of Peru, Chile, and Ecuador, with travel logistics often complex and unpredictable.

Today, improved regional air routes, road networks, and communications have expanded tourism across the continent. Destinations such as Bolivia, Colombia, and Argentina now attract as many adventure travellers as elsewhere. Mobile phones and satellite communication have also improved safety in remote environments, making many new areas both accessible and attractive to many more travellers.

In the mid-90's, travellers relied heavily on guidebooks and printed literature from specialist operators, for information. Since then, the rise of digital platforms such as TripAdvisor, YouTube, and Instagram have completely transformed this landscape. Travellers can now independently research destinations, fairly compare operators, and book directly from abroad.

All these shifts have combined, to seriously reduce the perception of South America as remote and risky.

In 1996, I was shocked by the dominance of overseas operators with limited economic benefit for local communities. Since then, there has been significant growth in locally owned businesses and guiding services. Community-based tourism, which was identified as an emerging opportunity, is now widely recognised as best practice.

This has increased local employment, improved the authenticity of local activity provision, and strengthened sustainability in the sector. Thirty years on, it is a joy to behold.

Back then, I found inconsistent safety standards and limited regulation. There was very little pride in the quality of local training or qualifications. Only the Ecuadorians had engaged with the French, to support their pathway to international (then UIAGM, now IFMGA) accreditation for Mountain Guides.

Today, many destinations, across many activities, have adopted improved guiding standards, training, and risk management procedures. Online reviews and global competition have also encouraged operators to raise professional standards.

As the best example of this, five South American countries are now full members of the IFMGA. Bolivia joined in 2004 as the first "non-skiing" member. Argentina joined in 2005, Ecuador in 2017, and Peru joined with their training and evaluation heavily involved in the regional development. Chile joined after the first generation of High Mountain Guides, trained entirely in Chile under the IFMGA standard, completed their training in 2024.

These five countries now collaborate on training, demonstrated by the South American Instructor Conference held in Peru in October 2024. There is now a tremendous (and well-earned) pride in the standard of their home nation Guides training.

Sustainability and environmental management and/or protection were important emerging issues in 1996. They are now central to adventure tourism. Visitor management systems in areas such as Machu Picchu and Torres del Paine National Park reflect a shift toward sustainable growth. But this comes at a price:

Since 1995, regulation by the Corporación Nacional Forestal (CONAF) and associated authorities has transformed Torres del Paine from a relatively open-access park into a highly managed protected area. From the time of my visit to 2005, there was a rapid expansion in visitor numbers and management strategies to cope. These were focused on infrastructure and trail designation, but major fires in 2005 and 2011 prompted stricter conservation policies, including camping restrictions and ecosystem restoration. Since 2015, CONAF has adopted visitor quotas, reservation systems, and seasonal access controls, improving sustainability while limiting environmental damage from tourism growth.

These regulations have limited independent access for climbers in Torres del Paine. Early informal access has been replaced by permit requirements, planning requirements, and designated approach routes. The park is undoubtedly more sustainable, better managed, and well protected. But it is now reserved for those with the disposable income required, and no longer freely accessible to all.

There are many similar examples across the natural and outdoor tourist attractions of South America.

## Conclusion

Since 1996, South America has evolved from a remote and emerging adventure tourism region into a globally recognised destination. Improvements in infrastructure, safety, professionalism, community involvement, and digital accessibility addressing many of the challenges identified in my travels.

## About the Author

The initial report was drafted at the end of the Fellowship, when word-processing was in its infancy. This revision was published some 30 years later at the opposite end of a career in the adventure industry. But this trip was really the catalyst, or springboard, for the three main streams of my future career:

1. Guiding: Over three decades, I have worked all over the world as an International Ski & Mountain Guide and kayak coach. From the deep south of Patagonia, to the far north of Greenland and Svalbard, via the heights of the Himalaya.

2. Outdoor Sector governance and workforce development: I worked for and advised all three UK National Outdoor Centres at various times, including 20 years at Plas y Brenin (Sport England's National Mountain Centre) and I am still an independent member of the Safety Advisory Committee for Glenmore Lodge (Sport Scotland's National Outdoor Centre). This experience has enabled me to build a reputation as an independent expert in outdoor and adventure activity safety, risk management, best practice, training systems and industry standards. With over 30 years' experience at senior and national levels of the outdoor sector, I have held leadership roles, developed national training and competence frameworks, advising governing bodies and national organisations alike.

3. Outdoor research and activity review: I have worked as an SME for numerous national outdoor organisations and initiatives. Conducting professional and independent research into impact and activity review from Sport England to Forestry England, to Mountain Training. All with the aim of helping more people, get more active, more often. Research into the outdoor sector, has informed government strategy, governance and best practice of outdoor activity initiatives. For example, the 2015 Getting Active Outdoors (Sport England / OIA) was heralded as "The most authoritative piece of research ever produced in the Outdoor consumer sector in the UK" by Ordnance Survey. The report led to 10 Regional and 24 Bespoke workshops to key partners, reaching 226 outdoor brands, governing bodies and organisations.

This combination of research skills, combined with pragmatic integration into practice, all started with my Churchill Fellowship. Throughout this time, I have been lucky to reflect on my Fellowship, and encourage many of those in my mentorship to follow their own ambitions, under the "Adventure and Exploration" funding stream.

This multi-strand career has given me numerous opportunities to promote the benefits of the Churchill Fellowship, from individual mentoring to presenting the benefits and opportunities at national keynotes.

I currently work as the Chief Instructor for the Joint Services - as a lead SME for the MOD in all aspects of their leadership and resilience development through Adventurous Training.