



CAT TALE

TRACKING ELUSIVE PUMAS IN PATAGONIA'S WINTER

BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO



WELL BEFORE DAWN, OUR JEEP CRAWLS over the deserted roads that traverse southern Chile's Torres del Paine National Park. Along with a guide, our group of three is in search of pumas. The day before, a guide and I had spotted tracks and scat while hiking, lending support to another guide's comment that "puma are everywhere" in this park, the jewel of Chile's Patagonia region.

Even after downing a cup of yerba mate (*mah-tay*), the popular South American tea, I'm still groggy as our Jeep cuts between a pair of lakes. "Keep your eyes open," says Beatriz Castro, a guide with Quasar Expeditions, the regional tour operator for a six-day trek it calls the Puma Tracking Safari, though our trip will be just five days. As she shines the headlights into the hills, she adds, "eight eyes are better than two."

I glimpse a flash of orange as she drives slowly round a bend. "Slow down!" I say. "I saw something." Probably just a gray fox or a reflector, I think, worried I had sounded a false alarm. Then I see the twin orbs shine in our headlights. The outline of the cat's face comes into view, its ears pricked up in keen attention. It regards us for several seconds, scampers a few steps up the dusty hillside, then turns sideways. We can see the full outline of its muscled body: its broad shoulders, thick paws, and sinewy torso. I had wondered how a 2-foot-high puma could take down a much larger guanaco, a relative of the llama and camel that thrives in Patagonia, but in that thrilling moment it all became clear.

Awe-Inspiring Park

Pumas are fierce, highly elusive creatures, and I had traveled many thousands of miles to see one, maybe even more. Though I had come to Torres del Paine last August in the depth of the Southern Hemisphere's winter in hopes of seeing the cats, it was the park itself that left the deepest impression.

Torres del Paine is best-known for its soaring granite towers that rise thousands of feet above the valley below. The park —

PARK AND RECREATION:

Clockwise from top left, at Chile's Torres del Paine National Park, search for wily puma, take in the breathtaking Los Cuernos formation, and hike near herds of guanacos.

a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with its luminescent cobalt rivers, otherworldly rock formations, gargantuan glaciers, turquoise lakes, and crashing waterfalls — remains wild and vibrantly alive. Moderate day hikes lead to the base of the Torres del Paine and Los Cuernos ("The Horns"), signature rock formations at the park, as well as to the iceberg-filled Grey Lake and spirit-lifting waterfalls such as Salto Grande, a riverwide series of cascades.

Torres del Paine receives 150,000 visitors a year — a small fraction of those who visit U.S. parks such as Great Smoky Mountains, which had more than 10 million in 2014 — but most of those come between December and February, summer in the Southern Hemisphere. So June through August, the Chilean winter, can be the best time to experience the park and soak up its 955 square miles of untamed beauty, a season when you can hike for miles without seeing another soul.

Getting to the park isn't easy: It's a 10-hour flight from New York to Santiago, Chile's capital, then a three-and-a-half-hour flight to Punta Arenas in southern Chile, followed by a nearly five-hour drive to the park. The good

news: The small airport in Puerto Natales, just 90 minutes from Torres del Paine, is expanding and projected to start receiving flights from Santiago by the end of the year.

Several hotels offer lodging within the park, but few luxury options exist. We're staying at the Explora Patagonia, which picks up all of its guests at the Puerto Natales airport. The hotel's cuisine is exquisite, the well-stocked bar is hosted, and most rooms have a jaw-dropping view of Los Cuernos. It's located in the heart of the park, just a five-minute walk from the Salto Chico waterfall, a powerful yet narrow cascade that attests to the power of the natural forces at work in Torres del Paine.

Hoofing It

After the pre-dawn puma sighting, we drive slowly looking for more big cats but reach a ranger station without seeing any. We watch Torres del Paine's towers turn orange in the day's first light, then learn we'll continue our safari on foot, along with three members of another group.

Isn't that dangerous? Castro assures us we'll be fine. We'll be accompanied by a veteran tracker, Jose Vargas, who tells us the cats are more scared of us than we are of them. For good reason: Ranchers outside the park shoot pumas to protect their sheep

and other livestock, or contract hired guns called *leoneros* to take down the big cats for them.

We walk uphill along a fence line on the park's boundary, past frozen puddles and the frost-crust skeletal remains of downed guanacos. The pumas are expert killers, with the ability to sprint at speeds up to 50 mph, Vargas says, and they're smart. The cats run guanacos into the wire fence, where they pounce on the overmatched prey and sink their razor-sharp teeth into the guanacos' necks.

Two guests in our group move at a glacial pace, photographing seemingly every guanaco bone, puddle, and vista. "Don't worry," Vargas says with a laugh. "The pumas always eat the slow ones." Though evidence of puma is everywhere, we don't see another cat, and by late morning we quit searching, knowing they're bedding down for the day.

The weather is remarkably fair: mostly sunny and relatively mild with highs around 40 degrees, though one night we get a light dusting of snow, adding luster to the landscape. It's not too windy, unlike in summer when full-force gales buffet hikers.

At Home With a Gaucho

The following evening we combine searching for puma with a visit to the home of 65-year-old ranger Juan Toro, who has been patrolling the park, on foot and horseback, for 41 years. He extols the virtues of visiting Torres del Paine in winter: "You have the park to yourself — that's the big difference." Then he offers me a gourd of mate.

This is the last of my four nights in the park and I ask the gregarious gaucho what he wants visitors to remember: "All this landscape," Toro says with a sweep of his arm. "All this beauty." I tell him I will and that my only regret is I didn't have more time in this primeval paradise. "You really need to spend 10 days to explore this park," he says. "A lot of people regret that they're on a set schedule and have to leave. Everyone says, 'Oh, we should have stayed longer.'"

I didn't encounter another puma, but made other wildlife sightings: a pair of ostrichlike rhea in a mating dance, two condors on the ground inspecting a carcass, an armadillo on the trail to the base of Los Cuernos, and countless inquisitive guanacos on hillsides and atop ridges. Naturally, I would have enjoyed seeing more pumas, but it was enough to be in the big cats' presence, knowing they're out patrolling this sublime landscape, atop the food chain, keeping the ecosystem in balance.

For more info and reservations, contact Quasar Expeditions at 800-650-9385; quasarex.com. Six-day safaris from \$6,550.

BEN CHAN/GETTY IMAGES (PUMA); MICHAEL SHAPIRO (LOS CUERNOS, GUANACOS)

