



viranatura
tours

CHILE TRIP REPORT

2021

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Day 1 26 Nov To Chile

The long journey to Chile from Europe (and Turkey) was embellished with the various hoops we had to jump through to get PCR tests, affidavits, mobility passes and the like. It was with some relief we finally sat in a café at Santiago airport and drank a cappuccino.

The drive from the airport to our first hotel passed through the dry hills of the coast ranges, where big stands of *Puya bertroniana* and *Echinopsis chiloensis* were spread across the north-facing slopes and a dense matrix of matorral shrubs (and cacti) blanketed some northern slopes. Despite the dry appearance (normal for this time of year) there were flashes of colour from *Alstroemeria zoellneri*, *A. angustifolia* and *A. ligtu* var. *simsii*, as well as two species of *Calceolaria* and as we descended from the Cuesta Dormida, large shrubs of *Senna candolleana* smothered in golden blossom and the coppery spikes of *Lobelia excelsa* too. A little sample to get us started, we would have more time with all of these and more in the coming days.

For now, we continued to the pleasant hotel, with comfortable bungalows set in large grounds which seemed to suit the singing Chilean mockingbirds.

Day 2 27 Nov Los Molles & Pichidangui

All of our PCR tests came back negative and we were free to roam. The leisurely breakfast time was fine, the days are long in Chile at this season and we made our way eventually to a supermarket for supplies before driving north. The dry landscape suddenly gave way to the blue Pacific, with breakers coursing the shores, the long beaches backed by dunes and rocky headlands. It was around one of these headlands we stopped, at the pleasant seaside town of Los Molles. Whilst most visitors on this busy weekend were there for the beach, we were there for a special and localised endemic beauty; *Alstroemeria pelegrina*. And, there were still plenty of its extravagant waxen flowers on show, nestled at the base of rocks, sometimes alongside yellow *Oxalis mirbelii* and both plants fully exposed to the salt spray from the powerful waves that were breaking over the rocks in the bay. Common on these rocks too, were fleshy-leaved clumps of *Cistanthe grandiflora*, with large magenta saucers balanced on slender stems.



Alstroemeria pelegrina

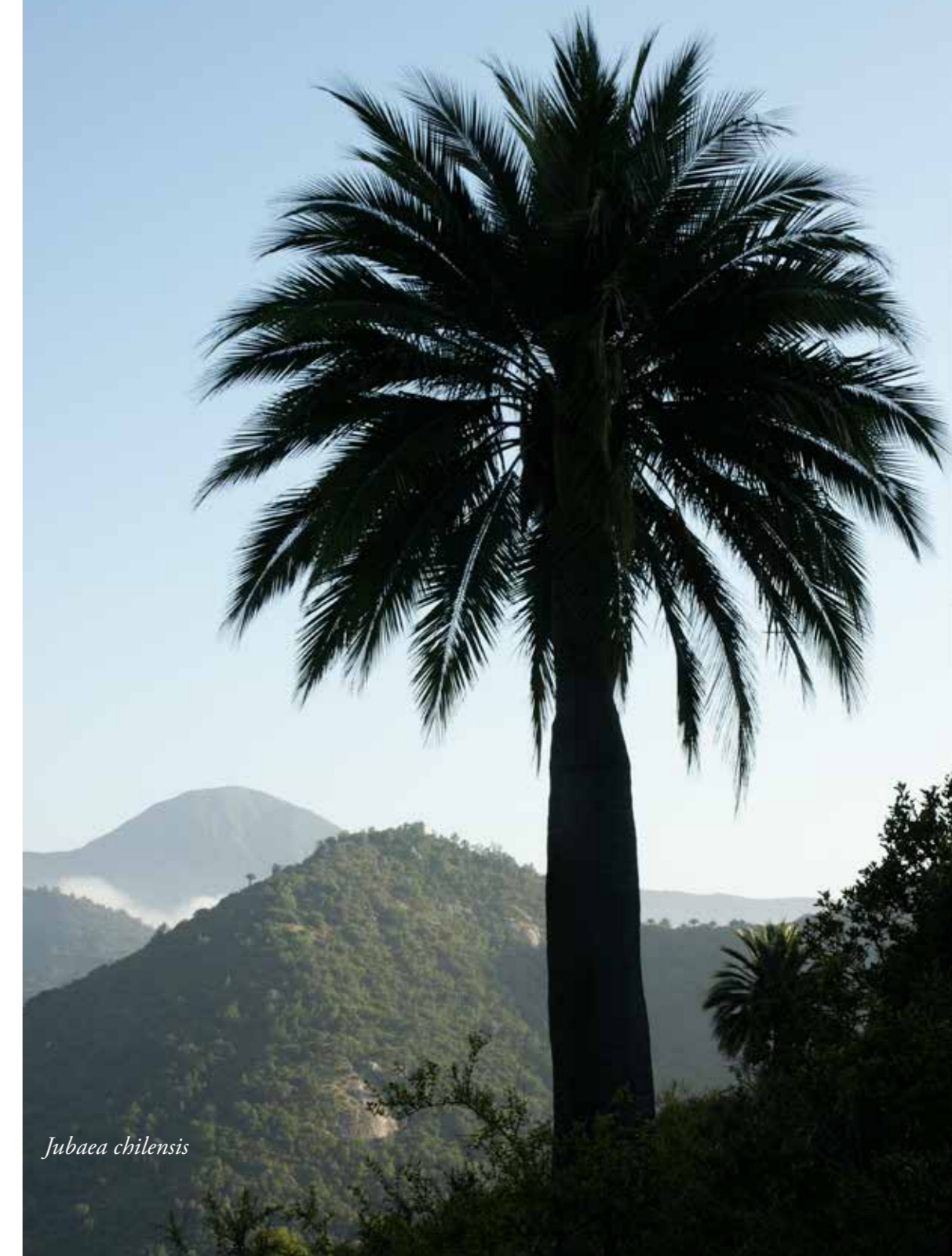
Succulent carpets of white-flowered *Nolana crassulifolia* sprawled across the rocks and bird life was also prolific with the coastal specialist the Chilean seaside cinclodes, Peruvian pelicans cruising overhead, blackish oystercatcher, whimbrel, kelp gulls and abundant neotropical cormorants. Time was spent exploring the rock pools too with an array of peculiar starfish and sea urchins among the seaweed fringed waters. As we ate lunch a sleek great egret arrived to stalk the same pools.

