

SOUTH AMERICA
SEPTEMBER 22ND – NOVEMBER 6TH 2008

Getting there: Well, here we go again – Mary and I on our next adventure. Usual long trip to get there. Left Bluff Road mid afternoon for flight to Sydney. Because of Aerolungus Argentinas's flight changes, we had an unnecessary nearly 24 hours in Sydney – took a train ride south to Waterfall next morning, but nowhere to have breakfast, so back to Hurstville for a “very late b'fast”. AR1183 departed on schedule. Business Class less than half full, so plenty of room to stretch out and move around. Service reflected the airlines declining financial status, but very comfortable and we slept, ate and wine'd well.

Because of the same schedule changes, we had to o/n in Buenos Aires (at their expense) – arrived at our downtown “not too pretty” hotel after midnight with a 0530 hrs. pick-up – not much shut eye!

Wednesday 24th Sept.: Our holiday begins. Made use of A.A.s Condor lounge whilst waiting for another delayed flight to Santiago de Chile. Had a hazy but good close view of Andes as we approached this city. Met by Valentina and Padricia, whom will be our guide and driver as we venture in and out of Santiago on numerous occasions. Went direct to Hotel Orly in the area of Providencia – beautiful tree'd streets with boutique shops/restaurants and close to river with wide park like walk ways on either side – this ‘avenue’ of road/trees, river, walkways etc. actually runs for many kms, with high snow clad mountains and glacier visible to north and east.

Afternoon tour: Pre Columbian Museum very interesting – all art work originally owned by a private collector and all said relics retrieved from burial sites dating approx. 2,000 BC through to 1400 AD (known as AC and DC). Palacio Cousino privately built in 1860's and now run by G'ment.

Valentina talked about an increasing number of Peruvian women working in Santiago – ‘mostly domestic work’, but much higher wages than in Peru and then return that money home to families.

Dinner at Astrid & Gaston was an incredible introduction to Chile. A sensational meal with sensational service. A meal to remember that introduces new insights to wining/dining.

Thursday 25th Sept: 0600 pick-up. Flight to schedule – now in cattle class but Lan Chile definitely has more leg space than back home. We had about 1½ hour stopover in Lima.

Finals into Quito very interesting. City is 2,800 meters altitude and surrounded by mountains and the airport runs along the only flat valley in area, but housing now closely surrounds airport so it was a steep decent giving the sensation of landing on a main thoroughfare. Met by Alexander (Alejandro Jacome) and driver. Villa Colona an amazing place. Origins of building date to 1860's and restored to present state 4 years ago. It is in Old City – cobbled roads outside and great views from roof garden deck. Drove to the other side of city for dinner. Again one on one service with menu pre chosen and their choice of wine. Beef and ravioli/prawn dishes. Of interest (we are informed) no alcohol consumption is permitted for 48 hours pre and day of an election – this Sunday there is a referendum re writing a new Constitution. Fuel is \$1.48/gallon.

Friday 26th Sept: 2½ hour walk through Old Quito. Down the cobbled streets by beautifully restored/maintained buildings – all featuring their balconies and brightly coloured. Walked around La Plaza del la Independencia, saw a lot of short indigenous people – often with bare feet by choice, then into cathedral, churches as per itinerary. City Museum displaying 11,000 BC to 19th century human history – well organized and interesting. Incan gold very prevelant in all the buildings. Signs outside the main church and cathedral, advising that tourists excluded from entering buildings on Sundays.

Drove up to top of El Panecillo for high view of city and at the foot of huge statue of a winged Mary – mother of Christ.

Drove north out of city, over the equator to have lunch at El Crater – set inside a volcano and we arrived in time to see the Pacific Mist blowing in from the west. Lunch - again good tucker and we were introduced to hot sauce (soon realized this is served with all meals in Ecuador and Peru – good on bread, in soup etc. etc. – we were hooked). Had our first (of many) serves of potato soup.

There are 2 sites to “see” the equator. The French with technology defined one area (which we did not visit) but we went to the Incan fortress site and our guide showed us practical methods to prove this site is more accurate (water draining clockwise/anti-clockwise etc.) Could see the French monument about 200 meters distant.

The drive in and out of town gave us a good look around – very dry – life styles became poorer as we got out of city. Migration from rural areas is on the increase with expected consequences.

In evening Alexander drove us back to Plaza where we had a good look/walk around to see the area by night (lots of floodlit scenes), then we had a horse carriage ride around the streets – felt like a youngster – enjoyed it more than I’d thought, then to Le Belle Epoque – a posh hotel on the Plaza, for yet another great meal – the desert was sensational – an iced mousse filled apple made out of a delicately light toffee (colour of a granny smith). Because of coming election our water was served in champagne glasses!! No wine, but we were surprised by a group of 4 whom circulated the tables singing opera arias. Great night. I could get used to this life style!!

Saturday 27th Sept: Looong breakfast with Rudi. Alexander did all our flight arrangements: 1. Luggage had to be cleared by Agriculture Dept. 2. Entry forms pre typed, 3. Issue of Transit Control Card (entering Galapagos Islands very closely controlled/monitored. Plane delayed.

