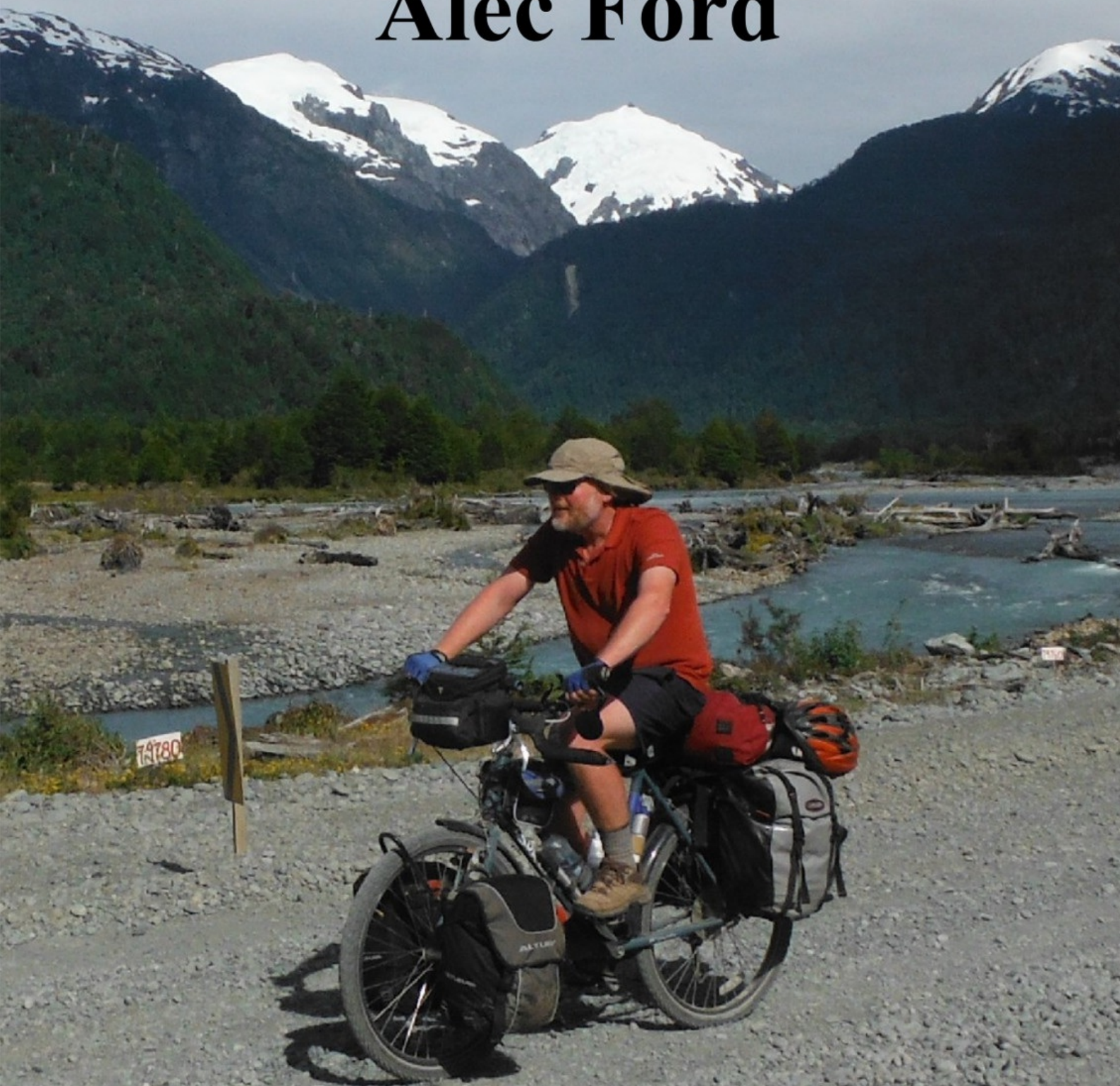


Pushing the Pedals in Patagonia Alec Ford



**Three Months Cycling the Carretera Austral
and the Chilean-Argentinian Lake District**

Pushing the Pedals in Patagonia

Alec Ford
Alec Ford (2014)

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Written and Published by

Alec Ford
Christchurch
New Zealand

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Forward

I didn't think that we were looking for a challenge or an adventure but somehow that's what happened. We have both been cyclists to a greater or lesser extent for most of our lives. In our mid 50's we had taken up recreational road cycling in the last few years for exercise and enjoyment. One day we discovered that many touring cyclists document their travels in journals and blogs on the Internet and we started reading some of their stories. We had backpacked through South America in 1991 and were soon drawn to stories of cycling there and in particular to the Carretera Austral in Southern Chile. Back then the Carretera Austral heading south in Patagonian Chile was new and not yet on the tourist route. Times have changed and it is now recognized as one of the greatest roads in the world to tour by bicycle. I suggested almost halfheartedly to Alison that we could do it and she didn't disagree. Our children, young adults still living at home, were now old enough to be abandoned for a summer - or so we hoped.

So a plan was born involving buying touring bicycles and working to cycle the Carretera Austral 18 months hence. Plans grew and we included the Chilean and Argentinian lake districts. And so it was that we spent nearly three months cycling in Andean Patagonia. Mountain tracks, gravel roads, hills, wind and even some rain amongst forested snow capped mountains, rivers and glaciers but to our surprise what we remember most is not just the landscape but the people we met, other travelers and more importantly the friendliness and generosity of many Chileans we met along the way.

Photos

This book is designed to tell our story in words but also act as a guide to the many photos we took. Each chapter has a photo set for viewing on the Internet. If you read this book in a reader or device that has Internet capability then you can access the photos from the book. If not you can visit the web pages for the book independently and then follow the index there. While the book stands alone without the photos you need the book for a commentary on the photos.

We took many photos but sadly many are not of the technical quality that I would like. This was never to be a trip where taking perfect photos was to be a priority. For a start we would never have time to wait for the best light for the perfect shot, it was about taking some snaps and seeing what came out. I had a small camera that I could pick up in one hand and take a shot while still riding along. Sometimes this worked well and sometimes not. Sometime rain or dust would get on the lens and taking photos this way I often wouldn't realize that we had some spot on the lens.

This all leaves a dilemma as whether to include these poorer photos or not. On one hand I'm embarrassed to show my deficiencies as a photographer but on the other many of the photos show what we saw and tell part of the story. In the end I have swayed towards putting up poorer photos in order to help tell the story and show you what we saw and I'll try better next time!

As to what we photographed: Of course there is the obvious scenery, mountains, lakes, forest. There is the road and those that we met on it and the trip in general. After a while we realized that with the predominance of bus transport there was a huge variety of bus shelter design and that we could do a photo collection of bus shelters. I have an interest in trees, the plantation kind, mainly Radiata pine and Australian Eucalyptus Niton both of which are as common in Chile as in New Zealand so you get photos of plantation forests. Following that line wood is a major fuel in rural Chile so I took lots of photos of firewood piles.

I'm not much of a photographer of people, I tend to stick to scenery. In a way this is a pity in that we didn't take more photographs of those people we met. I don't mind my photograph being taken in theory but can't be bothered stopping to pose so I look a bit grumpy in most of the photographs taken of me – so you don't see them!

In all I hope they give some idea of what we saw to enhance this story.

Front Cover Photo: A bit more than a kilometer south of Santa Lucia looking west up the valley of the Rio Frio to the mountains in Parque Nacional Corcovado. Today I'm not wearing my cycle helmet preferring my sun hat as it's an easy quiet road, Christmas day 2013.

Rear Cover Photo: Looking south down Lago Desierto with Cerro Fitz Roy in the background. Taken from the track a kilometer or so up from the Argentinian border post.

This Story

This book started life as an online journal written while we were on the road. The purpose of the journal was severalfold. Firstly while we were on tour we did our best to update it as regularly as possible so as to let family and friends know where we were and that all was well. With a small laptop and a tablet we found that we were able to manage short updates at least every few days even if some had to be filled out later. Secondly as a record for posterity for us and others. It is a reminder to us of our adventures for us in later years. Also as we had enjoyed reading other journals and found them useful in planning this trip then we hope to return the favor to those who read journals for enjoyment or planning their own trips.

I had toyed with the idea of perhaps converting the journal into a book when we were finished but that was not a major consideration while we were on the road. Retrospectively had it been I might have taken more notes, even if mentally, about some things we saw and the people we met. Writing as much as we did on the road did mean taking advantage of more rest days to an extent greater than I had thought of for writing. I had read many online journals where the task of keeping up to date proved too much for the writer sometimes leaving incomplete journals abandoned. Disappointed as a reader by such journals I was determined not to become one of those so I kept my promise to myself to keep up the effort.

On our return it was clear that our online journal written in haste needed plenty of tidying up and with leisure we remembered many things to add to the original. That original journal was written and posted online with entries not knowing what was coming next. Of course we now know what happened next but I have tried to keep some of that flavor in the story to give more of a feel of what it was like then by keeping to the daily diary structure as it was originally written. I hope it works.

Introduction

Patagonia

Just where and what is Patagonia you may wonder. Simply it is the bottom 3,000 kilometers of South America. The first thought that may come to mind is the dry southern pampas area of Argentina and while that is the largest part of Patagonia the forested snowy mountains and fiords of southern Chile out to the Pacific ocean encompassing the Andes is also regarded as Patagonia. History may have changed what are regarded as the northern boundaries of Patagonia but it is the National Geographic map of Patagonia that I like the most. It has Patagonia's northern limit far more north in Argentina than the Chilean limit. It is generally regarded that the Colorado river is the Northern boundary in Argentina and then a western boundary running north south somewhere down the Andes but then including the fiords of Chile out to the Pacific Ocean in Patagonia. Some sources mention the Valdivia province of Chile as being part of Patagonia but I don't think any modern Chileans would think this area of its fertile agricultural heartland to be part of modern Patagonia. From wherever you take the boundary into Chile's fiords I don't think it matters much as there are few people down that way anyway.

According to the above definition all but a few days of our cycling were in Patagonia. When we started out from Valdivia once we had then crossed into the mountains we were more or less in Patagonia until we came back to Chile a bit over a week and a half later. Then in a few more days once we left Puerto Montt onto the Carretera Austral we were in Patagonia again where we stayed until we rolled out to Los Angeles on our last couple of days of cycling. Certainly for the last few days around Lonquimay where the landscape is dryer it felt more like Argentina than Chile.