Driving a little farther north there were a few *Puya chilensis* still in flower and we stopped for a convenient one, which was being attended by a Chilean mockingbird, whose crown was caked in golden pollen. These statuesque bromeliads are a real feature of the coastal matorral we were driving through, each towering spike a complex arrangement of whorls of yellow-green flowers, subtended by long specially designed bird perches to make it easy for their avian pollinators. We were actually trying to find a cousin of this striking plant, one that is has a much more restricted range, being confined to rock outcrops in a narrow coastal band. Climbing up to the easier to reach stands there were several *Puya venusta* in flower, the stout stems topped with velvet-blue flowers above architectural silver-grey foliage. There were some impressive colonies on some unassailable outcrops too, below which we found a smattering of delicate purple-belled *Conanthera campanulata*. Then to round things off we spent time photographing the many *Rhodophiala advena* that were bursting up from the bare sandy ground in various shades of flesh to deep pink.

Pizzas on the balcony with red wine (or coke zero) completed the day.

Day 3 28 Nov La Campana

It promised to be a warm day. The landscape was crystal clear with a perfect blue sky for our walk to the see the magnificent Chilean wine palms (*Jubaea chilensis*) at La Campana. There were some



Jubaea chilensis

fine specimens with bushes of golden-yellow *Senna candolleana* beneath as we approached the park, but these were just an introduction. Our walk took us up a track past the tall columns of *Echinopsis chiloensis* cacti, some infested with the red parasite *Tristerix aphylla* and there were the coppery-red flowers of *Lobelia excelsa* too. A side path went to an impressive viewpoint where we could see hundreds of palms and the rocky hulk of La Campana mountain in one direction and the layered ridges of the coast ranges and orange groves in the other. Below there were several superb turquoise torches of *Puya bertroniana* (of which we had seen one earlier attended by common duica finches), growing from vigorous clumps forming a distinctive landscape with the tall cacti and palms.

Higher up were a few rich-orange *Alstroemeria ligtu* var. *simsii* and then it's pretty cousin *A. pulchra* in various colour forms. The heat was dry and so not so bad as we continued to the 'casino' with its impressive stands of giant, wide trunked palms and the fabulous fruits of *Sophora macrocarpa* dangling from bushes. A small stream ran through the area and increased humidity was enough to sustain delicate maidenhair ferns (*Adiantum chilense*). Lunch was in the shade of the palms as various lizards poked their heads out and scurried about the dry ground.

For the rest of the afternoon, we undertook a circuit of the mountain, turning off onto a narrow road that took us up past sprawling colonies of silvery-leaved *Puya coerulea*, with bushy *Calceolaria thyrsoflora* and *C. polifolia* hanging from the banks. Reaching 1200 metres it was cooler and greener and we spent time in a very productive corner where every flat area was peppered with the flaming scarlet of *Rhodophiala phycelloides* and bushes were strung with *Eccremocarpus scaber*. The former was superb and quite the best display I had ever seen here. Also poking up from between the rocks were some lovely *Alstroemeria angustifolia*, the odd deep blue *Pasithea caerulea* and pretty white *Leucocoryne ixioides*. Squat barrels of *Eriosyce curvispina* had coppery-bronze flowers, *Mutisia rosea* was scrambling over bushes and there were some superb stands of purple-veined golden-throated *Salpiglossis sinuata* bursting from among the abundant *Ephedra chilensis*. There was time for one more treat and after a bit of searching we managed to find a some very good *Chloraea bletioides* (our first orchid of the trip) growing among the scrub.

There were fine hazy views across the mountains as we descended from the Cuesta



Rhodophiala phycelloides

Dormida and reached the comforts of the hotel. Dinner was on the top floor of a local restaurant where we could see the warming evening light of the slopes of La Campana. The chips were superb.

Day 4 29 Nov Portillo

Another gloriously sunny day as we drove east towards the rising Andes, passing through the now familiar drier landscape and eventually (after a wrong turn by yours truly) we began to gain serious height as we continued up a deep canyon with occasional waterfalls and a precarious railway line, the cacti yielding to subalpine plants, with patches of *Alstroemeria angustifolia* along the roadside. Truck traffic slowed us a bit before we arrived at our lunch spot with an abundance of golden yellow domes of *Calceolaria hypericina*. Annoyingly the recent introduction of goat farming meant anything else had been nibbled away. However, the main 'quarry' lay much higher and we zig-zagged up the switch backs past amazing stands of *Schizanthus hookeri*, which quite literally coloured the slopes in a pink haze, and then reached the ski centre at Portillo, poised above the blue Laguna de Inca.

Time was spent exploring the rocky slopes nearby, quickly finding the exquisite rosettes of *Viola atropurpurea*, an extraordinary alpine, each plant a dense disc of overlapping leaves ringed with darkest-purple flowers with almost comical white 'whiskers'. There were some superb specimens, some with up to twenty heads, some on stalks like peculiar mushrooms. Here and there we found other delights such as yellow *Sanicula graveolens* and pretty pink *Olsynium junceum*, a few *Calceolaria corymbosa* subsp. *mimuloides* and low-growing fragrant bushes of *Berberis empetrifolia*.

There still was plenty to see on the descent, sweeping back down the switchbacks to a wonderful stand of *Schizanthus hookeri*, with fabulous floriferous plants brimming with pink and gold flowers with the Andes beyond. A few *Tropaeolum polyphyllum* grew on the slopes too. Lower down another low hill had plenty of *Viviana marifolia* and a fair smattering of *Alstroemeria pallida*. Lastly there was time to look at red-flowered *Mutisia subulata* scrambling across low bushes together with *Malesherbia linearifolia*, *Eriosyce curvispina* (this time in green flowered form) and *Mutisia acerosa*.



