

Emails from Argentina and Chile

What a long, strange trip its been. 21,000+ miles (including flight from the US) and about 50 miles walking.

Somehow traveling with the same people and guide for 30 days is an adventure unto itself. But a good adventure. Bottom line, it was a good experience, but I still maintain that the piece de resistance and highlight of the entire trip was Easter Island.

What follows is the trip review I've placed on the OAT website. It should give you an idea of what we did and what I thought of it. I was truly impressed with the hotels and the rooms we were assigned and I've posted hotel reviews on tripadvisor.com. It was a top-quality trip.

Let me know if you have questions. I'd like to do a short trip report for International Travel News mentioning some of our guides and will send that along to you when it is ready.

Thank you for reading this and for all the good thoughts you sent my way!

Esther

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Evaluation for OAT Chile/Argentina trip with Easter Island (pre-trip) and Iguassu (post-trip)

(this is also posted in the "traveler review" section of the OAT website)

This is an good trip and I have to admit that the Chile/Argentina portion of the month-long itinerary is enjoyable. But, if you add the the Easter Island pre-trip and the Iguassu post-trip it becomes a stellar month-long package.

What made this trip so delightful was the excellent guiding by well-experienced OAT guide Christian Vera as his personality and professional and polished delivery of the itinerary made every day enjoyable as well as adventuresome.



The seasons are reversed in Argentina and Chile, so dress warm when you go in our summer months, and their winter.

What to bring

You are moving around all the time on this trip. If you do the pre and post trips, you have a total of eight internal flights. Weight allowance of two bags, 50 lbs. total (LAN Airlines) and the carry-on can't weigh more than 17 lbs. The only places our carry-ons were weighed was on the Puerto Montt to Punta Arenas leg; and the Califate to Buenos Aires flight.

No matter who your guide is, take a look at the youtube videos prepared by OAT guide Alex Maureira. There are about six videos which cover just about everything you need to know in planning and packing for the trip. In addition your own guide will contact you with information relevant to your departure. The main thing is to bring technical clothes which are quick-drying and durable. You need cold weather clothes for southern Chile and warm/hot weather clothes for Iguassu.

As for the flights if you speak a little Spanish (a requirement), you can request to sit in the exit row. These seats are assigned at the airport. Be sure to ask in Spanish. We used mostly LAN Airlines which is partners with American; and Aerolinas Argentinas (1 flight) which is partners with Delta.

We Get Around

OAT uses 24 passenger busses and most people who want can get a seat to themselves. For the days when we visited Torres del Paine National Park, and in Califate we luxuriated in 44 passenger busses with enough room to spread out and even hang laundry in the back during the longer rides.

The Matter of Money

There is a local guide just about every day and of course a bus driver. Bring lots of USD in various denominations. It is most welcome in Argentina and acceptable in Chile.



Don't bring food/snacks if you plan to enter Chile. They are very picky about agricultural products. At our border crossing, high in the Andes, cute dogs were used to sniff out any foodstuffs.

Food

You don't need to bring a lot of snacks with you. In fact Chile has strict agricultural laws and items with honey and nuts may be confiscated at the airport upon arrival or when you cross the border from Bariloche (Argentina) to Puerto Varas (Chile). They use specially trained dogs to locate contraband food. The food in both countries is delicious and plentiful and there are supermarkets and mini-marts all over the place. Seafood and salmon is especially good and well priced at restaurants in Chile; and the meats are spectacular in Argentina.

What I especially enjoyed is that on evenings our dinner was not included, Christian, our guide selected a nearby local restaurant with an interesting menu and we'd meet in the hotel lobby to walk over. It was always a good dining experience.

If you like early morning coffee, you may enjoy bringing a small coffee pot or water immerser as virtually none of the hotels provided this.

Communications

Most hotels on the trip have free wi-fi, but the Torremayor Hotel in Santiago wi-fi is on a pay basis. You can purchase cards for 1, 3 and 24 hours. Speed is excellent. There are two computers in the lobby which are free to use. On Easter Island it is \$5 for the entire stay and speed is OK.