As we cycled south on the Carretera Austral we went through valleys and came to small towns that historically were more accessible to Argentina than they were to Chile. The Andes are relatively low down here and there are many low passes and routes through the chain of the Andes. Indeed early settlers here came through from Argentina rather than Chile. There are several lakes that span the national border having different names in each country and they provided access between Argentina and Chile. There are some rivers that run west from Argentina through the mountains to empty out into the fiords and the Pacific. Chile and Argentina may be different but down in Patagonia the peoples of both countries can feel more of a bond with each other than their own countries to the north.

It was under Pinochet that the Carretera Austral was constructed as a road to join some existing roads and unite Chilean Patagonia with the rest of Chile. The road was initially named after him but changing political times meant a change in name. The current generation of road builders widening and bringing asphalt to the Carretera Austral can only tie the people down here more closely to the rest of Chile.

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0401/feature3/map.html>

Prelude - How it all started

I can date the beginning of this story almost to the minute, 3:59 pm 16 April 2012. I'm at home, I'm feeling a bit tired after riding the 131 kilometers Around Brunner race the previous weekend with a pig of an autumn cold and it has all caught up with me. It may not have been sensible to do such a ride with my cold but it didn't seem that bad by the weekend and the entry fees and accommodation were paid for with no refund possible. I could hardly have made the 4 hour drive and then watched Alison, my wife, depart from the start line without me.

In comes an email from Alison, at work, it's a link to an online journal. Barbara in the office has forwarded an email from Shane in the Sydney office who has a brother Dennis cycling from Florida to San Francisco and he's writing a daily journal online. I'm in an easily diverted state so I start reading and pretty soon I'm hooked.

Over the next few days I'm spending too much time reading cycling journals and soon find my way to those in South America and Patagonia and the Carretera Austral. This time, 21 years ago we were backpacking down in southern Chile and Patagonia as part of 9 months in South and Central America. Back then the Carretera Austral was new, a bit of a mystery with not much in the travel books and not yet on the tourist route. Now you can bike the whole length, over 1000 kilometers and after the last bit as long as you are prepared to take a boat and then go off road for a few kilometers you can pass into Argentina. Back then we took a boat south from Puerto Montt through the fiords 1000 kilometers south to Puerto Natales. Then later after several weeks in the south we took an overnight bus in Argentina back north from El Calafate to San Carlos de Bariloche. So there's a whole chunk in the middle where the Carretera Austral runs that we never saw. I'm beginning to think I'd love to do this by bike while I still can. I suggest it to Alison not too seriously but she seems to get hooked on the idea also so maybe it could happen.

In the days that follow there are more wasted hours on the Internet and I'm reading about the kind of bikes that we would need. It seems the Surly Long Haul Trucker could be a good bike - how I'd ever find one here I have no idea. There may be a dozen bike shops within a couple of kilometers of home but I've never seen a LHT, perhaps because I've not been looking for touring bikes.

Ten days later I get a cryptic email from Alison at work about bike clips, I ring her - it seems Barbara has lost one and wants to know where to get some. Then she says: Remember (her cousin) Neil said the guy in the business unit next to his imports different and unusual bikes. I'm just off to get some bread - it's on the way - I'll drop in.

Since the Christchurch earthquakes starting 18 months ago closed the local Gym that I went to I've biked a lot more for exercise rather than joining another gym. The 2.5 kilometers ride to get our preferred brand of bread is one I do several times a week. My usual route passes the entrance down to the business units where I need to go but I've never been in there.

As I bike in, Neil sees me but doesn't immediately recognize me with my bike helmet and sun glasses on. We've never met that many times, occasional family funerals and the like. Neil and I chat for a few minutes then we walk the few meters to the next unit and the first thing I see is a Surly LHT minus wheels and some fresh welding on the down tube. Yes he did that welding, his business is Wrought Iron and he is an expert welder. He introduces me to Dave with "he's a relation, treat him well" and a smile. Dave seems to recognize me ("Alec isn't it" he says) but not me him. I find out later he's on an email list I run for a group I'm involved in and some years ago he and his wife built a house on a back section two doors down from us (but have since moved on). It turns out that the LHT had an argument with a car and needed repair.

So Dave is a New Zealand importer for Surly, lots of bikes about. His small unit is full to the roof with boxes and there is even a shipping container for more storage. He has another LHT out front that he's setting up for a customer, changing the standard drop bars for flat ones. We talk for what must be half an hour. I leave to get my bread thinking how it could come to be that the bike shop I wanted was so close.

A couple of days later it's Sunday morning and I'm doing some research on the Internet and trying to

work out what size of bike might fit me. I give up and I'm off to my local bike shop to buy a new spokes for my daughter's bike. It may be the closest bike shop to home but today just before lunch it's busy and I have to wait a while. I eventually get to the counter to pay, there's a bike between me and the counter, a bit of an annoyance in the way. I look down, I can hardly believe my eyes, it's a Surly Long Haul Trucker, nice blue. It turns out the owner is planning to tour India. He has bought the frame and main components off the Internet and still needs a few bits - the derailleurs aren't even connected yet but he rode it here. He has put on riser bars and hydraulic brakes. He's a fraction shorter than I and it's a 50cm Frame. I quiz him and ask if I can sit on - the seat is a little high for me and the Brooks saddle is new but feels about right. Is the something in the Universe I don't believe in telling me something here?

In the days that follow I do some more research and back to quiz Dave some more. On the next visit we talk about bars and things and he shows me the butterfly (touring) bars he's putting on a Surly Cross Check - apparently the customer is going to South America. Lots more to think about. Pity that nice blue is last year's color.

While I've been doing all this and researching the route Alison seems keen - she's looked up airfares on the Internet. She works out that in another 18 months she could accumulate enough leave for three months of paid leave - as long as we are away over Christmas to take advantage of the statutory holidays. Realistically we would be aiming for the Jan/Feb 2014. We wouldn't like to go away for such a time until our daughter is a little older and anyway this coming summer could be our chance get some bikes and to ride the Otago Rail Trail. I'd like to do Blenheim to Hammer via Molesworth - 210 kilometers all gravel with only a couple of homesteads along the road. It's dry open county and mountains all the way - a bit like Andean Patagonia in miniature.

In the meantime we have enrolled in a refresher Spanish course one evening a week at the local high school. After twenty years we are a bit rusty but know that even with renewed practice the Chilean accent will be hard for us to follow.

Our plan that develops is to head south down the Carretera Austral. Most of the Carretera Austral is a self defining route however the northern end has some options. We're not planning on making this part of some grand tour of South America so my initial plan is to head south from Puerto Montt. There's not much written on the Northern Puerto Montt end of the Carretera Austral because it's not the obvious way to go for those on longer trips. After that there are virtually no options for deviations all the way down the Carretera Austral until finally we can cross Lago O'Higgins by boat to reach Argentina. The two main options for the return north are from Puerto Natales in Chile by ferry or a long bus trip up Ruta 40 in Argentina.

As time passes I begin to think that we have enough time to include some of the Chilean Lake district within the total three months we have. The mountain passes in this area between Chile and Argentina look quite interesting. If we choose the bus option and return directly from el Calafate to Bariloche we could have time to then cycle the Argentinian 7 lakes route and then back to Chile via yet another one of the Andean passes. Alison works out we could end the trip with a few days of an Amazon cruise as the flights from Santiago are quite reasonable for this extra.

We don't plan on making it a completely camping trip but with this route there's bound to be a few days of camping necessary. Neither do we plan to make it a trip of heads down biking and rather we will take our time and enjoy the trip and the scenery. That means that in some of the larger gaps between towns we will need to camp so our preparations include planning our camping gear.

In the following weeks the Internet is searched for information on all sorts - not just bikes but tents and camping gear. Procrastination continues in the weeks that follow we visit Dave many times with questions. Eventually Dave sets up a 52cm frame and it seems right for both of us within adjustable tolerances. By the end of July we have decided to get the first bike with Butterfly handlebars. We start to accumulate the camping gear we need

Tuesday 8 August is a major milestone - Pickup day for the first bike. I take it out for a tough hill ride The

following weeks are full of experimentation. An adjustable handlebar stem allows the setup to be changed to work out the configuration for both of us. I experiment with different handlebars and experiment with some seats we have. We decide that Alison needs a smaller frame size, there is one in the new 2013 smog grey color on the way in the seasonal order from Taiwan due in 3 weeks or so.

I drop into Dave on the way to get our bread and he tells me that the shipment is off the boat and due in this afternoon. After lunch I go back and I get there just as a large truck is about to leave and there's a huge pile of bike boxes mainly labeled Long Haul Trucker. It's going to be a challenge to get them into the storage space available so Dave is quite happy to get the LHT smog silver out of the box onto the bike stand and build it up.

We've got both the bikes now and come the weekend it's our first ride together on the new bikes. We end up going to Kennedys Bush, one of the local hills where we can try the granny gears. A short sharp climb with bits over 10%. I've swapped the drop bars onto the first bike and like them on the hills, a position that's missing with the butterfly bars.

In the next few months we have trial rides on the hills and tracks around the city. There's more changes and experimentation on the bikes. As Christmas approaches plans develop for a couple of trips to try out ourselves and the bikes. In the week before Christmas we head south with our daughter to the Otago Rail trail. This is a four day ride. We choose a plan that does the center section both ways by leaving the car in the middle and ends where we started. Alison decided that she didn't like her butterfly handlebar setup on the gravel so I changed it for a riser bar for our next trip. After Christmas the two of us set off on the Rainbow Molesworth loop over New Year. Driving a couple of hours north to the resort town of Hanmer we park the car and then set off on the 7 day round trip. It's three days to Blenheim via the Rainbow and then after a days rest we returned via the Awatere Valley and Molesworth station.

We survived those trips undaunted but some ideas for further refinement of our bikes and camping equipment. Some short day trips were made on the touring bikes amongst our usual road riding for the rest of summer and into winter. By May it was time to buy our plane tickets. We discovered that if we went before the beginning of December that we would save around a thousand dollars each off our airfares. We worked out that we could do that and take a total of 3 ½ months with having the last bit of over a week being our trip to the Amazon. Our Canadian friend Frebis was interested in coming and we worked out a plan as to how she could be with us for three weeks from mid December and still have a plan that was consistent with her needs and ours. We will spend a couple of weeks in the Lake District before meeting her in Puerto Montt in mid December and she will ride with us for the first half of the Carretera Austral.