Viola atropurpurea

The drive home had its incidents(!), but we arrived safely, although all of the restaurants in town had shut! Nonetheless, corks were pulled and I whipped up a pan of the Turkish staple manemen (tomatoes and eggs) and there was plenty of other food from lunch to keep us well fed.

Day 5 30 Nov Cuesta Dormide to Vilches

A rather tedious day as a result of the broken windscreen sustained the night before, which meant we needed to drive to Santiago Airport for a replacement vehicle. This was dealt with swiftly enough, but we then hit a long traffic jam near Curico. We arrived late, but to a warm welcome at Vilches. Botanically, we had at least seen the lovely *Alstroemeria zoellneri* below Cuesta Dormida earlier in the morning and after all tomorrow is another day.

Day 6 1 Dec Siete Tazas

We awoke in the pleasant tree-filled surrounds of our hotel with hummingbirds buzzing from flower to flower and after a good breakfast set off for the day. There was a stop for an orange form of *Alstroemeria ligtu*, also producing its pretty pink climbing relative *Bomarea salsilla* and *Conanthera bifolia*. Unfortunately, the already rough road got rougher courtesy of Chilean roadworks and we drove past the stands of *Chloraea lamellata* (that we intended to stop at on the way back) unawares we would not return the same way. Back on smooth tarmac we passed wonderful drifts of pink *Alstroemeria ligtu* and then on the approach to Siete Tazas stopped at the fine bridal veil waterfall with a big clump of *Gunnera tinctoria* clinging to the cliff next to the pouring water and a huge specimen of *Hydrangea serratifolia* cascading from a large *Nothofagus obliqua*.

Reaching the park entrance, we organised ourselves and set off for an enjoyable walk through the forest, dominated by *Nothofagus obliqua* at first, which yielded to *Nothofagus dombeyi* with its distinctive layered form and smaller darker leaves one we had moved onto rockier terrain. There were also some magnificent very old trees of *Austrocedrus chilensis* and peculiar combinations of *Eriosyca curvispina* cacti with the native bamboo *Chusquea couleou*. Vivid pink *Montiopsis umbellata* gave flashes of colour in the stark clearings among the trees as we searched for *Chloraea apinnula*, a rather unusual green orchid. Bob spotted a group of three and we all paid homage, getting down close to appreciate the intricately designed flower with 'bobbly' lip (encrusted with osmophores) and shining blue 'eyes' in the throat to lure potential pollinating wasps. A second species,



Alstroemeria zoellneri

C. viridiflora was also found, but sadly it was not in great shape. Reaching the waterfalls, we stopped for lunch on rocky bar where there were the lovely rosettes of *Viola farkanensis* (though what the difference is between this and *V. congesta* eludes me). There were also some fine clumps of bright pink *Oxalis squamata* on the other side of a stream, sprawling *Adesmia* af. *prostrata* and dangling plants of *Escallonia rubra* on the rocks. The best was left until last with a spray of *Calceolaria cana* hanging out from a crevice with its delightful pink flowers.

A fast-paced walk back meant we had time to get close to some superb spikes of *Puya bertroniana* beside the river, before going on to the interesting Siete Tazas falls, which pour through a series of shallow bowls of basalt columns, one into the other. We made a stop for a scarlet *Rhodophiala splendens* and various colour forms of *Alstroemeria ligtu* as we left the park, opting to take the longer, smoother tarmac route home rather than endure the rough stuff.

Day 7 2 Dec To Antuco

Repositioning to our next segment of Chile we stopped for supplies in Linares and then drove onto an orchid site, which I didn't recognise at first because all of the pines had been cut down. Nonetheless, there were still a number of tall, pure white spikes of *Chloraea crispa* on offer. Further over, John found spikes of tall green *C. incisa* and small-flowered white *C. stenantha* too. Alongside these were various pretty colour forms of *Alstroemeria angustifolia* and a peculiar *Tweedia* sp. with dense clusters of white flowers.

A stop at the large Salto de Laja waterfall followed, before light showers kicked in. These had run out of steam by the time we reached our final, very productive site for the day. Here in semi-natural open tussock grassland were many tall yellow *Chloraea barbata*. They showed quite a variation, in part due to hybridisation with the rather dowdy *C. bidentata* (= *C. parviflora*) and there were many intermediates on show, as well as the odd *C. stenantha* and *C. crispa*. Beneath the tall orchids were charming drifts of *Conanthera bifolia* (with a smattering of *Pasithea caerulea*) and the diminutive iris-relative *Herbetia lahue*. The cloud had at least lifted by the time we drove the last stretch to Antuco, with the looming dark bulk of Volcan Antuco very much in full view.



Gunnera tinctoria

Day 8 3 Dec Laguna de Laja

An overcast morning did mean perfect light for photographing a wonderful wall of *Gunnera tinctoria*. The huge leaves were mingled within a matrix of *Cortaderia araucana* clumps, drifts of bright yellow *Mimulus luteus* and the handsome fern; *Blechnum chilense*. Here and there were bushes of *Fuchsia magellanica* with pendant cerise flowers, the pale-orange balls of *Buddleja globosa* and *Solanum gayanum*. Water chutes burst from the base of the basalt cliffs above and sent torrents rushing down between the lush foliar arrangement.

We stopped for views along the river valley that cut through the confusion of ash flows and lavas, the older areas swathed in emerald nothofagus forest. Our next stop was a complete contrast to the first, an area of lava and steep stony slopes, but it was filled with flowers. Fabulous mounds of bicoloured *Lathyrus multiceps* coloured the ground alongside some big clumps of pink *Vicia nigricans*. Egg-yolk yellow *Senna arnottiana* brightened the slopes, one or two purple *Solanum etuberosum* were found and there were three species of *Calceolaria* too; *cavanallesi*, *corymbosa* subsp. *montana* and *pennellii*. The latter were particular good on cliffs and rocky slopes. Higher on the slope were big 'squashed broccoli' – *Nastanthus scapigerus* too. From where we were standing, we could see another slope with big yellow patches on the black cinder. These were magnificent mounds of *Calceolaria meyeniana* subsp. *glabrata* and silver-leaved *Senecio chilensis* too, the latter with big golden-yellow daisy flowers. Tufts of pink *Epilobium nivale* were nestled in the rocks below.

