

Against the Wind for Four Weeks

Mountainbike Tour through Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia (1995)

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The National Park Tierra del Fuego

It raining. But our good old MSR-stove is louder. Soon food will be ready. Since we cycled here from the Ushuaia airport it was raining. Should our start of the bike tour start with rain? Hopefully not.

Ushuaia is the southern-most city of the world. The impressive landscape along the Beagle Strait, the mountains and surrounding forests make this city to one of the nicest in Argentina. After the strong rain in the night, the next morning welcomes us with blue sky, but the mountains are snow-capped. It is quite cold, but ideal for a day trip hiking in the National Park Tierra del Fuego. The forests seem wild and untouched. Birds can be seen everywhere, and trees are covered with layers of moss. After nine hours of hiking we return to the tent where we left the bikes for that day.

The next day is actually the first day on bike. We want to ride to the end of the Panamerican Highway, the starting point of our tour. It is only one hour from our current camping point, but we pack the bikes and ride with fully loaded bikes. The ride is through forests and bogs, and sometimes we can spot a view of the Beagle Strait. At the end of the road, a wooden sign marks the distances to Buenos Aires (3063 km) and Alaska (17848 km), and the Beagle Strait is now only 200 m away. A nice place for the start of a bike tour. As two buses arrive full of tourists, we immediately leave the peaceful place.

We want to spend another day hiking in the park, and ride to the Lago Roca. There is a wonderful hiking trail along the eastern shore through wild *Nothofagus* forests.

Start of the tour

The first real day on bikes welcomes us with a strong south-western wind and blue sky. Tail-wind back to Ushuaia – but the speed is limited by the number of pot-holes and larger stones on the track. Soon we have covered the 35 km, and buy a few supplies in the supermarket.

Immediately behind Ushuaia, there is a steep ascent, and then the track leads into the valley of Tierra Mayor. The wind is still pushing us, but stronger gusts of wind whirl up the dust from the track. Breathing is only possible through a scarf. We have to get used to it... After a long ascent to a 600 m pass we stop for lunch. Each of us is having a ration of self made energy bars, marzipan, dried fruit, and pemmikan. Then we continue on the worst tracks: the high traffic on the Panamerican Highway has led to formation of a "washboard" pattern on the road, in combination with large loose stones. Since we are now traveling downhill, we manage to reach a speed at which we "fly" over the washboard pattern, but it still is a difficult task not to hit one of the stones. And with a fully loaded bike speeds above 40 km/h can easily make the bike unmanageable. Pot-holes and stones can then be dangerous risks. The alternative of traveling a bit more slowly is to be totally hit by the washboard pattern... we decide to rely on our material and go for high speed – and our bikes have survived their first test.

Clear-cuts of the *Nothofagus* forests

In the afternoon we cycle along the Lake Fagnano, the largest lake of Tierra del Fuego. Again we have to swallow loads of dust, also due to the traffic. After a few hours, our faces are completely dirty, and I guess our brains have taken on the washboard pattern. 105 km – that is enough for the first day. Unfortunately the wonderful forests we have experienced more in the south of the island have been clear-cut and burnt to make space for cattle farming. This leads to a lower ground water level, and that is what is causing problems for us. We are looking for a space with clean running water to camp. Just before sunset we reach a small creek, and the tent is built up immediately.

There is a surprise for the next day: at Tolhuin, we reach sealed road. For the moment we enjoy the better surface and lack of dust. Now there are no more forests, and the farmland looks barren. The few left-over trees are covered with white lichens – giving them a spooky sight.

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Into the Patagonian grassland

We spent the night at the coast, south of Rio Grande. Due to water shortage we cooked the rice in sea water – no need to add salt. In Rio Grande, we again stocked up on food and soon left the city behind. From now on we travel directly north-west, and the wind won't give us a kilometer. Also the landscape has changed since Rio Grande. Trees are gone, and the landscape has turned into rolling hills of grassland. There are only few creeks, and the ones we find strongly smell like cattle. Luckily we are carrying enough water – it is becoming very precious in this grassland. The landscape becomes boring. We see nothing, except for a few sheep or every now and then a falcon in the sky. And we don't even see the farm houses (Estancias) – they are probably located where fresh water is available. 55 kilometers after Rio Grande we see an Estancia just next to the road, the Estancia Sara. It would have been possible to get water there, but our stocks are still full. Most probably more water would be available in spring, but we are traveling in fall.