It was a relatively benign winter for cycling for us and we managed to keep our fitness up with winter rides better than we had expected. Purchases of gear continued. Come the end of October we decided on an overnight trip to Lake Sumner. We had to drive most of the way and then ride in on gravel roads with plenty of climbing and then camp the night. For the ride in it was a serious headwind with some cold rain blasting into us and in the morning there was a slight frost on the ground. It was sure a good test of us and our gear. Although nicer on the way out we felt we were tested and ready to take on Patagonia when it was all over. A month of final preparations and by the end of November we had to be ready whether we were or not.

Online Journals of our planning and practice rides can be found on:

www.crazyguyonabike.com - Lots of cycling journals

www.crazyguyonabike.com/DCA – Dreaming of the Carretera Austral

www.crazyguyonabike.com/ORT - Otago Rail Trail

www.crazyguyonabike.com/RML – Rainbow Molesworth Loop

Lake District Loop

This section contains the days from our arrival in Chile for two weeks until our days in Puerto Montt before starting the Carretera Austral however the first task is to get to Chile. We leave Christchurch mid morning for Auckland and in the late afternoon catch a flight across the Pacific to Chile where another domestic flight will take us south to Valdivia in late afternoon. We are giving ourselves only a day to sort ourselves out before hitting the road toward Argentina.

Our first day on the road shouldn't be too bad, while we have read of this section being described as one of the worst roads in Chile but that was a few years ago and we are hopeful recent upgrading of the road is complete. From Los Lagos we have a decision to make. We can head north east to Panguipulli but there is an old route to the south along Lago Rinihue. The road closed over 20 years ago but cyclists have passed this way and I have been in contact with a group of Argentinians who traversed this route of washed out bridges as recently as last March. We have been watching the weather here for the last month and it has been dry so we know that the river levels should be low but we hope to pick up some local knowledge. Which ever way we go we end up at Puerto Fuy for a ferry across Lago Pirehueico and into Argentina.

We are looking forward to San Martin de los Andes for a good Argentinian steak before heading back to Chile via the little used and challengingly beautiful Paso Carirriñe. From there our route is a little uncertain depending a little of which route we take initially but we will get back out towards Los Lagos and head south past some of the lakes to Puerto Montt. With a deadline to meet our friend Frebis in Puerto Montt doing all this in two weeks will be a challenge and we are prepared to take a bus or buses if necessary.

The Ups and Downs of Airline Flights

Christchurch to Valdivia

Photos: www.pppg.pictures/ChcVld.htm

"I told you so" is something that I can expect to hear a few times. We had a good start to departure day, our flight from Christchurch to Auckland is around midday giving us plenty of time to make our international connection. A friend has driven us and our 2 children out to the airport for goodbyes. We have allowed the suggested 2 hours for full checkin as even though this is a domestic hop we can make of international checkin here.

We had been standing in the queue to check in for some minutes when an airport staffer comes up to us and introduces himself. "Hello I'm Shane and going to tell you something that you won't like to hear". He tells us that bikes must now be in boxes for Air New Zealand, not in bags. My protests that with the front rack and mud guards it's hard to fit in a standard box and that LAN accepts wrapped bikes were to no avail. I had to accept that it was a while since I had checked the Air New Zealand web site and that things had changed since then.

So they will sell us boxes for \$25 each and so begins a process of disassembly and repacking the bikes into their boxes. We are glad we are early. Another airport staff member walking by is accosted for the use of his box cutter so we can cut our way into the bags and the box containing my tools. I have to say that once under way the process went remarkably smoothly. Shane tells us that it would be more than his life is worth not to charge us for the boxes but he disappears and someone else tells us to go to the ticket desk to pay. Later on the plane to Santiago we reflect we could have gotten away with not paying for the boxes.

In the meantime our checkin is partially completed awaiting the final package weights. We get to checkin again to finish and then are sent to the oversize counter with the bikes. We get them done and the attendant leaves but then we have to put our boxes of everything else in here also - just because they are boxes and not normal luggage. Our bikes and boxes are checked in all the way to Valdivia. We are not quite sure how that works as we have to collect them and pass customs in Santiago.

All done and it's time for family photo and a coffee before going through the gates for final departure to Auckland. We later hear our plight had been noticed by other cyclists flying north for a race on this weekend and word had spread around town. Pretty soon we are there and I write this in the departure lounge in Auckland waiting for our departure to Santiago.

Every Cloud...

It's not easy writing a journal in the cramped conditions in the back of economy class while crossing the pacific - well I believe that to be true but thus far I wouldn't know. Having just finished a three course dinner with a choice of wines sitting here in first class I don't know what it's like down the back - but I get ahead of myself.

We arrived in Auckland on time and managed to see one of the bikes unloaded under our window while waiting to disembark from down the back of the plane. We walked to the international terminal and sat outside for a while to get some fresh air before checkin for this flight. We talked with the friendly James who checked us in telling him of our bike box experience. He confirmed that LAN would have been happy with our packing of the bikes. We duly went through to the departure gates where I was duly checked for explosives - was it that I looked suspicious or that the man has to keep up his quota to justify his existence. We had plenty of time waiting in the departure lounge and I the managed to pop off a poorly proofed first entry for our online journal. The Internet may be free in the departure lounge but only for half an hour and the speed was pretty appalling for a journal update, well I did add a couple of photos. After about half an hour our flight was called and we headed down to the gate.

We were to be seated in the middle of the plane so it was a bit of a wait after the first class passengers and women and children were loaded and then those behind us before it was our turn to board. We get to the

front of the queue and then it's our turn to hand over the boarding passes. Some light flashes as it is scanned. There is a muttered exchange in Spanish as the LAN gate staff there seem mostly Chilean or some other Spanish speakers. The man takes Alison's boarding pass and mine and gives us some new ones. Now something like this once happened to us on a trip to Australia and we lost our chosen seats so I'm wondering what has befallen us. The he says to me, quietly and almost apologetically: "You have been upgraded to first class". We continue speechless, I suppose he didn't want the whole world to hear.

Almost immediately were at our two wonderful seats. We were not the only upgrades but most around us were well seated with drinks and some nuts. We were seated and the attendant asked what we would like to drink. He recommended a pisco sour, a sort of Chilean National drink, pisco, the local brandy with lemon and sugar. We couldn't actually remember having one last time we were in Chile so it seems a good idea and very nice it was too.

With the change in time zones our meal was served promptly after takeoff, three courses with wine. But by 7 it was time to bed down and the lights went down and journal writing ceased. So we got a bit of sleep but about midnight by our body time the crew started the noise associated with breakfast which finally came an hour later. It was very nice being able to sleep flat, the seat probably had more intelligence than Apollo 11. I never did get a chance to check out all the buttons and adjustments.

In Chile

Dawn came as we approached Chile. Our great circle route has taken us south towards antarctic and we are coming north up the coast of Chile. Although in center seats out the windows we could see the Andes to the east and the dryer hills and plains south of Santiago as we approach. We landed in Santiago a bit early, not that it did us any good. We may have been off the plane promptly being seated up the front but there was a huge queue in immigration as ours was not the only plane arriving at this hour. In the queue we ended up talking to the fellow who had been sitting across the aisle from us on the plane. He had done some cycling in his youth but is now a lamb buyer for a Belgian supermarket chain and was heading down to Patagonia after being in New Zealand.

So when we got to the baggage claim there were our bike boxes sitting by the baggage conveyor - but looking a little worse for wear. Of our luggage boxes there was no sign. When new stuff stopped coming through we asked the baggage handler there, a quick call and he said that they would be there in 5 to 10 minutes. After half an hour we were still waiting and the woman of another couple came over and asked if we were waiting, so was she. A few minutes later her suitcase and our boxes appeared. We were glad that we had plenty of time for our next connection. So through to customs check, the fellow wanted to know what was the metal machine in one box. I couldn't think of anything but the thermos with it's fancy mounting attachments, this seemed to be enough for him and off through we went apart from showing our muesli bars and Christmas cake as food - both OK, meat and dairy were their concerns.

So out we went to find Custodia (baggage storage) as we wanted to know how much it might cost in 3 months time to store our bikes. It was US\$15/day/bike, it would be cheaper downtown. Then we had to get up to the 3rd floor to check in our baggage. There are two not very big lifts with not very big doors. With many others wanting to go up also we have to had to go through several lift cycles before we get in. We had to upend the bike boxes to get in. Then at the top I get out the sellotape to patch the rips in the boxes - all at the handholds, the boxes just aren't strong enough. We look around and almost opposite the lift on the left hand end of the LAN counters was one checkin sign: International checked in baggage. We assumed that must be us even though no one was there so we went over and someone did come and help us. At least the system is good enough to have the checkin formalities done from Auckland. Because our boarding passes were also issued from Auckland they didn't have a gate on them - we were told to watch the boards. Soon we saw gate 31 come up for our flight. It was downstairs - Santiago has some gates where you get on a bus to be taken to the aircraft and this was one. So down we went and waited, and waited, there were lot's of

people about, the gate screen said our flight. Now we assumed that they were for our flight and so we wait, a screen near us continued to say this was the gate for our flight. But then two flights for Calama boarded and there was no one left and it was our flight time. Panic.

We found a gate with someone there and asked - our flight had changed to 28 and left a few minutes ago. Go to ticketing on the 3rd floor we are told. Up down and around we found our way there. "Perdimos nuestro vuelo" - we have lost our flight, we knew the expression to miss a flight is to lose it from 23 years ago but that's another story. So our bags had gone, no more flights today and the best he could do was wait list us for tomorrow as the flight was full. However from the first realization that we were in trouble I had formulated plan B. "Temuco, Orsono, hoy dia?" (today) I ask. From our original planning I knew that there were 5 flights a day to Temuco, 150 kilometers from Valdivia - we could bus there tonight. Yes he could get us on the flight boarding in an hour, seats opposite side of the aisle, not together - "esta bien" (good). Watch the boards he demands of us - but the plane was already at the gate so hardly likely to change. Glad that we bought some SIMM cards for our phones on arrival we call our accommodation to explain we will be late. Our Spanish and Chilean Spanish aren't quite the same and eventually we get the owner who speaks English, no problem, they are open 24hrs.

