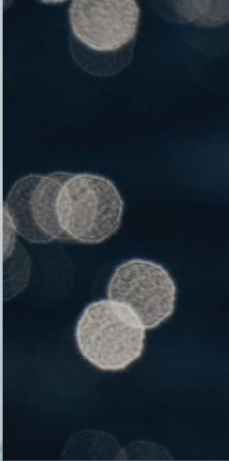


TRAVEL + LEISURE



THE HOTELS ISSUE

This page, from top: Sunlight in Los Huemules nature reserve; Explora El Chaltén's spa, set amid a forest of ñirre trees; hikers on the Perito Moreno Glacier.



From top: A telescope in the lobby at Eolo for surveying the valley and the Barrancas de Anita mountains beyond; horseback riding on Eolo's 10,000-acre grounds; early morning at Eolo, in the Anita Valley.

CHASING

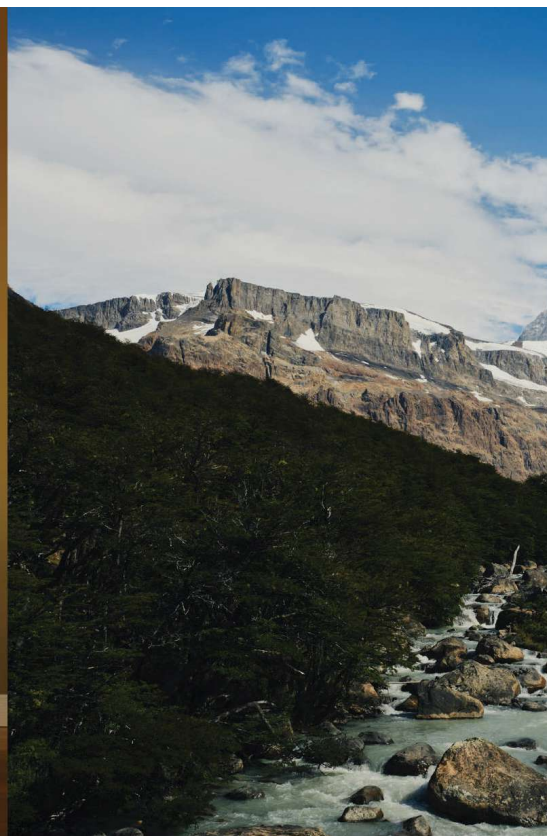
The wild stretches of Argentinean Patagonia draw intrepid souls in search of icy peaks, golden steppes, and raging gales. As **Mark Johanson** reports, two luxurious adventure lodges provide a stunning home base for glacier-hopping. **Photographs by Nick Ballón**



the

WIND





The gusts of wind felt like invisible shoves. As my horse clomped along the northeastern face of Cerro Frías hill, I knee-gripped the saddle to stay upright, my leather chaps scratching against the thorny bushes that give the nearest resort town, El Calafate, its melodic name. Tawny grasses swayed in the breeze as we trotted, briskly, to a hilltop from where I could see the vast estancias of the Anita Valley to the south and the milky-blue Lago Argentino to the north.

On the Patagonian steppe, beauty reveals itself in whispers, not screams. In the still valley below I could see a teal lagoon speckled pink with flamingos. In the sky, a lone condor soared south toward the three granite spires of Torres del Paine, just over the border in Chile.

I would have stayed in this spot for hours, drinking in the chamomile hues of the southern steppe—if I had been able to keep my eyes open. Wind whipped at them, extracting tears and plastering them back on my face. Plus my horse, Al Capone, was getting testy (I predicted he might when I first heard his name). So we trotted back to his home and my hotel, which, as it turns out, was designed with full awareness of the region's wind—an element that dominates life in Argentinean Patagonia.

Eolo is named after the Greek god Aeolus, keeper of the winds, explained resident manager Valentín Virasoro, flipping his breeze-tousled silver hair out of his eyes as I removed my chaps. He led me to the lobby, where we gazed through the floor-to-ceiling windows. “Most buildings in this region are set in protected valleys, but Eolo sits on top of a hill,” he said. The lodge was placed, rather boldly, he continued, to receive the full force of the austral winds, which blow in from the Southern Ocean unabated.