It is surprising what will not only survive, but choose to grow in such austere environments. Indeed, the gem of the afternoon rather summed this up. Because of COVID (of course) the road was closed so instead we walked further, turning up a track in the cinder to scale the lower slopes of the immense Volcan Antuco. Bushes of *Gaultheria poeppigii* were laden with cherry-red berries and with binoculars I could see our quarry. We plodded up the loose cinder to where there were many lovely cushions of *Viola cotyledon* in a variety of shades from near white to mauve. Traversing the slope, we found many more some with fine backdrops of the moody mountains (the weather was little changeable with rain, sun, hail and then sun again, followed by more hail). Plants of *Senecio bipontinii* and mats of the prostrate cactus; *Maihuenia poeppigii* with pale yellow flowers



Nastanthus spathulatus

(the mats sometimes supporting several other plants including violets) were found as well as a solitary *Caoiphora prietea*. However, as we descended down to the road and then walked along it, we found a few more of these unusual plants. The landscapes throughout had been moody and surreal, the stark volcanic slopes peppered with patches of vegetation contrasting with the rich green on the other side of the blue lake.

We close to closing time so whizzed down to the entrance and stopped just after for pretty drifts of *Nierembergia repens* and *Mimulus depressus* in marshy areas. Our final stop was for the tricky to access, but utterly lovely *Ourisia microphylla*, flowering at the base of basalt cliffs.

Day 9 4 Dec To Villarica

Departing from the scenic splendour of Antuco on a crystal-clear day, we drove south soon seeing our first snow-crowned volcano; Volcan Lliama. In time the beautiful snow cone of Volcan Villarica appeared, our destination for the rest of the day. It had been a long morning of driving, but finally we pulled up alongside an area full of fiery *Embothrium coccineum* with the towering volcano beyond, perfect for some cliched fire and ice photos. A plant of *Gavilea araucana* grew nearby too and the bare banks had lots of *Oxalis valdiviensis* whilst *Fuchsia magellanica* and *Buddleja globosa* grew among the *Embothrium* and stands of young *Nothofagus dombeyi*.

Driving past banded walls of ash to the ski centre, we took a walk across the lower slopes of the volcano. *Valeriana fonkii* was plentiful together with the golden heads of *Quinchimalium chilense* and bushes of *Gaultheria poeppigii* laden with white or cherry-red flushed berries. Everything presented itself with the stunning volcano as a backdrop and it almost became a case of NOT putting this magnificent sight in the photo! *Viola cotyledon* was abundant, in fact the dominant ground cover on bare slopes. Careful searching also found a few crimped-leaved *Nassauvia lagascae* and pretty fine-leaved *Adesmia longipes* in the ash. Time was taken arranging, taking and then retaking and then retaking a group photo.

Dropping down a little to woodlands of *Nothofagus pumilio* with attractive grey trunks, we found many pretty *Codonorchis lessonii* orchids in their shade. Open areas had more superb *Embothrium coccineum* including some with, you guessed it, the perfect volcano backdrop. There was time for a final stop to admire a fine stand of *Buddleja globosa*



Embothrium coccineum

(actually quite garish with *Embothrium* and *Cytisus* in the background, before the short drive to our small hotel.

Good pizzas, wine and (entertaining eating of) after eight mints finished the day.

Day 10 5 Dec Villarica

An enjoyable day in and around the woods and volcanic landscapes of Villarica national park began with stands of greenish white *Chloraea virescens* and little bushes of pinkish flowered *Ugni molinae*. Our main event was a walk in the mixed nothofagus and araucaria forests below towering Volcan Lanin. On arrival we could see the first impressive *Araucaria araucana* beside Lago Llanquihue, with fantastic corky bark and architectural spidery whorls of branches. Almost immediately we found the beautiful porcelain orchid, *Chloraea magellanica*, each sepal finely green-veined. Not much farther on and there were tall yellow spikes of pungent-scented *Gavilea odoratissima* and a smattering of *Codonorchis lessonii*. A bridge crossed a rushing stream and on the rocks, thereabout were the intense red flowers of *Ourisia ruellioides*. It was a flowery with walk with the tracksides brimming with *Vicia nigricans* and *Viola reichei*, whilst *Codonorchis lessonii* formed pretty loose drifts in the shade. After a while we reached areas with more araucaria, some with amazing bark, the branches draped in dense lichens. Tucked away in a corner was a small colony of rich pink *Rhodophiala andicola* and *Gavilea lutea* was just about breaking into flower too. There were fabulous views of Volcan Lanin framed with the old araucarias too. A side track took us to a lake, although the views across it were rather limited. However, the bizarre Darwin's bread fungus (*Cyttaria darwini*) was common on the *Nothofagus pumilio*, which also formed a remarkable tall forest of mysterious lichen swathed trunks.

Lunch was rather late, there had been so much to see, but none of us were concerned about this. A few austral parakeets flew about the glade of araucarias as we ate in the shade. Afterwards, we visited another big stand of these trees with more grand views of Volcan Lanin and lots of *Chloraea magellanica* beneath them. There was time on the way back to stop and look at *Nothofagus alpina* and pretty mats of *Calceolaria tenella* plastered on a seep with the outsize leaves of *Gunnera tinctoria*. *Calceolaria valdiviana* also grew on the rocks and there was a solitary plant of *Alstroemeria aurea* in flower (something we would see in much greater quantity tomorrow).



Calceolaria tenella

Day 11 6 Dec Valdivia

With all of the national parks closed (on Monday) we decided to explore and find somewhere different. It did involve a lot of driving, but in the end, - we got to see a very different habitat and lots of new plants. Essentially, we drove from Pucon to Valdivia (where the traffic slowed us for a while) before arriving at the scenic coast where breakers were washing up on the long beach below us. Here, we were among a rare preserved tract of coastal temperate rain forest, with thick mists blowing across the very dense vegetation. We lucked out on a track, which led to a carefully constructed complex (probably for education) with a convenient big bench for our picnic.