STUFF UP

We missed the flight!! Long story. After initial panic, it all worked out, but we will miss a day on boat. We booked into a cheaper style hotel, clean and quaint (had personality). We had a visit from Quasar Manager – upset re our problems and still apologizing for the Grace cancellations etc. etc.

Sunday 28th: Picked up as planned and through formalities at airport OK. Staff kept a beady eye on us, then had VIP escort to plane. Flew via Guayquil (pronounced Wayakee). Wilmot Cox met us at San Cristobal – windy and dry. We went by taxi to Galapagos Interpretive Centre – very interesting and well presented. Was set up by the locals for the locals as well as us tourists. Population of islands is 21,000, but was only 2,000 people 50 years ago. Meanwhile, visitors now at 141,000 per annum – from NIL 1970. Obvious problems. Walked back along beach front – saw sea lions everywhere, frigates and a few boobies + other birds. Lunch at a restaurant, then to a ‘day room’ at a hotel for siesta. Mary and I alone returned to waterfront to watch the wildlife, before dinner at 7pm (Election results announced and a noisy parade of happy voters entertained us). Evolution sighted by us whilst still eating and we were on board by 8.30pm. Had an interesting night zodiac transfer and saw iridescent plankton en route.

Monday 29th: Santa Cruz Island. From jetty we went by bus up into highlands. Saw sink holes, fly catchers, warblers, finches++ - mossy rain forest a surprise. Then down lower to see Giant Tortoises – fabulous. Saw dozens+ of them. Amazing. BBQ lunch by the tortoises. Visited Charles Darwin Centre – Lonesome George (with Georgette and Georgina). Walked back to docks through the town of Puerto Ayora – through the usual array of tourist shops and also plenty of stores catering for less organized tourists (thinking of Maurice).

Tuesday 30th: San Salvador Island (aka Santiago Is.) Zodiac’d to James Bay in a.m. 2 mile walk – saw sea lions+++ (including a pup a few hours old), fur seals, marine iguanas, turtles (copulating pair), Galapagos herons. Rest of group went snorkeling and saw lots of turtles, but I couldn’t manage it – sad.

3 hour sail to Bartolome Island. Saw Galapagos penguins, blue footed boobies. Climbed to summit (650 meters), a strenuous hike, but with great view of island and many surrounding islands far and near. Interesting close landscape with collapsed volcano crater and fascinating vegetation growing in grey soil.

The others visited the Interpretive Centre – Mary and I walked around for our final sea lion spotting. Back to Evolution for a snack pre trans. to airport.

Wednesday 1st October: Genossa Island (aka Tower Is.) anchored in Darwin Bay – a cauldron. Zodiac landing to rocks below Prince Phillip Steps (named because P. Phillip slipped down them many years ago). Saw 1,000's birds – many varieties. Great time.

Cold shrimp soup which one adds pop corn to, for lunch + yacca bread which I love. All delicious as all the meals are proving to be. In p.m. landed on near by beach (calm clear waters and white sand), with more fabulous bird sightings – this time in mangroves and near a creek with cactus growing close to the mangroves. A beautiful area.

Thursday 2nd: Early wake up 0620 as whales sighted – panga ride. Saw several good, but brief appearances. Lots of spouts noted, then on way back to Evolution, a pod of common dolphins spotted in distance. We caught up with difficulty, then fabulous viewing traveling beside them (like 3 meters close) – about 200+ dolphins.

After breakfast went ashore on Punta Espinos – Fernandina Island, for 2 – 3 hours. Sea lions, marine iguanas, turtles, flightless cormorants, great blue heron with a chick, octopus and lava/mangrove viewing. Another great time. Saw the cormorants fishing.

Short mid day crossing to Isabela Island – Tagus Cove. Had a 'power walk' up hill to view Darwin Lake, around crater and to top for overall viewing. Highlight was a hawk whom 'followed' us and made 4 x close landings. Nearly able to touch him – could have it we'd been game or silly enough.

Friday 3rd: Sailed all night and till after breakfast to reach North Seymour Island. New sightings included the Magnificent Frigate bird and saw several males 'displaying' (their red pouches), Land Iguana's – more colourful than the marine version, but not as big as I'd thought they would be. Had excellent blue footed boobie viewing and close to a chick being fed by parent. Usual viewing of sea lions, marine ig's, pelicans etc. etc.

Lunched near Baltra Island, where we refueled – had to stay indoors, then ½ hour sail to Black Turtle Cove on Santa Cruz for panga ride through mangroves to see black sharks and turtles – lots of mating turtle sighting. I spotted about a dozen black shark – about 10 inches long, but easily identified by their dorsal fins.

Final evening on Evolution included cocktails with crew and usual thank you's. Enjoyed our farewell dinner of steak and lobster – delicious, then a relaxing evening out on back deck for our last open bar session.