Fernando Bustillo, the grandson of famed Argentine architect Alejandro Bustillo, designed Eolo in the style of Patagonia's early estancias. It opened in 2004 and was, until this past December, the only high-end hotel in the area (though there are a half-dozen just across the Chilean border in Torres del Paine National Park). Below its gabled roof, 17 rooms are organized in a perfect square, with an enclosed courtyard at the center. Instead of flat-screen TVs, giant windows provide entertainment; the idea is to watch as winds roar around the hotel, smearing clouds like van Gogh brushstrokes.

Even the restaurant felt a little like dinner theater, with the vista beyond the glass walls putting on a nightly show. I feasted on chef Juan Pablo Bonaveri's playful, modern cuisine, which that night included a flaky pink cusk eel served over roasted artichokes, and then retreated to my room with a glass of plummy Malbec. Even for late January, summertime in Argentina, the evening was abnormally hot, so I flung open the windows. Air poured in, disheveling the beige drapes and electrifying my hair. *I've made it*



back to Patagonia, I thought, raising my glass in celebration. And I was captured, once again, by its vigorous embrace.

The wind had stopped me from visiting El Calafate on my last trip to this part of the world, back in 2015. I had set aside a month to see both Chilean and Argentinean Patagonia from top to bottom—which, as any local will tell you, is a rookie mistake. (“He who rushes loses time,” a store clerk in Cochrane, Chile, once told me, quoting an old saying.) Gales at the end of Chile’s Carretera Austral, or Southern Highway, left me stranded in the frontier town of Villa O’Higgins, unable to catch a ferry to Argentina.

For five days I was stuck. I ate spit-roasted lamb, glugged boxed wine with gauchos, and attended the Fiesta Costumbrista, a summer fair where kids race pigs and couples dance to *chamamé* folk music in their finest berets. By the time I finally arrived in Argentina, I had to change course and go back to Chile due to an unbreakable hotel reservation in Torres del Paine.

Now that I had finally returned to Argentina, I wanted to take things slowly. The plan was to focus on two sides of one national park: the 2,800-square-mile Los Glaciares, which cradles a staggering 256 glaciers. On my second day

at Eolo I set out to reach its southern end, following the winds toward the Andes.

Most of the glaciers in the Southern Patagonian Ice Field calve into gem-colored moraine lakes. I crossed one of these lakes on a 20-minute ferry ride to the park’s marquee attraction. Perito Moreno, a mass of ice larger than the city of Buenos Aires, rises 200 feet above Lago Argentino at its eastern edge, and it extends for a staggering 19 miles. Most travelers come here to stroll a network of boardwalks and overlooks, but I wanted to see the glacier from the inside, to understand how wind and water have turned snow into curtains of ice. I hired a guide, strapped on some crampons, and waddled out into its midst.

Perito Moreno is a landmark in constant flux. The glacier inches out of the Andes at a rate of about five feet per day—much of which is later lost to calving and melting. “The path we’re following may not even exist tomorrow,” my ponytailed guide, Iñaki Cezón, shared with a grin. Skirting the edge of the glacier, I watched as huge white boulders thundered down, announcing their departure with crackles and roars before dive-bombing into the lake.

The glacier’s veins revealed themselves, slowly, as I pushed deeper—hues of surreal blue, like toothpaste or

Above, from left: Art by Florencia Fernández Alonso in the lobby of Eolo; glacial waters run through a valley near Explora; prepping for dinner service at Eolo’s restaurant.

laundry detergent, appearing in rivers and caves. I filled my bottle with crisp, mineral water from sapphire ponds. Inside this cocoon, the winds ceased, giving momentary shelter. But when we rode back across the lake and descended onto the steppe, they roared back to life.

There are only two towns in this part of Argentinean Patagonia: El Calafate (where I was staying) and El Chaltén (where I was headed). El Calafate is a longstanding resort village on the edge of Bahía Redonda, a shallow bay on Lago Argentino. Its pine-shaded avenues are a shock of green on the otherwise arid steppe, lined with chocolate factories, barbecue restaurants, and gift shops that sell bittersweet jams made from the berry of the town's namesake plant.