A foehn storm from north-west

The drought and the wind request a lot from us, and it makes us feel even more boring in this vast landscape. We are definitively traveling in the wrong direction. After 120 km we are exhausted and the shoulders are sore from the constant fight against the wind.

During the night, the wind continues on, and the next morning we wake up seeing a cloudless sky. It seems as if only a light breeze is going over the rolling hills. We both eat a big portion of cereal mix, not only to fill our bodies reserves, but also for the next fighting day. As soon as the sun rose over the horizon, the wind took up the strength of the last day. The fight continues on...

Although the road is sealed, we travel at a speed of 8 km/h. But worse is still to come. The sealed road stops at the Argentinian border station San Sebastian. It is 16 kilometers to the Chilean border station of the same name. It takes us full two hours to cover this distance. Luckily the time of border crossing was not stamped our passports, other wise the Chileans may have wondered what we did for 2 hours. The wind is blowing straight across the plain, and the track is one of the worst. From the Chilean border station we have to turn north-west, directly into the wind. And the sky is cloudless blue...

We want to reach Porvenir, at the Magellan Strait. The distance is 145 km. The track is heavily used by trucks and therefore under bad condition, and due to the wind we won't make good progress anyway. At noon the wind becomes even stronger and even with the good gearing on the mountain bike riding is impossible. We have to push the bikes – on a flat plain. Dust is blown into our faces, and small stones are moving over the track. And the wind is quite loud.

Cycling can be so enjoyable.. Instead we are pushing across a plain or are simply blown over. We are exposed to the wind without any shelter, no tree, no bush, no big rocks. The sky is blue and the sun is shining. Amazing!

We are experiencing one of Patagonia's famous foehn storms. After three hours, we have pushed the bikes for 8 km. Then we discover a small shed. It does not seem to be the most stable one, but inside there is no wind and it is quiet. Now our only hope is for a next day with less wind (we don't even want to think about days without wind). We are lucky, the wind was less on the next day. It is possible to bike again. The track now leads along the east side of Tierra del Fuego, constantly up and down. Until noon we traveled 36 km, and the wind becomes stronger again. We are totally frustrated and rest next to the track eating nuts and dried fruit. Is this a bike tour?

The only thing we can do right now is to wait. It requires a lot of mental strength to get along with this situation. We are at the beginning of our tour, and swearing too much about the current situation would only make things worse. We try to think of other things... If we continued on with the bikes we would spend too much energy for virtually nothing, therefore we sit and wait. It is not really clear what we are waiting for, but our silent hope is that a truck passes by with enough space on the back for two bikes. Waiting for the wind to stop is even more unlikely... After five hours there is a truck. We are lucky. After only one hour we are in Porvenir –ready to take the ferry across the Magellan Strait to mainland South America.

Arrival in Patagonia

After a three hour ferry trip on the stormy Magellan Strait we arrive in Punta Arenas, and first of all have to get used to the traffic. It is quite a challenge to watch for crazy car drivers, pot-holes, stones on the street, and at the same time try to find a supermarket. Not much care is taken about bicyclists... We refrain from any sight seeing in Punta Arenas and leave the city behind as soon as possible. After 15 km we find a small campground among old *Nothofagus* trees. The campfire soon is on and we are having the best food from the bike kitchen: a hot brew, noodles with cheese sauce, garlic, vanilla pudding and fresh melon.

During the next days, we are fighting the wind again. Luckily the highway to Puerto Natales has one side sealed, but for us it is the left side... Soon we are sick of riding on the right side in the gravel, and switch to the "wrong" side of the road with sealed surface. It is 250 km to Puerto Natales. The landscape is not much changing – rolling hills with grassland, and in some cases remains of forests. About 40 km before Puerto Natales, the road descends into a wide valley with a large lake (Lago Diana) and in the far back we can see the snow-capped mountains of the Andes. We are happy to see the mountains after several days of riding basically through flat country.