Saturday 4th: Liesurely morning with panga transfer to shore and en route witnessed 100's frigates demanding fish from commercial fishing boat – we had to duck our heads as they circled around. The birds were not disappointed with the scraps given to them.

Quote from our guide on Evolution as we left:

Don't weep for what has ended, but smile for what has happened.

A few delays with our flights back to Quito – got there too late for our planned evening meal – oh well.

Sunday 5th: 0900 departure for Cotopaxi National Park. Unfortunately low clouds and cool so not good viewing. Did see 1 volcano south of Cotopaxi and just a snippet of snow and ice on base of Cotopaxi. Had a good walk around a lake with a few birds and quite a bit of colourful groundcover and shrubs. The Park and local farmers have an arrangement: cattle have limited access to park – a few days/month and in return, Park gets to shoot a beast – 1 each 3 months – to feed condors and other wildlife. We were at our highest altitude of 3,800m – we managed o.k., but certainly were aware of it and had to take it slowly whilst walking.

Had lunch at Hacienda La Cienega – built by Spaniards on large acreage. There is a long avenue from gate to hacienda of eucalypts – first planting of them in Ecuador and they are now protected.

Evening meal at Rafael Osterlicht's (as in our first night in Quito). Tonight we ate al la carte – presumably to compensate for missing out last night. Lovely meal – prawns and pork.

Monday 6th: 1030 pick up, Delay with V.I.P. flight to Coca, then 2 ¼ hr. motorized canoe with canopy down Napo River – wider than I'd thought. Lots of floating timber and sand banks. A 'lookout' sat up front with a 2-way, directing driver at rear. Saw lots of signs population, small crafts of all shapes and sizes including large punts ferrying up to 6 semi trailers. Passed an oil drilling site with its ever burning flame – that flame attracts tons of insects which die, litter and pollute area, + causing a deficiency in normal food supply for insect eating creatures – and so the cycle of problems is multiplied.

We got off our large canoe on a little grassed sandbank – walked across it and then loaded into our paddle powered dugouts. (Later found out that because there had been no rain for a little over 1 week, the water level was low, and thus our larger canoe couldn't get into mouth of 'our' creek to dock, where exchange usually takes place). We met our team that we would have for the week. Santiago – naturalist, Gabrielle – local guide (and heavily involved in the Echo Lodge development from the very beginning), and lastly Byron – a local lad whom sat up back working hard with the paddle and an excellent wildlife spotter.

Off up the blackwater creek – a magical event. Dull at first, but still saw birds, butterflies, moths and jungle growth. After dark, lots fire flies and bats feeding on insects and a threatening thunder/lightning storm. Mary & I both wonder if this week might even be better than Galapagos – big shoes to fill.

Met at the dock with a glass of fresh fruit juice. Our hut is right on lagoon – rustic and fabulous.

Tuesday 7th: 0445 wake-up. B'fast and boot fitting 0500 with 0535 departure. Canoe across lagoon and a few mins up a creek per paddle, then a 45 mins. Walk to tower – 112 meters high beside a huge kapok tree – viewing deck was sheltered under the top of this tree. Mist still in undergrowth below us.

Initially frustrating with glasses and binocular lens fogging up++, but that settled and saw a wide variety of birds – scattered about and mostly alone and at a distance. Santiago had very strong viewing gear which gave us good looks, but my binoculars are pretty good. Saw 2 pairs macaws with good vision and numerous tucans – 2 varieties. Rained most of way back to canoe. Hot chocolate waiting for us on return, then I went up dining room tower for a look see and had good viewing in now sunny day. Afternoon paddle down a new creek, around lagoon etc. 3 x types monkey seen including night monkeys whom live in trunk of a palm tree and guys know the time they emerge for the night – it was a quick look as they scurried up the trunk off into other trees. Lots of birds and 2 camon.

Wednesday 8th: 0515 wake-up – raining, but eased as we set off. Up Anangu Creek, then motorized canoe to Clay lick I. Had a 30 min. wait then down they came ++++ - 3 x types of parakeets. Magic. Then back down river and a 10 minute walk to Clay lick II – again the wait, then they came – another 3 varieties and different from the previous lick. No one sure why they come at approx. the same time everyday, and why lick I is always earlier than II. There is also a definite pecking order.

On way out we saw 2 x crested owls. Lunch at warehouse and bought a few nick knacks made by the locals. Crossed creek then a brief walk to see pygmy monkey (smallest in world) – cute. It rained++ briefly then lots of birds again and a good sighting of giant otter, on our way back to resort.

Thursday 9th: A great morning. Sleep in till 0600!! Paddled a little from wharf and saw several Golden Tamarin monkeys then back to b.w.c. – several new birds – Santiago carries an MP3 with bird calls – it works to attract them

Then a few capajin monkeys (biggest in area) and suddenly lots of squirrel monkeys – had a long and good look. They are so funny. Heard and saw a huge splash inches from our canoe – was from the tail of a very large fish whose name I can't remember, but later was shown a picture of one that had been caught, and 3 people needed to hold it up.

Then our giant otters came out again– brief encounter, but clear.