To reach the other town, El Chaltén, I needed to travel four hours north through grassy plains mowed by skittery guanacos, undomesticated cousins of the llama. Along the way, La Leona—a solitary roadhouse on the edge of National Route 40—was the only sign of civilization. Legend has it that, in 1905, American outlaws Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid crashed there after robbing a bank. In the decades that followed, La Leona attracted other rambblers, becoming a staging ground for wide-eyed mountaineers headed up the spindly peaks that loom over the horizon, most notably Mount Fitz Roy. In the mid 1980s, hikers and climbers began stopping at El Chaltén, “Argentina’s newest town,” which didn’t grow old enough for a public cemetery until 2021.



A Wild Tour of Patagonia

WHERE TO STAY

Eolo

This 17-room Relais & Châteaux property near El Calafate pairs fine wines and multicourse meals with adventures like horseback riding and mountain biking in the Patagonian steppe. eolopatagonia.com; doubles from \$1,264.

Explora El Chaltén

Set within the private 14,000-acre Los Huemules nature reserve, this new all-inclusive lodge offers 20 minimalist rooms with eye-popping views of the Marconi Glacier. explora.com; doubles from \$1,835.

WHAT TO DO

Hielo & Aventura

This is the only company authorized to run tours on Perito Moreno Glacier, with

half-day and full-day excursions into the icy core. hieloyaventura.com.

Say Hueque

Travelers embark on adventure outings with high-end touches like gourmet meals and private drivers—plus, this company offsets its on-the-ground carbon emissions by 100 percent. sayhueque.com.

HOW TO BOOK

Jordan Harvey, a member of T+L's A-List of travel advisors, plans off-the-grid Patagonia experiences, from kayaking along the face of Perito Moreno to hiking up to Mount Fitz Roy. jordan@knowmadadventures.com; 612-315-2894; seven-night trips on \$4,999 per person. —M.J.

Over the past three decades, El Chaltén has blossomed into Argentina's trekking capital, with trailheads on its periphery that lead into the northern sector of Parque Nacional Los Glaciares and wild-haired campers sipping yerba mate on its streets. Its main drag, Avenida San Martín, has a craft brewery or taproom on every block, plus third-wave coffee shops, cozy guesthouses, and restaurants that fill the air with the smell of grilled meat.

The arrival of a new hotel from Explora this past December is a big part of El Chaltén's evolution. The company is known for pioneering a model of luxurious all-inclusive adventure lodges in remote pockets of South America that other brands have raced to replicate. Explora's latest lodge sits 10 miles outside of El Chaltén in an extraordinary setting, the private 14,000-acre Los Huemules nature reserve. Its 20 understated rooms overlook the distant Marconi Glacier.

After checking in, I followed the pale blue Río Eléctrico on a six-mile out-and-back trail to the glacier. At the end of the river valley, an innocuous breeze billowed into a fierce gale. By the time I reached an overlook above Marconi's jagged moraine, I had to brace myself against a slippery boulder. An afternoon drizzle veered horizontal with droplets that felt like tiny daggers on my face. A Russian tourist, Yelena Bayeva, who'd joined me for the hike (and seemed to share my masochistic enjoyment of rough air), turned to me and said: “Everybody is going crazy for forest bathing. I think wind bathing is the next big thing.”



Clockwise from top:
Diablo Lagoon at sunrise;
Explora El Chaltén's main
entrance; the hotel's bar
and reception area.

When I returned with tales of extreme gales—of visions of going airborne like a human kite—hotel manager Marisol Sciorto shot me a knowing smile. Explora, she said, was placed in a tunnel where wind thunders out from the Southern Patagonian Ice Field. “The entire property had to be built in a modular fashion in Mendoza, the wine region, and brought here in 90 trucks,” she said. The resulting structure prizes clean lines and muted earth tones, with as little as possible to distract guests from the awesome landscape. “It’s all about the luxury of the essential,” Sciorto explained.

In practice, that means understated rooms, plush beds and powerful showers, bath products made with local herbs, such as *paramela*, and ceramic tableware made by the Ushuaia-based studio Alfar by mixing Andean clay with local stones and minerals.