All around were new plants, mainly woody ones with varied shrubberies containing *Eucryphia cordifolia*, the cinnamon trunks of *Luma apiculata*, *Ugni molinae*, *Aextoxicon punctatum*, *Gevuina avellana*, *Embothrium coccineum*, very large *Drimys winteri*, *Berberis darwini* and the lovely ferny leaves of *Lomatia ferruginea*. A few of the latter had open flowers of red and yellow. Stems of *Lapageria rosea* clambered through the branches (though sadly well away from flowering). There was also the odd clump of the large terrestrial bromeliad *Greigia sphacelata*, the onion-like *Nothoscordum sp.*, the tiny green orchid *Brachystele unilateralis* and pretty drifts of pink *Centaurium cachalahuén*, but the star turn was the stunning *Lobelia bridgesii*, with some substantial stands of this handsome tall herb with interesting pink flowers. Big-leaved Chilean tree ferns (*Lophosoria quadripinnata*) grew on the edges with some very large-leaved specimens of *Blechnum chilense* and the whole scene was lush and impenetrable.

Moving on we stopped for a (dusty) stand of the remarkable *Loasa acanthifolia* with large orange-red flowers and then on the other side of Valdivia for a wonderful big drift of golden *Alstroemeria aurea*, smothering a bank. Not far from this was a big stand of red *Lobelia tupa* overlooking part of the impressive wetlands complex found here.

Now we had to burn some rubber and drove non-stop to our pleasant hotel in Angol. The nearby restaurant served excellent (and strong) pisco sours and good food.

Day 12 7 Dec Nahuelbuta

A wonderful day with varied weather that gave us so much variety to photograph. It was cloudy at first as we drove in stopping for a solitary *Alstroemeria presliana* and then



Lobelia bridgesii

a colony of *Loasa acerifolia* with a stunning red *Rhodophiala chilense* (= *Phycella chilense*) on the opposite side, tantalising us on the wrong side of a stout wire fence. Reaching the park entrance there was a tumbling plant of *Mutisia araucana* and lots of big-pouched *Calceolaria corymbosa* along the tracks. The trees were draped in plentiful whitish Spanish moss lichens and the forest somewhat surreal (and it would become even more so later on). A population of *Gavilea venosa* was found along with the slender purple *Solenomelus segethii*. Then it was the turn of the traffic-light arrangement of what we dubbed the Chilean Christmas tree; *Desmaria mutabilis*, a showy parasite that hung from *Nothofagus* trees, each showy bunch of yellow flowers aging to orange and then red. Large shrubs of *Lomatia hirsuta* were also packed with flowers and though these were a less showy off-white, they had an intriguing design. A few *Chloraea nudilabia* were scattered along the road, but these were mere sighters for what was to come.

We drove on to an area of magnificent *Araucaria araucana*, with a mix of all sizes from veterans to seedlings, each topped with the spidery whorl of spiny branches, the corky trunks plastered with lichen. Our walk to the viewpoint found patches of *Libertia tricocca*, pretty pink *Calandrina colchaguensis* and a few red-pink *Rhodophiala splendens* too. Reaching the viewpoint, we were greeted by not only impressive araucarias and dense drifts of *Fascicularia bicolor*, but by some pristine glowing specimens of *Chloraea nudilabia*. The only negative was the heavy cloud that obscured the volcanoes to the east. The very same cloud seemed to be rolling our way and though we arrived in sunshine and enjoyed the stunning forested landscape this was eventually swallowed up in thick mists. Suddenly, the forest became mysterious and enchanting, irresistible to relentless photography.

This continued after we had enjoyed lunch beneath two venerable giant araucarias, with the next viewpoint presenting even more misty forest scenes and fleeting views to the canopy beyond. Fine shrubs of *Berberis montana* were festooned with golden flowers and lichen, whilst bushes of *Gaultheria mucronata* were heavily laden with white bells as Chilean swallows looped about the viewpoint, somehow able to navigate at speed



Desmaria mutabilis

in the dense fog.

Leaving the park, we stopped for a scattered population of the stunning *Rhodophiala chilense* to put the cherry on the cake.

Day 13 8 Dec Angol & to Vilches

The morning was spent looking at the various orchids that grow along the road between Angol and Nahuelbuta. Once again, we found a bewildering mix of hybrids, with the lovely white *Chloraea longipetala* crossing with small orangey *C. chrysantha* and orange or yellow *C. gavilu* to produce various intermediates. It is perfectly possible *C. gavilu* is a partly stable hybrid itself. There was also a fine spike of deep blue-green *Puya alpestris*, white-spiked *Escallonia pulverulenta* and the golden cups of *Linum chamissonis*. Farther on was a wonderful meadow with hundreds if not thousands of *Chloraea volkmanii*. Amongst the grassland we also found a pretty pale yellow native daisy, blue *Pasithea caerulea*, *Conanthera bifolia*, *Clarkia tenella* and *Chloraea barbata*, including a clear hybrid between this and *C. volkmanii*. The pasture was also studded with handsome *Nothofagus obliqua*, their forms irregular and decidedly oak-like.

Time to move on and from here we drove north again, eventually finding a shady spot for a picnic, then getting stuck in the supermarket car park at Linares before reaching the calm and pleasant confines of Hosteria Vilches.

Day 14 9 Dec Laguna del Maule

The high Andes beckoned and they loomed larger and larger as we made the long approach along wide valley flanked by forest clad hills. The pastures had flocks of burrowing parrots and the braided rivers and lakes plenty of other bird life. Gaining height, the non-native plants faded somewhat and we were in dry scattered woods and rocky slopes where the bushes were strung with the pale pink daisies of *Mutisia ilicifolia*. Among the sparse scrub were quite a few *Rhodophiala montana*, lilac *Leucheria viscida* and the peculiar wiry stems of *Loasa filicaulis*. *Alstroemeria ligtu* subsp. *splendens* and big clumps of *Eryngium pandanifolium* grew on the slopes.