Walked through dense rain forest area. Heard howler and spider monkeys. Walking a challenge – like up the tower – high humidity, sweat and misting glasses. Late p.m. we had another brief paddle and a 1 hour walk up a new path. Saw 2 tucans. Back to canoe in dark. Camon hunt – 1 very close and with a big splash.

Friday 10th: Adventure day. 0630 departure in heavy mist, but not raining. Had great viewing again going down the creek, then transferred to a canoe with outboard motor, Santiago, Gabrielle, Byron, cook, driver and 1 help and our back packs + food and cooking gear for 3 meals. Was not a big canoe. We went further downstream on the Napo River for 2-3 hours, to a flooded forest lake area. An amazing time.

Accommodation built indigenous style, - a unique experience. Canoe'd and walked. Vultures at hut, busy leaf eater ants everywhere. Ate well and had a brief walk after dark. Howler monkeys heard++ afar.

Saturday 11th: 0630 b'fast, pack up and further tour looking for the river dolphins – no luck, but lots of birds. Had a 45 min. walk about ½ back up the river, then headed for base. We must have been late as they sent out another canoe in case we were having problems. Claxon sounded all clear when we got to the Warehouse.

Brief rest in hammocks before Mary had a Cleansing Ceremony with the Shaman – a genuine one and still holds an important role in their community. It was hot work for the paddlers as we went back up the creek, but we got to see a very rare zig zag heron.

Lazy afternoon – I went up tower, but birds were lazy too. Had an evening session with Santiago who showed us maps and his ecology lecture and other things on his computer.

Sunday 12th: Usual morning – 3-4 hours paddling – good monkey viewing and good bird sightings. 4pm paddle and walk till dark. Saw a few bits and pieces.

Monday 13th: 0630 departure. Again good bird/monkey viewing then the return 2 ½ hour motor canoe to Coca – plane back to Quito late.

But not too late. Went straight to lunch at Octavo de Corpus – a delightful old home renovated with Chinese and local furniture. Apparently never frequented by the locals, but great food and hospitality. Went down to the basement to see his cellar. Went back to Colona Villa to get our stored cases – Rudy was out, but Ric phoned him and Rudy actually ran a considerable distance back, just to say hello/goodbye. Was like being with family. Planned trip to a museum was a no go – closed for renovations.

Flight to Lima on schedule and to our 5 star hotel for 5 hours – a luxurious room – their sweeties were to die for.

Tuesday 14th: Early pick-up and flight to Cusco – city doubled in population in the 10 years since we were here, but still love it. Went direct to hotel to book in (room not ready of course so early), had coca tea, then set off on our tours. Drove out of town to Moray site. Amazing. First 4 or 5 levels are pre Inca.

An Australian archeologist – Henry Earls in 1980's with help of others, discovered the true agricultural significance of site. Mind boggling.

Moras salt mines great – the owners work hard for little return. Lunch at Pio's El Huacatay was yet 'another memorable experience', had a quick visit to PIsaq markets and of course enjoyed the drive along Sacred Valley – We traveled in the opposite direction to what we did 10 years ago – snow on the high mountains this time.

Quick visit to Museo de Arte Precolumbian – I unfortunately got too hot and left a little early. Dinner at Hotel Monasterio. Food fine, but I guess service annoyed me a little and was not a particularly relaxing experience.

Wednesday 15th: All aboard the Orient-Express Andean Explorer – heading for Puno and Lake Titicaca. This train trip, although in total contrast to our Canadian Rocky Mountaineer trip, is comparable in enjoyment. The open viewing car was out back of a carriage with a glassed roof and posher than Canada. Seating was at the tables where we ate. Scenery changing – initially lush busy farming, frequent towns and signs of industry (mud brick and roof tile production, and usage of eucalypts for rafters, fire wood etc.). Then climbing gradually to bare Andean mountains, cold sleeting weather before moving to flat bare planes as we approached Juliaca. Here the train traveled close (like inches close) to a long market area – very poor market area which specialized in junk and second hand goods. It was teeming with sus atmosphere and not a place I needed to go back and have another look. When the train had passed by, gates closed and the track quickly filled with their activities. Juliaca is a poor city. Built because it is on ancient, but still used cross roads – east/west & north/south, and now has airport, bus terminals and university. A place to pass through quickly.

Thursday 16th: 0700 meeting with Sara. Walked from hotel to nearby dock below. Fun time at Uros after a trip along dedicated canal through reeds to islands. Population of 800. Fishing and tourism their livelihood. They now have solar power and tv's – both systems donated by an ex P.M. of Japan. On 'our' island there were 3 women and 1 male. He gave us a brief run down and demonstration on how the islands are formed etc. Mary & I were then secreted into separate reed homes and dressed up in the local clothing – then photos before the big sales pitch to buy their local crafts. We both bought more than we'd planned and needed. We then got onto one of their reed built watercrafts for a 10 minute ride – before leaving their island the 3 women sung to us – a local song in their dialect then twinkle twinkle little star.