So on schedule we take off for Temuco and an hour later on the dot of 6:00 the wheels hit the runway. Out we get to find out the options, it is a very small airport. We take a Taxi into the bus terminal of Buses JAC, a large regional company. So there we are, there are no tickets available on the 7:30 bus but we get on the 8:00 bus. We have an hour and a half to kill. We walk down a street towards the city center looking for something to eat and find a little hole in the wall type sandwich place half a block away from the bus station, we can't be bothered going further. The young fellow knows a bit of English - with the help of google translate on his smart phone we manage some conversation. As we are about to leave he asks us if we have any of our NZ money, he likes to collect foreign money. Alison has a \$5 note. We tell him its worth more or less what we just paid for our food. So he's happy to return our Chilean money and take a Kiwi \$5 note, we explain that Sir Edmund Hillary (picture on it) was the first to climb Mt Everest in 1953.

So back to the bus station to wait. Somehow it seems quite natural to be waiting at a bus station in South America, it was 23 years ago that we backpacked here but somehow we seem to slip into the groove. The bus comes in, the station has 5 spaces and buses have been coming and going regularly. On we get to our seat down the back and off we go on the dot of 8:00 - but only a few yards to the exit of the station and more people get on. After a while we realize the system - buy a ticket and get a seat or just get on and stand. It takes ages to get out of town as this is Friday night and plenty of people are getting on and eventually off as we travel along. We leave the Ruta 5 Pan American highway a few times for small towns but there are also stops all along the highway. It's frustratingly slow. We both get a bit of sleep, glad we have the seats at the back somehow a bit away from the standing passengers and a couple of inches higher, Very comfortable seats that recline a bit.

So at 11:00pm we roll into the Valdivia bus terminal. We know our accommodation isn't far but we take a taxi as it's dark and we don't have our bearings. In bed by midnight, tomorrow to sort out our baggage.

Getting Organised on Our First Day in Chile

Valdivia

Photos: www.pppg.pictures/Valdivia.htm

We managed to sleep in until after 9 this morning, I guess our body clocks need a little to adjust. After breakfast we started sorting out how to get our bikes and baggage. Valdivia airport is a long and expensive way out of town so we wanted to confirm that our baggage was indeed there. Alvaro, the owner of Hostal Totem rang LAN for us, our Spanish not being up to such challenges on the telephone. He didn't have much luck so he suggested we go down to the LAN office, only a few minutes walk away. There the woman was most helpful but was not having much luck until she decided to ring one of the airport staff who was probably still at home. Within a few seconds she had the affirmative answer that we wanted. But the airport didn't open until 3 as there was only one plane arriving today. So we walked back to the hostel where Alvaro sorted out a van for us, pick up at 2:30 and I'd be there as the staff arrived to open up.

So off we went to explore Valdivia for a couple hours. A block down to the river and we followed the path around to the fish market and wharf area where tourist ferries run cruises up and around the river/estuary. It is amazing to see sea lions in the center of the city. There are lots of people about down at the waterfront and bands playing it being Saturday. Valdivia is a very pretty town to visit as a tourist on a nice day, the pity was that when we were here 23 years ago it was cold and low foggy cloud and rain most of the time so we are enjoying it this time. The city was destroyed in a massive earthquake in 1960 but a few old buildings seem to have survived. We note that nothing like them would be left standing now back home, not due to the earthquake itself but the policies and standards on building strength introduced in the three years since.

We head off down the street to check out the supermarket. I remark to Alison that we haven't seen any bike shops yet. She seems perplexed. Not 15 meters ahead of us hanging outside the next shop is an old bike - I hadn't seen it but she had. We walk in the door and ask about bike boxes explaining we will be back in three months needing two. Yes that will be OK is the answer. One worry of the future planning list.

We walk a couple of blocks more and see a restaurant with a sign out advertising its dishes. We note Cazuela de Vaca. Boiled vege and a lump of beef in a tasty broth - it was a favorite of ours when we were here 23 years ago. It's wholesome tasty food we appreciated when traveling. I don't think that I have read of many cyclists having this dish but it's perfect cyclists food but then it's mainly a midday meal and many cyclists will be on the road then. So we order one each. Blaring on the TV is Chile's version of Chile's got Talent - some things seem the same the world over. There are a couple of single older men on tables near to us, one is having beef and egg and chips/fries and the other a cazuela. Sometime during our meal we notice the one having the fries has left and the other has finished his cazuela and is now having the beef egg and fries. One Cazuela is enough for us but I guess if you come to town on Saturday you make a meal of it.

After a quick exploration of the supermarket for Alison to come back to later it's back to our hostel to wait for my trip to the airport. The van turns up a couple of minutes early. You may have this idea from Hollywood and other sources that South America is a place where punctuality has no meaning. While Chile and Argentina were both once Spanish colonies they are separated by more than the Andes. While Argentina had lots of Italian immigration from the early 1900's Chile had German immigration. Some German efficiency flows in the veins of Chile. The ride to the airport takes exactly half an hour and we arrive half a minute before the staff bus. They drive in and I wait a couple of minutes, my driver knows the staff as he must drive the staff bus some of the time - the other bus is the same company. Then he pops down a corridor and out from an office to the side comes the first bike. No need to produce my baggage receipt or anything. In a few minutes we are loaded up and his boss who drove the other staff bus takes the wheel for the return trip. I begin to think he must have Brazilian blood as we fly back reminiscent of the way Brazilian bus drivers drive like men possessed. We are back at the hostel only a couple of minutes over an hour from when we left.

Alison is off shopping so I ask if there is a spare key for our room but there doesn't seem to be one on the bunch so I set about unpacking and assembling the bikes in the corridor. It's nearly an hour and a half

more before Alison returns and I have the second bike almost done. She had time for an icecream while I was laboring away but explains that if she had got one for me it would have melted, at least she has bought some biscuits (cookies).

When I return upstairs to our room the contents of our boxes are spread out around the room. One thing we learned on our trip many years ago was to ask for a room "con dos camas" - with two beds - you get a lot more room that way and we need it now. But it's time to eat and Alison has bought the makings of a picnic so we head out down to the river again. We walk on the wide river walk path around to the wharf area. There are lots of people out and about on this warm early summer evening. On a slope under the shade of some trees we find a spot not taken and sit to eat. People are walking by below. On the river a tourist cruise heads up river, some rowing skiffs head down river. An old man with a three wheeled bike with a cooler on the front pedals slowly by calling "Helados, Helados" (icecreams). We finish eating and join the people walking over and back on the high bridge to the other side of the river - just because it's there, it gives a great view of the wharf area on the city side of the river.

Back to our room it's time for me to make sense of my share of the mess and pack some panniers for departure tomorrow. Some journal writing and it's late before we are in bed. Now we saw quite a few dogs about the streets, all quite docile, well lazy and sleeping, but for the second night in a row one nearby seems to want to bark his head off off and on all through the night.

A Sunny First Day on the Road

Valdivia to Los Lagos

www.pppg.pictures/VldvaLLgos.htm

Our first day on the road, not a huge day after a late start, 51 kilometers of good sealed road to end up in the small town of Los Lagos. My first day of writing a daily journal on the road. I'm sitting on the bed in our room to start this. It's a large room, we have a third bed to spread our stuff out on. We arrived a bit before 5:00 and came upon this place as we crossed the bridge over the river that divides the town. It a rather large old building, it has history, there are plenty of signs of DIY renovations changing walls and doors about. There is a large dining and common room looking north across the river. The rooms have windows but the back side of the building abuts the shops around the Plaza and the bathrooms are windowless. The floor is far from level, age is taking its toll on the wooden piles that support the place. Our bikes are parked in the hall outside our room at the end of the main hallway – we have used some rope to tie the brakes on lest they roll away. But the people are very friendly and the place clean. It's hard to find information on accommodation in Los Lagos, it's a small town not on the tourist route so when we set out today we weren't quite sure where we would be staying.

The day started early, at some time before dawn there was noise from some people getting up in the hostel, while a generally quiet place, any noise did get around passing through thin walls. Just as this ceased it seemed the couple in the next room had been aroused and they got going fast and furious. Well when you hear that through the (thin) wall you usually know it isn't going to last long and this was thankfully the case with things coming to a swift end. Alison did comment that she heard similar noises later in the morning so maybe what he lost in duration he gained in repetition.

So it was an earlier start for breakfast for us than we may have expected. Then it was time for the last stage of packing but first some shopping to stock up. By the time we did the shopping and I got the bikes up from the basement to start loading most of the morning had gone by. As I started to put the front panniers on I realized I had put the front racks back on the wrong way around so to fix that was another job to do before departure. All in all it was midday by the time we pushed the bikes out the front door onto the street.

Our hostel was on a street well above the river so downhill a block we went and crossed the main road along the riverside to the river walk so that we could get underway a bit relaxed for our first time riding here. I realized I hadn't tightened my front racks or handlebar bag mount but decided that it could wait. Pretty soon we had to join the traffic on a major road, for the first time for us riding on the right hand side of the road. Then we took what we hoped was the first left at traffic lights to get us out of town. We then followed what we thought was the right road when it took us right although I thought we could have continued ahead – but both ways were possible. The road seemed to dwindle in narrow suburban streets and we felt lost, there was no major left turn or signage to take us north as we expected. To make matters worse there was a big open Sunday market going on in the area and there was lots of traffic crawling and parked on streets not made for it. Time to consult the map. Alison had downloaded the area in BackCountryNavigator on her tablet but neither of us had had time to look at it before starting. We worked out that we had overshot our road by a block, hardly more than 100 meters. Over a street, that seemed to be the right one but it was closed for reconstruction but pedestrians seemed to be using it so we carried on. Then there was a narrow temporary pedestrian bridge over a trench carrying new cables. I had to take my front panniers off to cross it. A friendly local carried then across after me as I pushed the bike over. But we were now on the right road although it hardly seemed a highway.

This route that we are following has never previously been a major road out of Valdivia, the main road north being on the other side of the river. That probably explains why there is no clear route for us to follow and perhaps we are caught in the chaos of that route now being created through what were previously just suburban streets. Some old reports from cyclists found on the Internet describe our road ahead as one of the worst roads in Chile with terrible gravel or ripio as it is called here. But we know that in recent years it has been progressively upgraded and sealed. Recent satellite imagery shows major reconstruction ahead and we

are hoping that it is all finished by now and that we will have seal.

Very soon we hit the edge of town and the road turned to rutted gravel ripio. Now we were wondering what we had got ourselves into but then within half a kilometer there was a new bridge and the seal began on the other side of it. We needn't have worried and we stayed on excellent seal for the rest of the day. I guess the bridge may have been the city limit or something similar.