Viola cotyledon

We knew the border would be closed, but that they allowed people to walk to Laguna del Maule. So, parking the car we set off for the 3 km walk along the edge of the lake with sweeping views across the blue waters to the dramatic and varied volcanic hills and mountains, the slopes varying from green to alabaster, ochre or dark slopes that glistened with abundant black obsidian. All looked quite austere for a while until we reached a slope with the most fabulous mounds of *Viola cotyledon* in many colour forms from white to deep violet, with the commanding landscape beyond. Joining these on the slope were plentiful *Oxalis adenophylla*, itself in various shades of pink emerging from the fine-cut foliage. Here and there was *Nassauvia revoluta* and a few little pale yellow *Olysinium obscurum*. It was a little paradise in a otherwise stark volcanic landscape.

Walking back there were some good mats of *Oreopolus glacialis* growing on the slope above the vehicle, as well as some sumptuous white-and-pink forms of *Vicia nigricans*(?). Moving onto a striking viewpoint with eroded ash towers we had lunch and photographed the pretty *Montiopsis cistiflora* that were scattered in the stony ground. More stops were made as we descended, first for the billowing masses of *Calceolaria integrifolia* and masses of pink *Ourisia microphylla* that grew on a section of cliffs, the latter tantalising out of reach! An Andean condor soared across as we looked at these. Lower down was a quite wonderful clump of purple *Calceolaria arachnoidea*, clinging to a slope that was being fast-eroded by the many marauding goats, Would it survive until my next visit? Our final stop was in an area with many superb rusty-red *Salpiglossis sinuata* and vivid magenta *Montiopsis umbellata*.

From here we drove onto Curico for the night in preparation for our next high mountain area the following day.

Day 14 10 Dec Paso Vergara

Our final field day in the high Andes. We left earlier than normal and drove until we reached a small stream cascading down through a steep gully. Here tucked among the boulders lining the stream were superb flowery masses of *Mimulus naiandinus*, a lovely herb which varied from soft yellow to rose-pink.



Oxalis adenophylla

They were gorgeous next to the stream, in places beneath the cascading boughs of *Fuchsia magellanica* dripping with cerise flowers. Away from the water on the drier slopes was the handsome *Calceolaria paralias*, and on rocks were the garish pink saucers of *Cistanthe grandifolia*, whilst the tall yellow daisy *Virguiera revoluta* was common along the roadsides.

We continued up seeing increasing numbers of showy *Alstroemeria ligtu* subsp. *splendens* and abundant bushy *Calceolaria thyrsofolia* among increasingly dramatic landscapes, with steep slopes rising on both sides. The pass was closed so we were on foot from the customs post, immediately seeing big stands of the alstroemeria nearby, sometimes mixed with the non-native *Echium vulgare* and yellow cups of *Scyphanthus elegans* in delightful sloping gardens. Flat stony areas had some superb *Pachylaenia atriplicifolia*, each rosette of big-cabbagey leaves beset with a large pale-yellow flower. The main destination was a nearby slope that quite literally ran with rivers of golden *Tropaeolum polyphyllum* and thousands of *Alstroemeria ligtu* subsp. *splendens*, among which grew *Famatina cisandina* and plenty of scrambling *Scyphanthus elegans*, clumps of pink *Stachys gilliesii* and in places dense shrubs of *Buddleja globosa* each with hundreds of orange ball flowers, whilst the bushes of *Calceolaria hypericina* were completely submerged in golden blooms. Blue skies brought out the fabulous colours.

John and I hiked a bit further up the road to where stands of red-pink and gold *Schizanthus grahami* coloured the screes alongside more golden *Tropaeolum polyphyllum* in a decidedly garish blend. There were also fine tufts of *Montiopsis umbellata*, sprawling mats of *Adesmia* af. *prostrata* and mounds of silvery-leaved *Acaena digitata*. All too soon it was time to head for Santiago in preparation for Patagonia tomorrow, but it had been an intense flower-feast. Driving down there was a fairly pointless attempt to wash the car as the muddy road and dusty trucks made in worse than when we started. Slow traffic in the city held us up a bit but then we were soon in the comforts of the airport hotel.



Cortaderia araucana

Day 15 11 Dec To Torres del Paine

Everything went well at the airport and by early afternoon we were waiting for the tediously slow baggage at Punta Arenas airport. On our way we drove across the vast flat expanse of grassy steppe towards the distant mountains, passing flocks of sheep with occasional Darwin's rheas. After a while I eventually located the right roadside bank for us to get a quick fix of Patagonian flora with the lovely *Oxalis ennaephylla* growing with the pretty scented white daisy *Hypochaeris incana*. Another sweetly fragrant plant; *Arjona tuberosa* was also common, sometimes sprouting from amidst the big hard cushions of *Bolax gummifera*. There was also a smattering of *Calceolaria uniflora*, but more of these beauties tomorrow.

Thanks to the flight being moved to a later time, this was our only botanising, from here we sped to Puerto Natales, where a team effort saw the picnic shopping done in record time and car refuelled before the final leg. The mountains were largely wrapped in cloud as we approached the national park (another treat for tomorrow) and we rumbled into the hotel in time for a late dinner looking out at the iceberg strewn Lago Grey.