From there we motored further away from Uros to the island of Llachon where we saw their local lifestyles and visited a kindergarten – got there in time to see the mother of the day arrive with lunch for all the kids – fried egg and pasta - looked good. Kids were all well nourished and happy. Another ½ hour away was the island of Taquile whose heritage is traced back to pre Incan times. We ate there – delicious trout after soup and hot sauce. This island is famous for the women weaving and the men knitting.

Friday 17th: Another great day. Drove through Puno, up and over the hills behind and headed south towards Sillustani – saw pre Incan and Incan burial sites – all effected by earthquakes and set on a hill beside a beautiful lake in a volcano crater. On leaving this area we visited one of several 'typical homes' open to tourists. The female showed us her weaving, outdoor cooking facilities using llama dung as fuel, her collection of herbs and grinding stone – also her mother's grave which was a centre piece in the courtyard.

Next stop was Lampa – like all towns the Plaza was a feature and in it we saw a few Quenuales trees before we toured in the Church of Immaculate Conception – full of surprises. A large replica of the picture "The Last Supper" had been well done and dates to early Spanish times. In another area was a replica of Michael Angelo's "The Peter" – donated by a local. A huge sepulcher featured skulls and long bones. Then down below church to see pre Inca catacombs and saw the beginnings of tunnels – one to gold mines, one heading to Cusco and the last towards Argentina. These tunnels were kept secret from invading Spanish because of the bones in catacombs.

Pukara was our next town to visit which boasts a small but excellent Inca museum highlighting local diggings. From there we had an hour drive over a mountain on a scenic route to Tinajani to see incredible natural stone formations – great sensations and with not too much imagination, many faces and figures could be ‘seen’. High up on a hill was a formation which clearly looked like a man squatting near a rock. A self appointed guide (whom had had a plentiful chew on coca leaves was quick to inform us the man is called Alberto and he is squatting to do ‘big jobbies’!!

Drove back to Puno via Juliaca which looked no better from road than train. Still not a nice place. But all the small towns had been clean and friendly.

Saturday 18th: Another day – sunny. Headed south along the lake. Visited the phallic temple “Inka Uyo” – not that dramatic, but of interest, the early Spanish priests were so offended by these stone carvings they were all instantly destroyed. What we saw today were all years later retrieved from private residences and an amusing aside was the church built by said priests, had standing discreetly on top of a dome a small phallic symbol – the locals had the last laugh and presumably never noted by the priests.

After that we drove for quite a while through rural areas beside the lake as we headed towards Ccopa Amaya – ancient carved rockface known as the Puerto de Amaru Muru – but of more interest to us was the fact that it was a busy farming time and we saw many many locals sewing their harvests – most had oxen or mule drawn wooden hoes, but in some cases the hoes being pushed by men and always the women following behind with the seed. Had coca tea with a local guy, his wife and daughter.

Further south 3 churches/and a museum were all closed, but we pushed on south seeing in hazy distance snow clad mtns. over lake, in Bolivia. Coming home we stopped the car and walked down to lake – just for the sake of it, and Henry our driver decided to drive down and pick us up. Good of him, but he got bogged. He alas had no idea how to get out of the sand/gravel – we could see nothing in the area to assist.. We 3 woman did a lot of pushing and eventually Mary suggested using car mats under tyres – it worked. He was super embarrassed and pride a little dented, then to add to his distress he was pulled over by police not far from Puno – for no apparent reason – seemingly they were suspicious of the all but new vehicle (privately owned) that he was driving and we were on the road from Bolivia. Seemingly police harassment is not unusual and often money changes hands, but we didn’t see that happen this time.

Sunday 19th: 0630 departure and clear flight to Lima. Met by Alberto and tour through privately owned huge home now full of many amazing pictures (all religious) and the décor of rooms great to see – stained glass windows, ornate high ceilings etc.. A separate area held many valuable relics (Incan mostly – metal, stone) and then early Spanish gear – armor etc. Lunch at Café del Museo – outdoor dining in museum grounds and again a lovely meal – 3 courses. Before going into museum proper, Alberto took us to a smaller area which had Incan carvings – all of a sexual nature and one would have to say, mostly R rated material. The main museum again, had incredible displays of Incan artifacts, but walking through their store room was mind boggling – shelves full and overflowing with thousands of amazing objects – all as interesting as the main displays – I could have spent longer in the store room than the main area.

Back to the hotel by 4pm and we had a few hours of relaxing in luxury – long soak in bath.

Dinner at Huaca Pucllana restaurant which was situated beside an area of excavations dating to 300 A.D. The temple built of abode bricks with air spaces to cope with earthquakes. % of profits from restaurant go to restoration/further excavations. Incan’s did not know of the temple – site would have been long covered long before Incan habitation and it was only very recently discovered. A great atmosphere to dine out at.

Monday 20th: 0430 pick up. Clocks forward by 2 hours for flight down to Santiago. We went direct to lunch at a lovely restaurant with great food/wine. Then off on a mainly walking tour for rest of afternoon. The King of Jordan was in town, so unable to enter most of scheduled buildings – not to worry. Drove to Santa Lucia Hill – a scenic site in middle of city, owned by city and all now parklands – after parking we walked to top for good views of city and surrounding hills. Dined at a tapes/wine bar – a relaxed fun evening.