Before long we came to our first and biggest hill of the day, quite a long climb. Well a ninety meter vertical climb isn't really much but a more gentle introduction to Chilean hills would have been nicer. I kind of knew this climb was here from research but had put it out of my mind. The gradient wasn't too bad and the surface was brand new smooth asphalt. Soon we got to the top where there was a stop go man because of some ongoing roadworks, the newly completed road needing repair already. We slipped past to a lookout just ahead with a great view over the river below but it hadn't yet been sealed. The man advised to proceed with care – it was a long stretch and we couldn't do it all in the window allocated to cars. We had a bit of a rest there as I attended to my brakes, the downhill ahead was going to need it. This was by far the biggest hill of the day but as we followed the river to Los Lagos there were 6 or 8 smaller climbs where we had to climb because the river came in to our side of the valley.

We were riding above the river on a road cut into the steep valley side with the railway between us and the river. By about 1:30 we were feeling hungry only having had a light breakfast. We had now moved onto the wider valley floor and were looking for a place to stop on the roadside as so far there hadn't been anywhere suitable. At 30 kilometers (from Los Lagos – there were plenty of markers for us to count down the distance today) we saw a Camping sign pointing to a place across the railway line by the river. We went in the gravel track across the railway line, a sign said 1500 to stay the night but she wanted 1000 each for us to have a picnic lunch there. No way we think, we only wanted a short stop, so we went back out to the road and a few meters to one of the many bus stops along the road for a shady seat. We were later to learn that camping here often means what we would call picnicking but those stories are yet to come.

We were now biking along with farmland on the flat valley floor. By about 3 o'clock we had reached the small pueblo of Antilhue. Here the railway branch line from Valdivia joins the main line from Puerto Montt to Santiago. I presume we passed through here on the train 23 years ago but we would have been sleeping by then and I recall nothing. It was quite warm and with 15 kilometers to go we were on the lookout for a shop selling icecreams hoping there might be one here. We were in luck. We spotted a small shop on the side of the road. It was a bit of a culture shock as the shopkeeper had to unlock the freezer for us to get our icecreams out. The icecream was a deserved treat and about two minutes after we bought ours the shop shut for siesta, it is after all Sunday afternoon. We were still standing outside enjoying our treats when a car with a family in it pulls up. "Es abierto?" (open) we are asked. Sadly we have to disappoint them and reply "No".

On the road again and another one of those small climbs confronts us. With 6 kilometers to go we come to another climb, the river is on our side of the valley here. It's not that bad but I start to get a bit of cramp so we take it easy and stop and have one each of our dextrose and mineral tablets for a boost. On we continue and with 1.5 kilometers to go we get one last climb before Los Lagos.

As we roll downhill into town we see one accommodation place near the railway station that we think other cyclists have reported using but it looks a bit of a dive so we carry on. We are fairly sure this road ahead will get to a pedestrian bridge that crosses the river that cuts through town. A check of the map saved on our tablet confirms this but the road deteriorates and it's a bit confusing so we turn back to the main street and after crossing the main bridge we see what looks like a better place to stay. Just as leaving Valdivia was a bit confusing on streets not intended as a major road route so arriving in Los Lagos was also a bit confusing for the same reason. We go around the block on the local one way system around the Plaza then having not seen anything else come back and take a room. Los Lagos is not exactly on the usual tourist route although Ruta 5 so we are happy to have a roof for tonight previously having wondered if we would be camping. The floors are up and down, we tie the brakes on so the bikes won't roll away from where we lean them in the hall outside our room but the people are friendly and the place clean.

I started my journal for the day and Alison went for a shower - but it was cold - she couldn't see how the gas heater worked. My time for a shower and I asked our host - he brought the gas bottle and plugged it in. Soon we are off a few tens of meters out the door to the town plaza to get the local municipal free wifi to make a post to our online journal. The plaza was large and the signal weak. Here in Chile many small towns have free wifi but that doesn't mean that it's super fast. We moved around but couldn't seem to get a better signal and were a bit perplexed about the source of the signal. There were some local children also out connecting as well so maybe that didn't help.

So then we returned to our room to sort our gear, I haven't yet fully rearranged from packed for travel to packed for cycling. Then it was off to find a meal. Back across the bridge seemed to be the commercial center of town and we saw a sign for a restaurant off on a side street. We thought we might have to have a pizza but Alison asked if they had Cazuela and the answer was yes so that's what we had instead. Much the same as yesterday but without the mixed vege - the traditional version. There was one foreign cyclist looking type on the other side of the restaurant. It wasn't until we had finished that we talked with the waitress and she told us that he was a cyclist from Holland that had got here with a cold and had been staying for a week. So we went over and talked to him. We were possibly the biggest conversation that he has had for a while as he told us his Spanish wasn't that good. Of course his English was excellent. He had started in Cusco and was heading south eventually to Ushuaia but he had bussed down to Temuco from Santiago and then got caught in some rain and now with a cold he is resting up here until he gets his energy back. While he was staying here above the restaurant and getting his meals he was also above the bar and TV which wasn't all that good for getting early nights. So it was later than planned when we got back and to bed.

Heading into the Unknown

Los Lagos to Lago Rinihue

www.pppg.pictures/LLagosRinihue.htm

Our tent is pitched under some trees, there is just enough of a flat area before the drop to the stream below tumbling noisily over large boulders to into Lago Rinihue a few meters further on. Some stones ringing an old fire place indicate that we are not the first to camp here. The sun is shining on the lake still. There's certainly no wifi tonight as the signs of civilization dwindled as we continued further down the road, the last power poles ended a few kilometers back at the last farm. It is really quite a nice quite spot to be camping at the beginning of the closed bit of the road to Enco. Above us on the road is a recently reconstructed bridge and signs that the road ahead has recently been widened and cleared - for how far we will find out tomorrow. We have received conflicting advice about the road ahead but in the end we pushed on to here 61 kilometers from Los Lagos, the recognized end of the road according to a sign we passed earlier today.

At breakfast the man at our lodgings confirmed that the Lago Rinihue route is possible so that's the way we are heading today. He offers us a map with the road on it but it's old and we decline - newer maps don't have the road. He has also told us that he is from Santiago and only been here a few years so maybe we should take his advice with some caution.

There was a bit of rain as we got up but it has passed so that won't be a problem for a nice days riding. In spite of our best efforts we didn't get away until 11:30 this morning. A dog had been barking in the night and it was nearly 8 by the time we woke up - well we knew we had a quiet room out back. Getting jobs done we got to the ferreteria (hardware store) to buy Bencina Blanca (white spirits) for our stove. Being Sunday when we were back in Valdivia we didn't have a chance to get to an open hardware store. We had forgotten the rules in shops like this here. You go to the counter at the back to get your items. You then you get given a price ticket which you then take to the cashier where you pay. Then you go to pick up the purchase from the front counter with the stamped price ticket. I suppose that way only one person in the shop handles the money. We were the only customers in the shop.

Heading back to the hostel we stopped in at the small supermarket for some supplies, fresh bread and the like and some empanadas. Then we went down to the square for the free Internet which seemed to come and go again. In the Plaza we are approached by a group from Celipras, the local special school. They are selling some special Christmas biscuits (cookies) decorated in icing and chocolate. We bought a small packet for a treat on the road later. So eventually we were out on the road later than had hoped. Leaving town we noticed a couple of signs for Hospedaje further than we got yesterday, they were closer to Ruta 5, the Pan American Highway that brushes the edge of town. They looked newer than where we stayed but we were happy with our lodgings for our first night on the road.

On the road out of town, it's pretty flat but with a bit of gentle climbing, we will be gaining height today. Then we turned off the road that would otherwise take us to Panguipulli but we now headed to Rinihue and we soon got hit with a good climb. There are 6 or 7 trucks of logs coming grinding down slowly because of the grade. After that we stayed pretty level almost to Rinihue on the lake of the same name. There were mainly dairy farms beside us for a few kilometers, huge herds of cows like we have come to expect back home.

We were following beside the old embankment of a long torn up railway for five to six kilometers so flatness could be expected. A sign beside the road tells us the distances to places ahead, Flor del Lago our destination for today, is 35 kilometers. It is only 4 kilometers to Folico, a small hamlet with a cluster of houses off the road. The entrance to the large dairy farm we pass has an old stationary steam engine all painted up brightly at its front entrance. It was to be the first of many of these we were to see on the trip. It is a reminder of the forest that once covered the land and that was cleared for timber and farming. Not all the land is clear, as we cycle along there is younger regenerating forest trying to claim back some of the poorer or hilly land on both sides of the road. Around here there are plots of this scrubby land for sale. We later find out that the

government has policies to encourage the development of small holdings on this kind of land.

We stopped for late lunch at 1:30 at the little hamlet of Huidif. There are lots of German names around here going back to immigration to this general area around the 1860's and signs from recent elections have many candidates with German names. There was an old bridge to a side road there and it sort of made a bit of a picnic area. Alison needed to relieve herself and there was sort of a track off the end of the old bridge to some appropriate looking bushes. When she got there she found that she was indeed at the local public toilet - when in Rome. While we were there a logging truck and several milk tanker trucks passed, both somewhat smaller than those we would expect at home but they reminded us of the land use we see - dairy and forestry.

It was a gentle climb before we had to roll down to the lake. We had been passing patches of pot holed seal all day and even a gang patching the road but here whole sections had been replaced with new hotmix asphalt surface in contrast to the existing chipseal. We guessed the reason was the number of logging and milk trucks that we had seen and the damage they would cause to the road. On the last bit before the lake there was a pretty avenue tunnel effect over the road as the trees each side joined overhead as we rolled downhill on the smooth surface .

We pass the village of Riñihue without stopping - it doesn't seem much now but the railway once came here and no doubt it connected to boats that plied the lake. Three kilometers further on we reach the end of the seal and a sign saying 20 kilometers until the end of the road. Just past that there is a sign pointing up a steep stone cobbled drive saying Cabañas and Cafeteria so we head up as one of us wants a break but we get there and it's closed. I thought that I had read that it was only open in summer but I thought Alison needed to find that out for herself. We are told by the señorita there that there are road works ahead and that the water will be too deep and current too strong to cross the river. She says that the Argentinians did it in summer (March, it's their GPS track I have and I know that they stayed here). We decide to go on however and indeed we soon come to road works.