That evening, I learned that the locally sourced concept extended to the dining, too. Restaurateur Pablo Jesús Rivero and chef Guido Tassi, both of the Buenos Aires institution Don Julio (ranked first

on the Latin America’s 50 Best Restaurants list in 2020) designed the menu, which features local vegetables and meats—most notably lamb. I watched the meat being grilled over an open fire in the *quincho*, a small, smoke-filled building near the kitchen. Paired wines came from the northern Patagonian provinces of Neuquén and Río Negro, where the earthy reds are fresher than those in Mendoza since the vineyards are cooled year-round by—what else?—the intense winds that roll off the Andes.

Of course, these were merely the spoils I returned to each evening after a day of exhilarating guided adventure. The expedition team, the majority of whom were women, told me that the next morning would be windless—a rarity, and the perfect opportunity to ascend to the base of Mount Fitz Roy. The 11,171-foot, saw-toothed peak symbolizes Patagonia in stock images, Google searches, and the clothing-brand logo (founder Yvon Chouinard pioneered the Californian Route up Fitz Roy in 1968 alongside Doug Tompkins, cofounder of the North Face).

We departed on our 14-mile journey to Fitz Roy at sunrise, following the Río Piedras Blancas up to its namesake glacier, which tumbles down a cliff in the shape of an hourglass. Farther along, I grabbed a handful of chaura berries, which tasted as tart as apple skins, and popped them in my mouth for an energy boost. Small black-and-gold birds called thorn-tailed rayaditos trilled

Below, from left: Sheltering from a gale inside Puesto Cagliero, a mountain refuge; afternoon tea at Eolo; Puesto Cagliero, with Diablo Lagoon behind it.



morning anthems on the path ahead, rustling through gnarled lengas, trees that live for about 300 years and spend the next 400 decomposing on the forest floor. Near the campground at Río Blanco, we began a demanding 1,400-foot ascent, zigzagging above the tree line to Laguna de los Tres, a mirror-like turquoise lagoon.

As we reached the summit, I thought to myself, *This feels like it's been stolen from a fairy tale.* The iconic peak, which lures hikers and climbers from around the world, pierced the clouds, looming over a crowd of more than a hundred who'd gathered to pay their respects. I feasted my eyes on the fabled mountain, a multitiered palace etched in granite.

On my last day, I set off into Los Huemules to visit the Cagliero Glacier, the final swath of big ice I would see on this trip. By this time the good-weather window had passed, and the forecast predicted 65-mile-an-hour winds by the evening. But my guide thought our group of six would be able to make it out and back before the weather turned.

Starting near two lagoons with distant Fitz Roy views, we spotted a pair of emerald-green austral parakeets—who appeared far more tropical than their surroundings. We crossed a hanging bridge over the Río Diablo and tiptoed over trickling streams

on bridges the size of balance beams. Bald-faced granite domes on the horizon called to mind Yosemite's cliffs.

There were moments of pure peace in the forest, when I could hear nothing but birdsong. Then, as we emerged at Cagliero's milky moraine lake and saw waves frothing the surface as if it were the ocean, the whirl of newly electric air became a static drone.

UFO-shaped lenticular clouds—an ethereal indicator of heavy winds—had now draped over the mountaintops like Salvador Dalí clocks, slinking down in our direction. We retreated to a small, fire-heated shelter near the glacier's base. No sooner had we bitten into our sandwiches than pebbles began tapping against the windows, whipped up by squalls that arrived earlier than expected. In a split-second, the pebbles became rocks and hit the windows, which cracked into spiderwebs of glass.

Our hiking group crammed into the changing area in the far corner of the shelter, a jumble of Helly Hansen shoes and Arc'teryx jackets, awaiting instructions from our guide on how to plot our escape. I should've been scared, I know. But the truth is, I was ecstatic, and remained that way even when we safely returned to the hotel two hours later.

The wind and I had danced a strange tango throughout my trip. It's a duet I knew well; it had lured me back to the tail end of the Americas five times over the last decade. Like its wild weather, Patagonia demands to be felt at full force. 🌐