Tuesday 21st: On the move again – 0430 pick up to airport and flight to Calama. Desolate drive to San Pedro with a short detour to Death Valley – a spectacular introduction to this area. Also saw our first vinacos. Awasi Hotel: Amazing. Had late breakfast on arrival, then after getting settled in to our accommodation – a mud brick rounded construction with thatched roof – bedroom, large bathroom area with a huge shower recess and a door leading to a private sunny outdoor annex – for sunning or showering outdoors. By the front door was a further area with tables, lounges etc. which could be shared between 2 apartments. The main public area is all open air – large fire places that get lit at night, pool, the bar and further seating, lounges everywhere + dining under a fixed roof, but open as is the kitchen. Mary & I walked a few blocks to shopping area for a look see and a little shopping.

4PM pick up. 2 hour walk around ‘valley rim’ down a steep sandy decline to flat base, 1 km walk across this floor then entered Kari Canyon (an ancient riverbed)– some hairy rock climbing. A spectacular 2 km. walk with bright colour rock faces, salt collections on rocks and at times one could hear the cold salt crust cracking. Our jeep was waiting for us at the other end and we drove on to Luna Valley for sun set. Lots of pictures – another magic moment.

We had pre dinner drinks and nibbles in front of open fire and then long after dinner talking with folk at other tables.

Wednesday 22nd: 0930 pick up. New guide who is also our driver. Mario. Drove south to Toconao – a lovely small village with a wee church – built with love, not money. Police check again – assuring Mario had appropriate license. On to Chaxa Pond for flamingo viewing. Not a lot of them, but fabulous reflections. Country this morning quite different with several oasis areas and lots of desert ground cover. Saw wild donkeys.

5PM pick up for afternoon tour. Drove north to Catarpe – pretty valley with an old disused church set up on a small hill. En route we climbed a steep hill to see ruins on site of an old Imperial Inca Trail – this used to be an o/n area for travelers and crops etc. used to be planted in the area for the travelers use. The river ran along this valley.

We then drove back to Pukarade Quitar – a 12th century settlement of pre Incan time, which later became an Incan Fortress. A few kms. from there is an almost hidden entrance to a valley – guarded by stone carved faces – one female and one male and beyond them was the beginning of a secret passage through the mountain behind Quitar Fortress. These places were oozing atmosphere. Also another lovely sunset and clear view of the cone shaped volcano – Licancabur that dominates the landscape where ever one is.

Thursday 23rd: Fab day (again!!) Full day tour to Tara Salt Lake. Climbed steadily out of San Pedro – east – past Licancabur volcano – it has lands mines on Chile side ex 1977 war Argentina v Chile, so mountain climbers can only approach it from Bolivia. Still climbing up and through Jama Pass – scenery and lighting magnificent – highest point for us was approx. 4,800 mts – just a photo stop. Passed by a few salt lakes – some frozen – saw vicuana++ and a few birds/llamas.

Bolivia very close by. Turned off the main road after about 2 hours driving and traveled a further 1 hour to Tara Lake. That track passed Pakana Monks rock formations – lots of images could be identified from different angles, by salt lakes at a distance and one we stopped at that had a few flamingo in it. The track basically is not a track but a wide red earth plane and you just ‘picked your own route’. Windy++

There was a herd of llamas at Tara Lake – this lake is on a large plain which has huge red cliffs surrounding it – some of course way in the distance. Mario prepared our gourmet picnic lunch – snuggled in close to the jeep for shelter, but with magnificent outlook and the glass of red wine which at that altitude and with too much food, should have been avoided – *but how could one??*

Although not adversely affected by altitude, that evening for first time felt “bloated”. No nausea, pain etc. – just felt as though I’d eaten twice what I had.

Friday 24th: Drove north to Putriani Hot Springs. Different terrain yet again. “Our” pool was longer than most, so could swim, float and had a waterfall cum spa – which was invigorating. All set in a deep long valley with high cliffs surrounding us. Water temp. less than we’d expected. Had a delicious morning/tea/snack looking down the valley.

Back to Awasi – shower, final pack then relaxed with wine till lunch 2.30 – 3.30 before 4pm departure (given farewell note from manager:

*“May the desire to discover new cultures and landscapes be lasting.
May travel always be a way to arrive at a new home”.*

and a bag of chocolates + lots of personal farewells by staff – they know how to do it proper!!) to Calama airport and back to Santiago, Hotel Orly, Valentina and Padrica. Another home base.

Saturday 25th: Our free day. Cool and cloudy day. Had late b’fast then walked to downtown Plaza, into Cathedral that had been closed last time we tried, – wandered around the area for a while then walked back – about 3 hours walking in total.

City was quiet, as it is Election Day tomorrow and lots of things closed, including a lot of restaurants etc. We ate next door - the only one open in near vicinity, but we had planned to visit there some time anyhow. When we left at 9.30pm no other customers had presented and they closed as we left. They did, however, serve wine, which we had not expected.