Major upgrading of the road was in progress with a new 20cm or so layer of gravel being added. This had begun to pot hole already and it was quite a steep climb, most unpleasant but we made it to the top and had a rest deciding what to do - we chose to carry on. Alison's vote was to go back to Los Lagos and not lose a day, though that would have been a head wind so she let herself be convinced to just go to the end of the road and see... Pretty soon we came to the actual road works in progress. The new gravel was being graded and the road was down to one lane. To the side workers were felling a plantation of eucalyptus trees adding to the works around us. The surface wasn't great, the grader had pulled off to let a truck by and his wheels rolled it down well for us. Then the grader came back through ruining the surface but he was soon followed by the water truck that improved the surface for us by virtue of the weight on his wheels compacting the surface again. Wondering what we had got ourselves into we came to the end of this flat section to start some downhill. We found ourselves behind the chipseal machine heading downhill on today's newly sealed road - what joy, we must be the first to be on it. Just before the bottom the sealing machine let us by as the seal had ended and very soon so did the newly prepared road so we were on an old solid narrower gravel road. As a postscript newer satellite imagery a few months later shows this whole section newly sealed - we were just a bit too soon

Now we carry on relatively flat for a few kilometers, passing some houses and farms. The road progressively gets narrower and rougher. Then we have another slow climb for 5 kilometers, thankfully not as steep as the last and with easy bits. Then we start downhill and beside the road amongst the forest is a large flat newly grassed area and just below it a new grass tennis court with a high fence around it - there is no sign yet of an accompanying house. This end of the road had some large houses on it, no doubt holiday homes for the rich. Then with a couple of kilometers to go suddenly there is farm with nice green fields and cows and the farmer is feeding out a trailer load of grass to his cows. He has a very new flash tractor to pull the trailer. There is money the world over in dairy at the moment but to have a farm so far down the road seems incredible, maybe what he was feeding out was trucked in but no wonder the road needs improving. I would hate to have met a milk tanker on the narrow road down here. Continuing we cross several small rivers on

relatively new bridges, at one we see the old log bridge below us, it all points to recent progress in improving the road.

We continue down until we are near the lake and get to a large bridge. This must be the end of the road according to our distance. I've seen a picture of this place but with the bridge in much poorer condition and there are signs of recent road improvements on the far side of the bridge. The road does continue uphill but it's time for us to camp. There is a large flat area beside the bridge approach and we think of pitching the tent there. We decide that we should look for a track down to the lake and realize that there is a wide track only a few meters away and leads down to a wonderful spot with enough room for our tent. There are signs of previous fire places, it has clearly been used for camping before.

It's 6pm and we decide that it's warm and the priority is a wash in the lake. Alison finds that where the stream hits the lake the stream bed is quite sandy, perfect. So washed, tent up, time is running short for much cooking so it's the quick option of instant mash with cheese melted in and tuna and olives. We know the predicted overnight low is minus 1 degree but under the trees we hope it will be warmer so we wrap up well before getting into our sleeping bags. At least there will be no barking dogs tonight.

A Bad Turn Takes Us Back to Square One

Rinihue Dead End

<http://www.pppg.pictures/Rinihue1.htm>

3.8 kilometers getting nowhere

Today was the day we went nowhere - the hard way, up a steep hill, bush bashing but in the end returning for an afternoon at our lovely camp spot by Lago Rinihue. How and why we went wrong is a lesson in a little bad knowledge and not using the good information that we had.

Up and our first camping breakfast of oatmeal and pans, the bread buns you get in Chile, toasted over the whisperlite we are ready to leave on the dot of 9:00. Off over the bridge we go into the switchback climbs, there are signs of recent work on the road, it has been widened and the encroaching scrub cleared. Some is rideable but in other parts we push. On one corner we see a stake in the ground with some yellow painted signage on it. It says kilometers 21.670. This turns out to be the distance to Choscuenco and we see more of these yellow markers on the route to come.

After the switchbacks we come to a couple of relatively newly reconstructed bridges. Beside one someone has been cutting up the old wooden bridge that was constructed out of large loges. This is all good we think but then we come to a partially collapsed old bridge that we walk over, the improvements have ended but still the road looks well used. Then there is a bit where a bridge, more of a culvert really, had collapsed a bit and it's steep out but never the less the track continues and the gradient eases off a bit. It would be rideable but the road works finished at the last bridge and the vegetation is now growing in closely from the sides so we can't ride the wheel ruts on the edges due to encroaching scrubby trees so we walk otherwise rideable bits. Things ease off and an hour after we started we arrive at a gate. The well used track continues through it so we follow. Very soon we reach a small blue house, all locked up and the road seems to end. However the well constructed road line continues through a thicket of bamboo.

Now a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing and we had found the story of a couple who had passed this way 13 years ago. We had found a broken link to a no longer existing website but I had recovered it off archive.org. It talked of pushing through bamboo so we thought that this must be the way. So I pushed through and the road opened up again. So we got the bikes through and then there was more and then more bush bashing. We could see where someone had been here cutting the bushes a bit and I assumed it must have been the Argentinian s back in March. Over and hour passed and we hadn't progressed much and then the road turned in a direction that it shouldn't according to my memory and there were trees blown down over the formed road. I crawl on under and over the trees - there's no way we could get a bicycle this way, they couldn't have come this way surely. We decided this was time to give up. So it was nearly 2 hours when we got back to the blue house making only marginally faster progress back than forward. I then had realized that I had lost my watch. I had thought of taking it off when we changed into bush bashing clothes so figured I must have dropped it then. I couldn't actually remember taking it off or putting it anywhere. We looked around where we had prepared for the bush bashing ahead but without success.

So we gave up and decided that it was a nice day, we were tired and we had a wonderful campsite. Neither of us fancied the idea of biking back out today with a bit of a headwind through the road works so as we had been on the go since arriving in Chile we decided that that we would just have a nice sunny afternoon by the lake. So back down to our campsite we had some lunch. I re-pitched the tent and had a wash in the river and Alison washed clothes and had to watch over them as they dried on rocks in the hot sun. We talk of the options for going back and around and taking a bus over some of it.

Alison takes the camera down to the rocks by the water to try and photograph the blue green lizards that are sunning themselves on the warm stones. Then she spots two large tarantula sized hairy spiders engaging in either battle or courtship under the rocks!

By about 4pm we have rested and I decide that I would go back up and look for my watch - it was only

1.5 kilometers up the hill anyway. So by walking in no time I was up to the gate and I realize that the old road actually went downhill from there and we shouldn't have turned and followed the used road through the gate. Anyway I went to look for my watch and couldn't find it. I came to the conclusion that I only thought about taking it off and what had happened was that a branch must have caught the strap and flicked it off - it had happened before.

So on the way back down I decide to check out the road down to the river and in hardly more than 100 meters I'm at the washed out bridge that we have seen pictures of. It's quite clear that this is a used route by foot traffic. I shinny down and rock hop to the other side of the stream. Up the other side are worn foot holds and bamboo pulled down by it being used as a rope up. Up I go and the road is wide and branching with an up and a down. I check up first even though I'm fairly sure we go down and it doesn't take long to confirm this. I walk on briskly, there's a bit of blackberry I have to avoid but it catches my clothes a few times. I go another 1½ kilometers quite quickly until I reach an excellent viewpoint of Volcan Choshuenco. Most of the way I can see someone has been through the long grass quite recently. I curse that I don't have the camera, the views are great. I know the distance exactly because along the way I spot occasional newish yellow marker pegs with the distance from Choshuenco marked - I made it to 19.0. That's far enough, Alison might be getting worried - and indeed when I get back she hasn't long woken from a sleep (siesta - compulsory in L.America she claims) and is wondering where I am.

So we now wonder what to do, should we return or give it another try. As it's a long way back and around taking two extra days then going ahead seems the most likely. With more time we cook some rice and put tomorrow morning's oatmeal to soak to enable an early start tomorrow. It's not looking like it will be as cold tonight as some clouds are coming over. .

Reflections

In the months since I have often reflected of how we went so wrong. We had the track to follow on our computer and tablet but never looked at them even when it seems so obvious in hindsight that we weren't on the right track. There are several reasons. Firstly with heads down pushing uphill we just didn't see the branch in the track. To be fair it had scrubby bushes growing in it. We just followed the well-used track not expecting it to deviate from our route, perhaps the gate distracted us. Having previously researched the route as soon as we changed direction through the gate it seemed wrong to me but because the track was so well used it just didn't trigger worries. When we reached a dead end why didn't we check out maps and turn around. Well Alison had found a rather cryptic story on the Internet from a couple who went this way some years earlier who talked about this section as if they had been this way – they probably had but their story of when they turned around and went back wasn't clear. I could blame myself for being so smart as when Alison found the link to their pages it was long dead, their site existed no more but I knew enough to find their site on archive.org. If I had not found it we would probably have questioned our route sooner. I guess one of the reasons for not checking the route was not being familiar with our electronic toys. I didn't realize how much Google earth cached pages visited for offline access and I could have easily used that if I had known. We just hadn't had enough time to be familiar with Back Country Navigator on the tablet – we certainly found the reassurance it gave us following our routes near the end of our tour very comforting. I guess the lesson was to use the tools and information we had and check when things seem a bit awry.

In a way it may have all worked out for the best. We got an earlier start the next day and it was cloudy – I wonder how much more we would have sweated away had we carried on following this route on this hot sunny day.

Bamboo, Blackberry, Mud and Collapsed Out Bridges

Rinihue Camp to Coshuenco on the closed road

www.pppg.pictures/RinihueCshenco.htm

I've reached the age where I shouldn't end the day with a blueberry beer when it started at 6, on the road at 8 and ended well after 6 with some vicious hills until 2 kilometers before the end, it just wants to send me to sleep in our nice cabin. But I get ahead of myself and should go back to the beginning of the day...

So indeed we woke with the sun at 6 but even with our preparedness it was just on 8 when we set out again. Another hour and we were up to the gate again and quickly down to the washed out bridge. This is where the Argentinians used a rope to lower and raise their bikes and gear so we set about to do the same. I have brought a rope for this purpose. Alison gets down to the river and pannier by pannier I lower them down to her on the rope. Then it's the turn of the heavier bikes, with the rope running around a tree I go down with each bike holding the rope and letting it out as I go. It probably takes 40 minutes to get everything down – piece by piece slow and steady. Then across the creek, it's not deep or wide but I stand sort of one foot in the middle and Alison passes panniers to me from the side and I put them on the other side. We are still working slowly but steadily. Then it's time for the uphaul. The panniers are relatively easy work but the bikes are somewhat trickier, they are a bit big to fit easily in the gaps between the bushes. There are some large bridge nails poking out of what remains of the first section of the old bridge. I am able to tie off the rope bit by bit on them making things easier. I had thought that it may be easier to take the wheels off the bikes to make them lighter but in the end it doesn't seem necessary.