Day 16 12 Dec Torres del Paine - Lago Toro trail

Wow! What a first morning we had. First light revealed the (now clear) spectacular Paine massif with the sculpted cliffs of the Cuernos del Paine alongside the ragged ridges of soaring Cerro Paine Grande with its capping glaciers. Surely, one of the world's all-time great mountain vistas and the frigid bulk of Glacier Grey could be seen with a vast sloping ice sheet beyond to add an icy hint to the vast southern icefield that lay to the north. Our first stop of the day was (unsurprisingly) for a view, looking across the turquoise waters of Lago Pehoe towards the dark-capped Cuernos del Paine, where tufts of *Lathyrus nervosus* grew from within the spiny mounds of *Mulinium spinosum*, the abundant yellow domes that dominate much of the steppe-type habitats in the park. Some floriferous *Escallonia rosea* also grew along the edge and we



Chloraea magellanica, *Blechnum penna marina*
& *Gunnera magellanica*

saw many more fine bushes of these during the day. It took a while to get out of the car park where a population of *Gavilea supralabellata* held us up, but this was just a mere sighter. There were thousands of these yellow orchids across the heath, invariably with the sultry and exquisite *Chloraea magellanica*. Of the latter we found some superb big clumps, sometimes with gnarled trees and/or blue lakes for backgrounds, other times nestled amidst a bed of *Blechnum penna-marina* and *Gunnera magellanica*. A superb patch of *Calceolaria uniflora* brought us to a halt, but again this was but an introduction and a little further up the path they were sprinkled across an entire slope in their hundreds, alongside fine patches of blue *Perezia recurvata*. The former is a remarkable flower, adapted for pollination by a bird (the least seedsnipe) that pecks at the white band across the flowers and picks up pollen on its forehead as it does so). The views grew increasingly grand as we gained height passing plenty of *Lathyrus magellanicus* and compact bushes of *Gaultheria mucronata* laden with cherry-red fruits on, the shaley slope sweeping down and across a vast mountain landscape punctuated by sinuous blue lakes.

Just before the last pull to the top there were some superb *Calceolaria biflora* and mounds of whitish *Phacelia secunda*. The track climbed into mature *Nothofagus pumilio* woodlands interspersed with grasslands with plenty of *Anemone multifida* and the beautifully purple-lined white trumpets of *Olsynium biflorum*. A few *Codonorchis lessoni* were scattered along the path and there was a sprinkle of pretty deep pink *Leucheria purpurea* too before we about turned and walked back down. Lunch was in the relative shelter of the visitor centre, with a family of upland geese providing the entertainment.

On the drive into the park the roadsides had been very flowery so we retraced our steps some way and then made a series of stops. The first produced another orchid-feast with plenty of curly-sepaled *Gavilea araucana* growing with *G. supralabellata*, *G. littoralis* and the tall green spikes of *Chloraea leptopetala*. Scarlet shrubs of *Embothrium coccineum* were abundant as we drove on pausing next for some fine *Fuchsia magellanica* laden with cascades of cerise and mauve flowers. *Acaena ovalifolia* grew near the river flanked by *Nothofagus betuloides*. There were stops for (windy) views across towards



Calceolaria uniflora

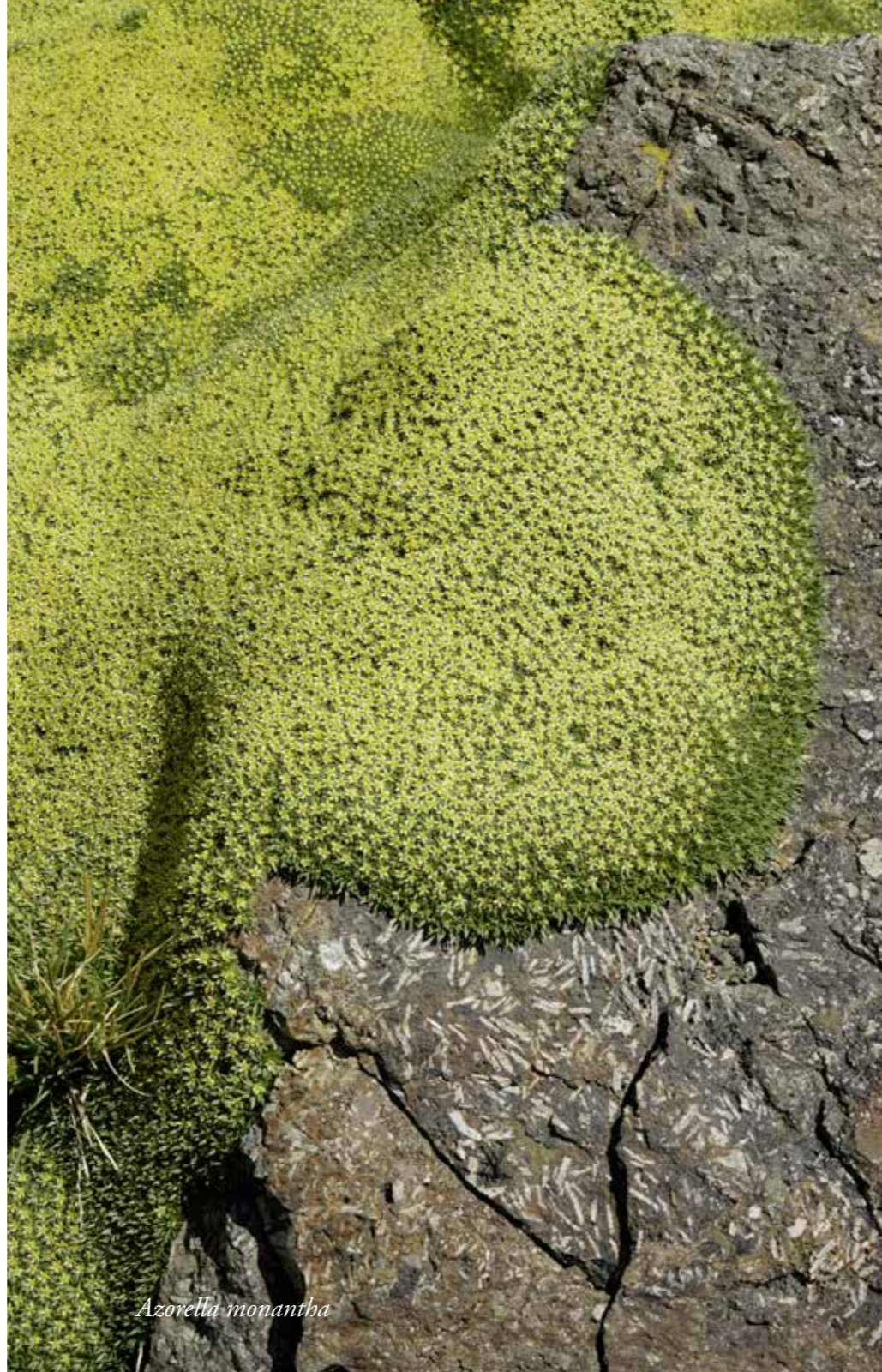
the park and then back inside for flocks of handsome black-throated ibises and then more striking mountain landscapes closer to home.