Puerto Natales

The small town of Puerto Natales has everything necessary for tourists. Supermarkets, Stores for outdoor equipment, typical souvenir shops, and car rentals, it's all there. Puerto Natales is the final port for the ferry coming from Puerto Montt, the city in the north, at which the Panamerican Highway ends before it continues on from Puerto Natales. Apart from that, Puerto Natales is the gateway to the famous National Park Torres del Paine. However, the National Park is still 150 km away. We stock up on food for 14 days (since we want to spend a few days hiking), and leave the town behind.

A stony track north

Leaving Puerto Natales we turn north and it seems unbelievable: tail wind for 30 km! However, even that has its disadvantages: we are almost traveling too fast, and have to be extremely careful not to hit one of the large stones on the track or lose control over the heavily packed bikes. Landscape is flying by. However, from the small border station Cerro Castillo on, we are back to the usual head wind situation. Using the 1:1 transmission on the bikes, we can hardly proceed on the dusty track. We are riding with scarves over our faces to protect ourselves from the dust, and that at blue sky (sounds familiar?). Soon we hit a road construction site marked by an incredible cloud of dust. Heavy machines are used to scrape off the washboard pattern, then the new road is finished by covering it with a layer of gravel. It is left upon the traffic to compress it. Of course even our broad profile tires have no traction in this loose gravel. It's time again for pushing. (Off-road cycling next to the track was not an option, there are quite a few thorny plants around)

The tent is going to rip apart!

The wind is becoming stronger, and our mental strength is weakening. At a wonderful view of the Torres del Paine mountains, near the Lago Sarmiento, we set up camp. By the time now, we have a routine of sharing the work to be done: getting water, attaching all the pegs and lines of the tent, setting up the "kitchen". This time even the bikes have to help fixing the tent, some of the guide lines are attached to the bikes. The wind is still becoming stronger. We can hardly sleep at night always listening to the strong gusts of falling winds, which seem to rip the tent apart. Even on the next morning, there is not much change, except for the blue sky. We are stuck at the tent until noon. As the wind weakens off a little in the early afternoon, we leave our nice campsite.

The tent is ripped apart

We are optimistic: the track is good for a change. But who cares with this wind? After 18 km in six hours, we reach the gate of the National Park and are completely exhausted. The wind forced us to push the bikes, or if hitting us from the side, we simply were thrown over. We try to build up the tent behind a wooden shed near the entrance gate. Even though the area is fenced off with high walls, the wind still is strong enough to rip the tent including four pegs from the ground. Before we can get hold of our tent again, two poles are broken and the nylon channels for the stakes are ripped open. No cooking, but sewing... How are things going to be tomorrow?? – our daily question.

If it is not possible during the day, why not at night?

I'm waking up. It is three in the morning. the moon is shining brightly, and the sky has almost no clouds. Something is wrong – yes, there is no wind! Immediately we have eaten a quick snack, pack everything and are on the track. Our eyes soon adapt to the moonlight, and we can clearly see the track leading through the National Park. However, we are definitively approaching the mountains – the track leads up and down like a roller coaster. The only disadvantage is that we experience it at night... At dawn, we can see the schemes of the near mountains. The sun is up at seven o'clock, and we allow for a short rest at the Lago Pehoe. About ten minutes later, the wind is on – from nothing to full strenght! Without warning! What a strange country...

A hiking trip in the National Park Torres del Paine

Luckily the track turns south, so that the wind hits us from the rear side. That way we can enjoy the gorgeous landscape. Wonderful colors: turquoise and light blue lakes, yellow grass, a few trees, and blue sky. After 38 km we reach the headquarters of the National Park, where we can park the bikes and most of our gear in a shed. Now it's time to switch to hiking. The backpacks were full when we started out in direction of the Glacier Grey. The grassland is more and more interrupted by small forests. And the views of the Paine and Lago Pehoe are wonderful. The trail is not very difficult and after six hours we are at the campground near the Refugio Lago Pehoe. Unfortunately, it had started raining.