There is wi-fi on the ferry to/from Chiloé Island -- it's only a 40min. trip, but it may come in handy.

Most all hotels had free public computers in the lobby.

Be prepared..... for the long drives. From Punta Arenas to Torres del Paine is about 8 hours and is the more interesting drive. From Torres del Paine to Calafate is another story. From the National Park to the border (6 hours) is scenic and interesting, but once you cross into Argentina, you get a real feel for Patagonia (5 hours)-- Expansive, high altitude desert and brown. Bring your iPod for this portion of the drive.



There is beautiful silver Mapuche (ethnic group) jewelry to be found in Argentina and Chile. They work in solid silver, never silverplate. Best place to buy is in Bariloche.

Shopping

Look for the word “artesenia” - which means local handicrafts; and “galleria” which means lot of small booths. Best artisan shopping of the trip was in Bariloche. There is a Artesenia “galleria” (small shops) at the corner of Moreno and Billega Streets with stall after stall of great things to buy for yourself and for gifts. Don't miss this -- it is about 2 blocks from the main square on a street parallel to the main shopping street.

If you like knitted things -- Chiloe is the place for knits and weaving, including artisan yarns. Just outside Angelmo (fish market) in Puerto Montt, there are numerous stalls with souvenirs and knitted items..... mostly from Chiloe. One stall had extensive beads and jewelry making items. But look closely as I suspect many of the items are from Peru and I even saw some items from Guatemala! This is a popular cruise port so if you visit during cruise season, about 6 blocks of vendors will be open.

Puerto Varas had “Artesenia” shops by the casino. Next door is a high-end shop selling work by Chilean artists.

If your interest is Lapis Lazuli, best prices are in Santiago where the Easter Island pre-trip begins. I especially liked the artesenia shops across the street from Santa Lucia hill. There are so many little shops that competition is high and prices are excellent. I also bought some Mapuche (indigenous) earrings there.

You will also have a chance to shop directly with wood-carvers (Easter Island), weavers (home-hosted dinner in Chiloe) and Indigenous jewelry (Mapuche speaker in Bariloche).

El Calafate had the highest quality shopping for jewelry apart from Santiago and Buenos Aires. The best places are a local market called Artisanos. There are about 20 booths where the artisans sell their own things. The entrance is a few doors to the right of the casino. For the highest quality jewelry and handicrafts, make a bee-line to Pueblo Indio which has items from not only Argentina, but the surrounding countries. Huge selection of very high quality with prices to match.

If you do the Iguassu post-trip, there are local artisans by the river at a scenic stop called Los Tres Fronteras (the Three Borders). Dance right by all the tacky stalls, and go down to the river bank. Here several local artisans sell their hand-crafted jewelry and weavings. They are there mornings until about 1pm, for sure, and sometimes in the evenings.

Hotels

OAT always seems to be changing hotels. I've put hotel evaluations for our trip (taken in Sept.2012) on www.tripadvisor.com

Iguassu Post-trip -- just a few words. It is another excellent OAT experience. The views from the Brazilian side of Iguassu Falls are spectacular (they say “Argentina has the Falls; Brazil has the view”) and is a more “authentic” experience. You spend about 4 hours on this side. The entire next day is spent on the Argentinian side doing three easy walks - Garganta del Diablo (2 hours including the disneyesque train to get there); The Upper Trail (45 min), and the Lower Trail (1 hr) then the optional “Great Adventure” boat ride (don't miss this!). The first two walks are completely level. The lower trail has stone steps leading to the river. You will have three options for lunch -- two snack-type

places and a buffet restaurant called “El Fortin”. I strongly recommend the buffet restaurant! There are 4 stations, including a grill. It costs 100 pesos (\$20)+ drinks and is very worth it. You won’t have to eat the rest of the day. They also have very clean bathrooms.

The Andes to Patagonia trip is an excellent experience and the addition of the Easter Island pre-trip and the Iguassu post-trip make it a once-in-a-lifetime adventure.



Spectacular Iguassu is not to be missed. They say Argentina has the falls, but Brazil has the view. It's true!