Day 17 13 Dec Torres del Paine - Laguna Azul

It had been windy overnight and the gusts still had some life in them this morning, but hopefully we could dodge much of the weather. Driving out, the black-throated ibises were again in the wide grasslands of yesterday. Today we were closer to the stunning mountains, and stopped for elevated views across Lago Pehoe and again for the strata-rich landscapes near Lago Nordenskjold, where we also found tight mats of *Azorella monantha* and *Nardophyllum bryoides*. More pano-inducing views followed before we reached a small gully with a stream cutting through dense patches of (the sadly finished) *Ourisia ruellioides* that smothered the rock banks. On the drier area adjacent to the stream was the lovely golden-flowered *Alstroemeria patagonica*, a near stemless gem that shone among the dark shale flakes. Elsewhere were tight mats of *Ephedra frustillata*, bushes of sweet-scented *Junelia tridens* and our first views of the iconic Paine towers.

An Andean condor sailed overhead as we approached the impressive Salto Paine Grande waterfalls and then it was on to see some of the herds of guanacos that thrive in the park (and help feed the many pumas). On the edge of the herd a sleek grey fox was hunting in the bushes, to the disapproval of the guanacos who tried to chase it away. Some young guanacos brought about some cooing (from Laura) and there were other photo opportunities before we arrived at blue Laguna Azul. Lunch was in the lee of some *Nothofagus antarctica* with a hefty southern caracara keeping watch for scraps. Afterwards we took a pleasant walk along the shore, hoping all the while that the Paine towers on the other side of the lake would clear of cloud. There were lots of golden *Geum magellanicum* as well as some good clumps of *Chloraea magellanica* and the cloud did finally lift albeit briefly for arty photos through dead trees or along the shore line.

Driving back, we stopped for more guanacos and then fine landscapes and lake views. A few Chilean flamingos could be seen across one lake, so we drive down and around to a better lakeside position. Looking at the pink birds we



Azorella monantha

noticed the wet flushes had a thriving population of small white-flowered *Chloraea chica* amidst a sea of dainty pink *Samolus spathulatus*. There were many other waterbirds on the lake including red shoveller, yellow-billed pintail and coscoroba swans. Serendipity then took a hefty swerve our way. Rounding a bend, a muscular puma bounded in front of the car and then across the grasslands to a bush, stopping to look around at us before disappearing. Wow! Nothing was going to top this.

Day 18 14 Dec Torres del Paine - Lago Sarmiento

A beautiful sunrise across the magnificent Paine massif, with golden light illuminating the rock faces and clear skies. Blue would be central to the day, with sky and lake combining on numerous occasions as we undertook a scenic spectacular across the park. However, to begin with we looked in an area of mature *Nothofagus pumilio* woodland, with many fine old trees with deeply-fissured bark. The understory was a mass of *Blechnum penna-marina* ferns, grasses and orchids such as *Gavilea lutea* and some fine *G. littoralis*. It took a while get much farther as the stunning views of the glacier clad peaks kept delaying us. We did eventually make it too the waterfall that thunders down from Lago Nordenskjold into Lago Pehoe, casting rainbows in the spray as it tore between a narrow rocky defile. The rocky steppe was populated by the domes of *Mulinium spinosum* and their yellow-green rounded form was a constant feature during the day, adding texture to the raw landscapes, as did the contorted silvered skeletons of dead nothofagus (victims of a fire five years ago). Clumps of *Chloraea magellanica* and tufts of *Lathyrus nervosus* were common, but almost ignored as we focused on the amazing scenery beneath a wonderful varied sky, the azure canvas painted with everything from mackerel to stretched-out high altitude lenticular clouds.

We moved on to the other side of the park and had lunch before taking another walk towards the huge deep blue Lago Sarmiento. It passed through some stark steppe and marshy flushes fringing a pool. The dry areas were peppered with golden *Alstroemeria patagonica* and mats of *Nassauvia maeviae* with white flowers. An interesting assortment of natural hybrids between *Calceolaria polyrhiza* and *C. uniflora* could be seen growing near





Vincent the
Magellanic
Woodpecker

both parents and bushes of fragrant *Jurinella tridens* perfumed the air throughout. Delicate stems of *Olsynium junceum* somehow survived the strong gusts, and indeed the wind got decidedly stronger as we near the vast blue waters of Lago Sarmiento. The edges of the lake were fringed with a broad rim of white-grey 'boulders' which were actually ancient stromatolites (this is one of the few locations in the world with these ancient cyanobacteria created features).

For a short time, we left the park, hoping to find rheas, but instead seeing some very close guanacos and then enjoying the striking panorama of the entire Paine massif across Lago Sarmiento. Various other postcard view stops followed as we returned to base, the combination of turquoise or azure waters and sculpted mountains proving irresistible time and again.

Day 19 15 Dec Torres del Paine - Lago Sarmiento

Reluctantly we had to leave our very comfortable base in the remarkable widescreen land of Patagonia, one of the few places in the world that lives up to the hype. Vincent the tame magellanic woodpecker was knocking on the metal frame of the building as we left and we made a couple of other brief pauses for ashy-headed goose and much farther on for Chilean flamingos. There were final glorious views of the Paine massif as we drive out of this stunning place.

The flight north was smooth as gave some amazing views of the frigid southern ice cap with vast glaciers flowing between the peaks down to lake or the ocean. Inland ridges of snow-capped ridged extended to the horizon. Closer to Santiago we could see the various volcanoes we had visited the previous fortnight too in this very scenic country.

Day 20 16 Dec Flights home

All went well at check in, and although Santiago Airport, British Airways and Heathrow all conspired to risk me missing my onward flight I made it to Istanbul and Antalya to two young boys very excited by Christmas.



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Mimulus naianthinus