And it is raining the whole night. Our clothes did not dry completely as we leave to the glacier the next morning. It keeps raining. But there is no wind. We are passing through *Nothofagus* forests, some of which consist of really old trees, and we discover a lot of interesting plants. At noon we are at the Glacier Grey. The colors are just amazing: deep blue ice. I never saw a more colorful glacier before. If only the sun was shining! On the way back to the tent we don't stop much, and as we arrive at the campground, we are completely wet. We only drop our gear in the tent and decide to move to the nearby hut. There we meet a whole lot of other hikers, who also escaped the rain into the dry and warm hut. We eat warm dinner for a few Pesos, and use the opportunity to get to know some of the other hikers to exchange information.

As we left the hut late that night to go to the tent for sleeping, we can hardly believe it: the clouds are gone and the moon is shining brightly onto the mountains. Up there it had snowed, and it looks like silver in the moon light. We are looking forward to the next hiking day.

We are up early and packing for the day trip to the Campo Italiano, a base camp for climbing the "Torres". The trail leads along two lakes, but the vegetation is more scarce up here. But we have an incredible view of the famous mountains and are even lucky enough to see three condors.

Later on the day, we pack our gear to return in direction of the headquarters, and set up camp at a nice site next to the trail (which is free, compared to the site near the Refugio). On the next day we are back to our good old bikes.

A changed plan

When we cycled into the park, we had strong headwind – so, naturally we would have tail wind leaving the park. Of course not – this day is one of the few days without wind. We find a nice campsite with view of the mountains just behind the border of the National Park. We had calculated the distances we still want to cover, and the number of days we had left. It appeared that we would not be able to cycle back to Cerro Castillo, take the official track to Esperanza and El Calafate from where we can access the Moreno Glacier. This would be a distance of about 300 km, plus we had to consider the wind... Therefore we decided to take the direct route: crossing the green border from Torres del Paine to the track from El Calafate to the Moreno Glacier would only be 50 km. And we were convinced to experience nicer landscapes using the "different" way.

Therefore, the next morning we cycle north in direction of the Estancia La Cumbre. From there, there should be a trail over a pass which was closed since a few years. At this moment we did not bother too much about whether this was legal or not since we were only two persons on bikes, who can easily hide somewhere. However, we could not get information about the conditions of the track or trail. We are confident that we can manage.

Unexpected hospitality

After a day trip of 80 km on a winding track through mountains, we reach the Estancia La Cumbre. They actually have some sort of hotel and offer all kinds of activities (horse back riding, fishing, hiking, etc.) for tourists. Don't ask me who will ever find this place... However, they have not seen too many cycling tourists yet. The couple running the farm, are overwhelmingly friendly and offer us to stay with them for a while. We are glad for the moment, because we had to cross an icy cold river just before the house – without a bridge. Then, we decide to stay for two nights using the time to explore the track, which officially ends at the Estancia. We put up our tent in the garden, but we could not make clear to the couple that we are used to cook our own meals. Anyway the salmon steak with a huge portion of rice and a desert was worth it!

The next day we rode all the way to the pass, without the load. The track is pretty much overgrown, but for mountain bikes it should not be a problem.

Across the border

As we leave, the weather is sunny and the wind is not too strong. Only upon leaving we tell the couple at the Estancia, that we are going north. At first we feared they might be totally upset about us crossing the border, but then they said that often people use this track, and it would even be good business for them if more people come by. After nine kilometers, we reached the point to which we had cycled the day before. The landscape is so impressive, the grass is green, the sky is blue, and we almost forget that it will be extremely hard work from noon on. At times the track is a bit swampy, and going uphill makes even pushing a hard job. We cannot really see the pass, so from time to time we have to search for the right trail. Soon we are above the vegetation zone, and have to work our way up a gravel field. It is too steep to be able to push a packed bike alone. We have to work together: pushing one bike 200m then walking back, and pushing the next bike, and so on. Just at sunset we reach the border pass (1400 m), the surrounding mountain tips are already orange from the last sun rays. We are exhausted, but very happy. Temperatures are already below zero. We hurry up to descend a bit on the other side. Riding down the gravel field is far more fun than working the way up!