Sunday 26th: 0500 pick up. Cloudy flight south, but saw several snow topped mountains and volcano’s pushing above the clouds. Very green on landing with gorse bush, blossoms etc. Again city very much in election mode and we had to drive an alternate route to our first destination, because of closed roads. Petrohue Falls a good introduction to the emerald coloured fast running waters cascading down the valley from Lake Todos los Santos. Whilst walking back to vehicle, clouds cleared over yet another idyllic cone shaped volcano – pictures taken urgently in case it was our only chance – little did we know.

Hotel has glorious outlook over the lake from our room on top level. The volcano dominates the area and the rest of the day cleared to a cloudless day and we had a 3 hour trek with guide after lunch. We soon discovered more volcano’s and surrounding mountains – tracked back along shores of the lake. (And we thought we wouldn’t take that many pictures down here??)

Monday 27th: Another great day –Catamarian trip along lake past all our volcano’s and viewing some lovely countryside with quite a lot of private residences – all only accessed by water. School kids stop in town during the week – home weekends. Disembarked at Peulla wharf and walked about 10 mins along a scenic walk to ‘town’ – certainly a few locals, but mostly tourist accomm./activities etc. We lunched at a lovely hotel with magnificent view of valley (and mag. food), before going on a short trek up to a waterfall.

On return to Petrohue, we were met by our guide/driver whom drove us back to Puerto Varas and our next hotel. The drive was mostly around another large lake – the drive was a feast of yellow, red flowering trees, plus all fruit tree blossoms and by some pretty expensive properties and stud farms. The hotel overlooks the lake/city and set on the side of a hill – we enter at top level and go down to rooms.

Of interest, it seems everywhere we have been in Peru and Chile, that dogs are more than plentiful – roaming the streets freely and one suspects a lot have n.f.a. – In Peru, Sara pointed out that out in rural areas they wait on side of the road for passenger bus returning with workers, shoppers, school kids etc. expecting that food will come there way (and I guess it must for them to keep the practice up). At this hotel there were 2 or 3 dogs that checked every person that came out on to the street – hoping obviously for handouts. We are told rabies is a problem – we kept our distance.

Evening meal (to change the subject) at Restaurant Club de Yates was a special one – building out over water and delicious food and super attentive service. Comparable with our previous special meals.

Tuesday 28th: A different day. 1 hour+ drive west through Puerto Montt, to coast via interesting suburbia, then rural areas to coast to get ferry across to Chiloe Island – saw sea lions and dolphins on crossing then day on island – traveled about half way down it's length to main area of Castro. Here the main feature was: 1. a visit to a wooden church that has UNESCO World Heritage protection and a really interesting collection of relics in a back room – OLD books, wooden objects, clothing etc. Church as stated is entirely made of wood – externally it gets painted a different colour each time painting occurs, and internally certainly in contrast to the lavish gold filled/decorated churches recently visited. 2. Brightly painted wooden slat homes with clusters of these built over water so the fishing owners could moor boats beneath. 3. Went through their local museum which is heavily themed on their fishing history and also that they over the years were able to withstand external pressure to 'change their ways/modernise'. From Castro drove through fishing ports, locals markets – all very quaint and yester world. Unfortunately rained on and off most of day, but did have a few sunny spells.

Had our worst meal of trip at hotel – service and food lousy and to cap it off got woken up later to sign our drinks bill, by dining room staff.

Wednesday 29th: Off on our last leg of this adventure. 0700 pick up. Cloudy flight way south to Puerto Varas. A yet another fabulous day with a full and long day drive north to our final destination in Torres del Paine National Park.

Drive initially over flat and vast expanses of mostly bare land – large acreage properties that can only support one beast (mostly sheep) per acre! Soon came across our first condor – good view as he was on land, then took to air and flew over us. Then we saw guanaco's (slightly larger than the vinacu's in Atacama desert) and Lesser Rhea, eagles, and Magellan geese seen everywhere.

Visited Milodon Cave where local land owners discovered remains of an herbivore – probably 12,000 ago. It was a huge cave, with great outlook, but surprisingly no evidence of human habitat has ever been found.

We kept driving and gradually moved towards brilliantly coloured lakes and the emerging Towers – initially barely visible through cloud, but weather improved and better views as we got closer and weather kept clearing – lots of panic picture taking again in case it was our last chance. Came across lots more wild life within the park and saw 2 eagles trying to escort a condor out of their territory – they eventually agreed to disagree. Then a pair of male guanaco's chasing each other up and down a hill (about 50 metres from us) with the female looking down from above at a distance. Scenery in park is spectacular, with every bend in the road giving a new vista, new lake and demanding pictures be taken. Wind as warned and expected was strong and standing still for picture taking is a constant battle. Official velocity that day 75kph, but weather, although cold, not as cold as I expected – had wind breaker on, but not the long underwear etc.