Somewhere in all this I had got the camera out to snap our efforts as we proceeded. I realize that it is no longer in my pocket. It should be easy to find, I bought a red one for that reason. I have been carrying the panniers about 10 meters up from the bridge to a large open area so it must be beside my track in the grass. I fail to see it as I go up and down. Then the bikes are up and Alison now comes up and looks but all to no avail. She starts packing the panniers on the bikes preparing to continue and I untangle the rope. We are ready to go but still no camera. I walk back down and I even crawl under the remains of the bridge, I figure it could have dropped down in the gaps where I was working. I return to get a light and this time walking down the track really slowly I see the camera end on between a couple of clumps of grass. Now sometimes having such a small camera is really handy but this is not one of them, a bigger one would not have lost itself so easily. I am relieved. I had copied all the photos from previous days to the hard drive on my computer but it is a very handy little camera and I would hate to have lost it.

It's two hours after we arrived on the other side that we continue on from here at last. We are now into a more overgrown track. We can ride in parts, other times we have to push and or get off to avoid blackberry, and there's certainly plenty of that. But it's only half a kilometer to the sloping bridge. There are pictures of this on the Internet, basically the approach at one end has washed away. It seems simple enough to cross, it's clear plenty of others have and I got across easily yesterday. We take off the panniers and get them across and then it is time for the bikes. It's a drop to get them down from the track level to the bridge level. I've used a sharp stick to cut some footholds but the dirt is really soft. As I'm passing the first bike down to Alison her foot slips and somehow there is nothing below it and she is a bit stuck in a hole between bridge timbers. It takes a minute for me to get the bike shifted while she waits patiently for me to help her to get out of the hole. The next bike is easier and we are soon all on the other side and loaded up to continue.

It's gently uphill for the next kilometer or so. Some places we have to take it slowly and I use our knife to cut some blackberry tendrils. Sometimes we pass under bamboo and there is the occasional tree down that slows us as we clamber over it but nothing is impassable. We reach the 19.1 kilometers lookout that I walked to yesterday much more quickly at about 1:00. Slow but steady progress. Time for lunch. While Alison rests I walk on a bit and see we start to climb. That means we are making reasonable progress.

Immediately after we start after this stop there is a deep muddy bit. Walkers push through on the side to avoid the bushes and Gunnera, the extra large rhubarb like plants. We have no choice with the bikes but to

slosh through the gap in the middle but at least the base is solid underneath in spite of what it looks like on top. Then it's pushing and climbing, blackberry, bamboo, we get the occasional chance to ride for the next 3 kilometers. One of the biggest dangers when riding are some old survey pegs in the middle of the track just the right height to catch my front panniers and some seedling trees. Only a centimeter or two in diameter but cut off at a similar height and they have regrown a little foliage to hide their sharp stumps. There are some easier bits and tougher bits, we walk and push quite a bit, not so much due to the gradient but the foliage of one kind or another. At one point a massive tree has fallen over the road but it is so big and from higher than the track that we can easily pass under it. It is a reminder of the forest that once covered these hills and that the side roads were no doubt made to haul out the logs.

We have a bit of a drop then rising again we come to a bit of a high point and there is one of those yellow marker pegs with 16.0 on it. Is this the top, dare we be so hopeful, from the Argentinians' GPS track it could be. Here the forest shades the track a bit so it is actually quite clear. We can even ride down a bit now. Soon we come into the open and now the grass is quite long on the track slowing us but the blackberry and bamboo aren't so bad.

Soon we come to a gully spanned by a huge log, once part of the bridge. The story from 13 years ago told of crawling across this and having the bikes tied together, one each side to get them across. Such challenges are not for us however as there is a bit of a well used (well relatively well used) path has been cut down and out of the stream upstream of the log. It's a joint effort to get each bike the dozen or so meters up the other side but nothing outlandish, no need to remove panniers this time. For a while the grass on the track is quite long and it slows us, thankfully no bamboo or blackberry for a while though.

So then we have a short bit of uphill again coming out of the gully and then we come across new fresh pegs in the ground, the pain is to avoid them. Then there is freshly cut bamboo, dried off, and the biggest problem is it getting stuck in the wheel and gears. Somehow Alison is more of a magnet for this than I. We end up stopping numerous times to clear it from our wheels. This hillside where we are going downhill is steeper than the way we came up - one reason that I wanted to come this way and not the other as the Argentinians had done. But the surface is rocky and with the bamboo and pegs it is not always easy to ride - but when we can we have a recently well worn foot track to follow. Occasionally we can see in the brush at our feet that we cross small log bridges and get off lest our tires get caught between the logs and throw us off.

We move into a bit more forest cover again and then to our surprise we come across three surveyors, they seem amazed to see us. We talk but we are not yet up to much Chilean. I ask and am told that the road may be rebuilt in 1-2 years. One draws us a map and tells us to turnoff at kilometers 14.500 and then we should follow the track to the river and not continue on the road. I would have followed the road, this route that is described to us is more of less the Argentinians route. So we continue on around a bit of a switchback section and come across a gang of 3 or 4 men working with slashers and the occasional chainsaw clearing the route. They have done an awful lot of work and in places every 20m or so a path 3 meters wide has been cleared up to 50m at right angles to the track. I guess I'll never know why however I speculate it's to get good ground level survey data for road design. Later satellite imagery shows they continued on towards the top with this clearing.

So we wind down several long switchbacks towards the lake level. There are actually 2 sets of distance marker pegs. One set that goes all the way through and we deduce that they are the distances from Choshuenco and the other from the turnoff to it about 4.6 kilometers up the road. Of the marker peg we are looking for there is no sign but the distance from the previous peg of that set and the map coincide with a wide cleared track heading off the road as was described to us. I walk down it a bit, this must be it so we bike on over the flat ground, scrubby pasture, rough with the solidified cow hoof prints. Satisfied that this is the way we continue to the river bed and push over the gravel and we soon see the water itself.

We are at the junction of 2 side rivers and the main river joining lakes Panguipulli to Rñihue. There is less water here now than when the Argentinians crossed in March in my opinion. Crossing both rivers at the best points there would hardly be more than 6 inches of water flowing gently. We have to look carefully to find

some old vehicle tracks to work out the best way next which is on the gravel up the middle of the wide river bed. We go upriver then cross back to the other side of the stream and while still in the river bed and we see the workers white twincab camioneta on the other side of the river. I know that we are following the Argentinians route more or less. We stop in the middle of the river, not much more than ankle deep, and wash the bikes of the mud they accumulated earlier in the day and ourselves of some of the grime and blood from many blackberry scratches.

Out the other side in a Eucalyptus plantation we take a rest to change out of our bloodied clothes and prepare for the last 10 kilometer leg to Choshuenco. We follow a farm track out to a gate at the road. Then at 5:00 it's off on a gentle climb on good road through the open farmland at the head of the lake. All too soon this last leg has some stings in it. We have to gain and then lose a couple of hundred meters before our destination. Some times we are forced to get off and push it's so steep, maybe it would have been doable on fresh legs but not now in our tired state. It seems to climb forever with some relief but every downhill means more climbing. This road has recently been improved, I guess in anticipation of what we have been through being restored. Finally with just over 2 kilometers to go we hit some serious downhill. About halfway down a truck of logs is just about to leave a forest so we wait as we don't want to have to be passed by him on this narrow gravel road.

So it's well after 6:00 by the time we get to Choshuenco entering with the last few hundred meters above the gravel beach along the lake shore. We see the seal where it ends at the lake edge and in the middle is a big 0.00 painted on it – we have reached the beginning point for all those numbered pegs that we have seen today.

There is a big hotel ahead of us as we reach the seal but we figure that the closer to the lake the more expensive so we head up away from it a bit. The first place we stop has a restaurant but no rooms available, perhaps the woman didn't like the look of us although later we come to think that maybe the surveyors are staying there. We roll around the block and back to where we started and outside a place saying Hostal a woman and a man are talking, she has rooms but no Internet, she suggest the hotel next door that we first saw. Oh well, who cares about the cost. We are first shown a room upstairs, it has a view of a lake but we aren't keen on lugging our gear up here, Then we are shown a cabin, much better for us with the bikes. We check in and the beer cooler behind the desk is most tempting. Interesting flavors, I choose a blueberry and Alison a honey beer. Off for a shower and return for a cyclist meal – steak eggs and chips for me. Sitting outside on the patio with a pisco sour looking out to the lake before our meal we see the surveyors return from their work of the day.

The Internet is slow but we catch up on some news from home and are able to let the world know we are safe and well after being offline for two nights.

Choshuenco Rest Day

Choshuenco

www.pppg.pictures/Coshuenco.htm

After yesterday's exertions we deserve a rest day. This place is a bit more upmarket than we planned for but we had two free nights in the tent so we figure that we could justify some expense and comfort. It's a bit cloudy still today. A rest day is a good chance to catch up on the journal and maybe the clouds will clear tomorrow.

We get up after 8 having slept well. We are stiff so there's no way that we are moving on today. Had we made it to San Martin in four days as planned then today would have been a rest day anyway so at breakfast we tell the hotel we will be staying another day. So then it's washing, bike maintenance and other odd jobs for the morning including journal writing and catching up on emails - when we backpacked in South America 23 years ago things were so much simpler. The two resident dogs come to keep an eye on us but spend most of their time sleeping. At lunchtime we head out for a walk around the block to check out what passes for a supermarket here but end up back at our hotel for lunch. Alison has a spinach omelette and I have the menu del dia - salad followed by tasty slow cooked beef with rice and veg and icecream for desert.

After lunch I continue to work on the bikes, Alison's front hub is a bit loose and I need to tighten it. The mounting rail on one of my front panniers is broken, it is rather light plastic. I take it off and turn it around and have no problem with it for the rest of the trip. Some organization and washing and preparations for tomorrow. The tent is strung up and the fly laid out to dry as they were both still a bit damp. Finally we take an afternoon walk down to the beach that makes this place the tourist town it is. There's the rusting hulk of a ferry on the beach reminding us that before roads ferries across the lake would have been the only access for those farming here. While we are on the beach a large semi inflatable boat comes racing across the lake from the other side of the outlet river and drops it's load of locals before returning to the other side. Farms over there still don't have any or good road access and a quick boat trip will bring them to the bus stop here and easy access to civilization.