Viva Argentina!

With the seat posts pushed down, we speed down the mountain on the Argentinian side. After half an hour we cannot even see the pass anymore. Vegetation starts again, and we find a spot near a small creek to camp. Considering the strenuous work this was the toughest part of the tour. However, the wonderful wild scenery of the mountains was more than rewarding.

The small creek is frozen on the next morning, and it is -8°C , and it will take a while for the sun to reach the valley we are in. Until we reach the first tracks, we have to struggle our way through small rivers and across ridges. Then we see an abandoned hut, and from there a clearly visible track leads downhill. We spend another night in the valley, which leads into the wide valley of the Lago Argentino. We have to reach the Moreno Glacier the next day, because we are soon running out of food. Then we reach a mountain ridge and have a great view of the Andes and Lago Argentino. The air is extremely clear and it is hard to estimate the distances.

The Moreno Glacier

Down in the plain we hit good quality tracks and the weather is ideal. Only as we pass the gate to the National Park Los Glaciares, tracks are of bad quality again, even though they must earn quit some money from all the entrance fees paid by the tourists. The road to the Moreno Glacier leads through *Nothofagus* forests, and every now and then one can spot a sight on the blue Lago Argentino. Then we see the Moreno Glacier. It is impressively large. The massive ice wall directly on the lake leading all the way to the Campo de Hielo Sur in the far mountains. The air is so clear, one can see all the way. We spend hours watching small icebergs break from the front of the glacier and causing immense waves on the surface of the lake. Sometimes, smaller pieces of ice even reach the shore. The Moreno Glacier is one of the few glaciers in the world that are still growing. Every three years the glacier actually blocks the drainage of the lakes, leading to a huge explosion of the glaciers tip once the water pressure on one side of the lake becomes too high.

A bus ride

After a day of watching the glacier, we want to return to El Calafate. With our packed bikes we are at the big car park near the glacier and hope for the possibility to get a bus ride. We don't feel like working our way back on the bad track, especially since we would not be facing a wonderful scenery when riding back. The bus was 10 \$ per person and it took two hours. The bus driver at first was skeptical about transporting the bikes, but within a few minutes we had taken the panniers and wheels off and managed to stuff everything into the rather small baggage compartment.

To the Atlantic Ocean

In El Calafate we approach the campground, meeting two other German cyclists. We spend a long evening cooking. We still have to cover 350 km to Rio Gallegos, the end point of our tour. At least, we would not have to worry about the wind, since we are riding south-east and the road is sealed.

Only about 40 km behind El Calafate, there is a long ascend, from then on we are on flat terrain with tail wind. Without pedaling we speed ahead with 30 km/h. It is amazing! We are delighted by the speeds we can easily reach without any effort. It pays for the strenuous days fighting against just this wind for such a long time. Now we are speeding ahead, and don't even have to worry about pot-holes or stones. It is a pity to even touch the brakes. No more breaks necessary, we can do everything while riding.

On the second day with wonderful tail winds, we reach the city of Rio Gallegos. Of course we don't want to go to the airport directly, but first dip our feet into the Atlantic Ocean. However, we are disappointed from the dirt of the city and especially the amounts of garbage at the coast. But for the moment, it only counts that we made it there. We eat the last cookies, nuts, and dried fruit and then slowly make our way back to the airport. It is 5 km west of the city, we had passed it when we came in from El Calafate. And of course, on our last kilometers in Patagonia, we are fighting the wind again. It takes us an hour to cover the 5 km, and earlier the day we had sped past happily. We are absolutely relieved to reach the airport building and escape from the Patagonian winds. Despite the fights against the wind we had a wonderful time at the end of the world, wild landscapes and impressive glaciers will stay in our memories for a long time.

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