Thursday 30th: Boring – just another great and different day. Started off wet and very windy (later found out gusting to 100km's/hour. Saw lots of guanaco's. Tried to walk to Pehoe Falls – raining lightly and we were given an option – I got out of car to take a picture, but it was too windy – had my glasses blown off (caught them in flight) and hard work getting back into vehicle. Walking attempts were mostly abandoned, but the clouds cleared and we were soon getting our best views of The Towers from the other side of Pehoe Lake. It was scenic driving still where ever we went and got to Grey Lake about midday. Our lake/glacier trip was in doubt at that stage, but amazing vista of same from Hosteria Lago Grey, where we made good use of their warm indoors viewing area before having lunch there – just a 5 course meal with wine. Ventured out onto deck occasionally to take mandatory pics. and by 3pm were on board Grey II heading towards the glacier. At least that's what we were told. Because of the still high windy conditions, waves were splashing across the front of boat and virtually saw nothing for the over 1 hour trip (it had looked so much closer from afar). Anyhow, despite the frustration, it was all worth it and enjoyed the close up look at the glacier, which we were told is receding at an alarming rate. Between the 2 points where it goes down into the lake, our boat stopped and a lump of ice was retrieved from water – thus on return trip to terra firma, we all had complimentary drinks with 10,000 year ice. The trip back of course of much smoother with the wind behind us and we were all surprised at the number of smaller bergs we had passed unsighted on the way up!

We got back to hosteria about 8.40pm – temp 6 deg. and raining again.

Friday 31st: Woke to rain – 4 deg. when we set off for the day. Drove to a few scenic spots as per itinerary – yes very scenic, but too wet to appreciate them properly. Roberto our guide, says it is the first rain at this time of year that he has seen in the 10 years he has been guiding – and I believe him, as roads and heavy vehicles were causing problems. We came across a large tourist bus (full of course) bogged at right angles across road whilst trying to do a U turn- he had been having problems and knew better than to go down the hill to the lake we had just left. (We stopped for a while – our guys trying to help, but situation only got worse for bus. We learned later another bus arrived numerous hours later to get passengers and the bus was expected to be stuck for a few days).

Fresh snow on mtn. peaks. Thus we arrived early into Puerto Natales and our Hotel CostAustralis – nicely situated by water and we had a lazy afternoon watching boats coming and going in very choppy waters – showers too frequent to let us get a planned walk in.

Enjoyed our complimentary pisco sour before yet another great meal (al la carte and full bottle of wine) – it is always a surprise with the wine – do we get to buy it or enjoy their selection. One thing for sure we love Chile wines – did not taste any that we didn't like – really like that is. Will look around to see if we can get them back home. And the unexpected 'pre paid' drinks that we have encountered has certainly kept our budget on line.

Saturday 1st November: 1030 departure. Cold and raining. Soon saw more fresh snow on hills, then on road side, then driving through falling snow – only light, however.

Cold trip with continuing intermittent sleet, rain and snow. Drove into Otway Sound, but no penguins – they had been there in good numbers 3 weeks earlier – could it have been too cold for even them?! Temp. 2 – 8 deg. all day.

Had a quick look around Punta Arenas – in rain unfortunately, then to airport and return to Santiago.

Sunday 2nd: Our free day and it was a lovely sunny day. We braved the underground rail system. Easy to negotiate and great/frequent service. Wooden wheels.

Markets everywhere – fresh produce as well as the tourist things. Shops began opening after noon. Visited San Francisco Church – another church seemingly built by love not money. Rough hewn stone work walls etc. A favorite of all the churches we had been to. Took a long walk along river near our hotel.

Evening dinner at Camino Real which was on top of a wooded hill in mid suburbia (not the hill we had visited earlier) and a special moment with sun setting over mountains as we arrived, with food, wine and service to match the occasion – our farewell meal from Chile.

Monday 3rd: Interesting day. Drove south out of city for a few hours through increasingly rich pastoral areas and surrounding scenic mtns./volcano to Colchagua Valley of vineyard fame. Had 2 vineyard visits. The first owned by a convicted gun manufacturer whom is “wanted overseas” for selling arms to both Iran and USA during the Gulf conflict! He has invested heavily into this wine industry and as well as other diverse community activities – appeased his conscience I guess. They had the best wines, but the second visit to an organic vineyard was also interesting. They get checked on a very regular basis to prove their ongoing organic status.

We ate at H. Orly – al la carte, but we stuffed it up - assumed the spicy/hot main dish wouldn't be too hot – it was – so much for their printed warning.

Tuesday 2nd – Thursday 4th: And so to our last day. Home via B.A. again. Our 11.59pm flight actually left B.A. at 0230 – Mary and I were comfortable for the 6 hour stop-over in the Condor lounge and enjoyed nibbles and scotch – soon got into conversation with fellow passengers and had the US elections results on

TV to watch – the decision was announced just as we were called to board. That delay meant we missed the Sydney to Coffs flight which we thought would prove to be expensive, but Qantas just issued new tickets – and just 9 hours to wait!! So it was 40 hours from Hotel Orly to Bluff Road.