Pre dinner drink was a pisco sour each again on the outside area of the bars overlooking the lake below again, very enjoyable but it made us a bit light headed by the time we went in for our meal. As we were sitting admiring the view a stream of 20 or more young cyclists came racing into town down the sealed road and turned off the way we had come yesterday. Halfway along the beach they turned off to the beach at the jetty where they camped for the night near the rusting hulk of the old lake ferry now beached well above the lake level. I even saw some Ortleib panniers, they must be a bunch of Chilean students reaching the end of the year.

Dinner was Chicken a la pobre, the chicken version of last night and Alison had the daily menu which was soup, porkchop and mash followed by rum and raisin icecream. In the restaurant tonight was a large group of women from Santiago traveling on a tour to San Martin de los Andes in Argentina. We manage a few conversations with some of them. Back at our cabin we thought that we should take advantage of the bath in our small bathroom as we hadn't had a chance the night before. It was only a short one and the choice was body in legs out or legs in body out - but we don't expect such luxuries often.

A Long Day Split By a Ferry Ride

Up up and up hill in dust dust and more dust

www.pppg.pictures/CshncoLLcar.htm

Choshuenco to Lago Lacar

At the end of the day with hardly enough time to spare before sunset we end up at a camping place recommended to us by a German woman we met on the road, our first meeting on the road with another cyclist. Well we met a couple of women resting waiting for the ferry at lunch just earlier but this was actually on the road. We had time to set up the tent and heat a little food and take a sort walk down to the lake before oncoming darkness sent us into our tent for the night. It's quite nice with camping spots among the trees and a water tap not far away but of toilets the only sign is toilet paper in the bushes. Perhaps a little further on than anticipated it will mean a shorter day tomorrow to reach San Martin de los Andes. This morning we weren't sure where we expected to end up tonight, there was a turnoff back a little after we passed Argentinian immigration that leads to some interesting small lakes but by then after our meeting we had set our target as this camping area.

It was cloudy when we got up at 6 to get an early start however there is no wifi at the patio outside the restaurant. Waiting for some life in the place I walk down to the beach curious about the cyclists that rolled in last night. There are in fact a bunch of tents in the distance on the beach. We did pass some sort of sign indicating camping was possible down that way but at the time we had wanted something better. At 8 we finally get into the restaurant but there is still no wifi. Then we find that we can't pay until 9 and then when we have paid the wifi starts working. We have to do some quick emails etc to sort out some things back home. We've not had breakfast so get some pan (bread) at the mini market on the way out of town. This means we need to push on to make sure we don't miss the ferry at 1pm and there is lots of steep uphill to come before then.

We are finally on the road at 9:30. We start with 4 kilometers seal until the turn off back to Panguipulli and then we get the ripio - corrugated gravel road. We start to climb gently enough but then we cross the river and hit our first steep climb to the turnoff to Lago Neltume. In the next 4 kilometers we climb 250m but often alternating flat and then steep climbing which means extra steep bits. There is a new visitor center building at an entrance to Salto de Puma, one of the many waterfalls on this section of the river but we don't have time to stop as it's slow going.

At the village of Neltume the road flattens out for the town and we have a short stop for a cup of tea. There is a monument just off the main road to the many disappeared and imprisoned from this area during the troubles in the past. It is surprising to us to see that many predate the Pinochet times as we were not aware of previous troubles here. More cheerfully there is a small steam locomotive from logging days and a puma carved from a log of wood reminding us of the past. There is a small museum but we don't have time to look at it.

We are looking like we are on target to make the ferry but with not a lot of time to spare so we can't afford a long stop and the unplanned delay in leaving is proving stressful. This is one of the few times in the trip where we are under pressure to meet a deadline We carry on as we have a 130 meter climb in the next couple of kilometers before we then drop down into Puerto Fuy. We do stop along the way for a few minutes to look at the famous Hotel Bao-Bab built in the trees and also a volcanic center but we don't have time to go into either. This last section of the road is through forest and quite pleasant to ride especially as we get a bit of shade now that the morning cloud has gone and the sun is out however it is very dusty and there are lots of cars racing to catch the ferry sometimes reducing or visibility to near zero as they pass us.

Over the last rise and the downhill before us into Puerto Fuy is most welcome. We arrive at the boat at 12:30. The ferry looks full already as Chilean long weekenders are heading to Argentina and two buses are lined up including the one of the women from Santiago that had stayed at our hotel last night. Having been directed to the front of the queue, we wait patiently as all the cars are loaded and then the buses are squeezed

in and then finally we are last on - except for one last late vehicle. At least there will always be room for a couple of bikes.

We had been confused as to when to pay but at the office at top of the ramp we were told money would be collected on the boat and so it was. I guess some had booked ahead to ensure a spot and had tickets but it seems money was collected from most on the ferry. It takes an hour and a half hour to cross lake to Pirehueico, great views, lots of photos can't really do justice to the scenery. By now the clouds have lifted from the top of Volcan Choshuenco. We remind ourselves plenty of people pass this way on a cloudy day that we might have done had we not mucked up our Riñihue day. As they say every cloud has a sunny day sometime. Although the steep sides of the lake are forested it's a little surprising to find plantation forestry where the original forest has been harvested on some easier slopes in several places. We talk with a Chilean man from near Concepcion who is making a family trip to San Martin for the weekend. It seems most of the load on the ferry are similarly off for a long weekend. I can see the appeal of this trip for Chileanos wanting a short break. As we and our bikes were last on we are first off. There is a very new flash terminal building at the ramp matching the one where we embarked but it's not completely open yet. Along with recent road improvements the Chileans are clearly investing in this border crossing route.

Off the ferry we see little traffic waiting for the return of the ferry, most significant are some trucks loaded with cut timber. There is very little at Pto. Pirehueico but we see that there is a restaurant. Feeling that we need to eat we decide to have lunch there. Outside there are two Argentinian women (mother and daughter we later find out) on bikes, they have 10 days holiday from Buenos Aires and they started in San Martin. They are doing a loop from San Martin de Los Andes and back via Chile – virtually the reverse of our plan for this section. The restaurant is an unexpected chance to feed ourselves well. The menu del dia was chicken leg with papa tomato picante, at 5,000 pesos a little expensive and not all that exciting but there was nothing else. Now there will be no need to cook tonight.

Pto. Pirehueico - Yuco Camp

Finally at 3:00 we depart to start on our way to the border. Less than a kilometer on we meet a German woman coming the other way. She is riding towards us on the left hand side of the road. After riding down from the north of Argentina she considers it better to face oncoming traffic this way than have traffic come up behind her. She even has a small flag on a stick horizontally out to the side of her bike so traffic has to give her a wider berth. This doesn't inspire confidence in us for the Argentinian traffic ahead. She tells us that the border is another 12 kilometers on and of a good camping site in 29 kilometers where she stayed last night. We decide to head for the camping area knowing we can afford to get there late having just eaten and feeling rested from this morning's exertions by our ferry ride.

After about 6 kilometers we pass through the village of Hua Hum spread out along the road. There are several sawmills along the road with piles of logs. Clearly forestry is the main industry around here and no doubt the trucks we saw waiting for the return ferry came from here. After an hour we reach the old Chilean border station now closed, a sign tells us the new building is four kilometers further on right at border. We stop for a minute and move on but then I realize I haven't put my gloves back on and haven't got them so have to go back a few hundred meters to pick them up where they have fallen off my bike onto the road. A lesson to be learned about being careful with everything, there's not a shop around the corner to buy a new pair.

The new border building sure is flash and new and hardly finished. A young lady checks us out and another talks to us, she has the SAG uniform and I guess just wants to know that we don't pose some kind of risk leaving the country or she could just be being friendly. We are offered use of flash new toilets. Such quality toilets are a rarity in Chile, they haven't had time to put the mens/womens signs on the doors yet. I think that they wanted to show them off to us.

Outside the building a man is working in the hot sun finishing the landscaping with a rake such is the recentness of the completion of the building. He is wearing the standard orange overalls with orange legionnaires hat with a large flap at the back to protect his neck from the sun. Chileans are very aware of the

dangers of the sun and UV light from the hole in the ozone layer. We are often warned to use sunscreen here, particularly me with my fair complexion.

On leaving we almost immediately cross the border and the road deteriorates markedly. It's a couple of kilometers more to the Argentinian border post. As we approach we are greeted by the thumping of the diesel generator that powers the building. We are stamped in with no questions, there is a big sign about what we are not allowed to bring in but, well, we are in Argentina now, it's only a sign, no effort is made to actually check what we might have. I guess by this time of the day all the cars and buses have been processed and the staff are winding down for the rest of the day. About a kilometer further on gently downhill is a branch in the road where we may have turned off to a campsite but we have other plans now. We stop and have pan and cheese and avocado and a cup of tea under a shady bush before moving on.

With 15 kilometers to go we carry on alongside Lago Lacar. The ripio is not so bad for the first few kilometers but then it deteriorates and we have to climb which is a bit miserable as we are tiring after a long day. Then it's a slow steep climb as we gain another 150 meters up before we can drop down again. It's a hot sun and it's been a long day and we are counting down the kilometers. Finally we see the entrance to the area we are looking for at 7:00, it's been four seemingly long hours since we set off from Pto. Pirehueico.

The road forks at the entrance, we go one way and see a no tenting sign but it is after the turnoff to the area with Fogones (fire places). We go back to where we presume tenting is allowed. We discover a tap with good water so choose a nice spot to erect the tent not far away. In true Argentinian style there is no sign of any toilets except where people have been in the bushes. We boil the Kelly Kettle and afterwards toast some pan on the coals on the base that we then have with tuna, avocado and a cup of soup. We then head down to the lake after the sun goes down behind the mountains for a wash to get off the worst of the dust. We return to the tent and it's bed time as dusk falls.

Dust, Hot Dust, to Town For a Sunday Lunch

Yuco to San Martin de los Andes

www.pppg.pictures/LLcarSMDLA.htm

An Argentinian Parrilla – Roasted meat for lunch, meat and more meat and little else, that's what we expect and that's what we got. It took priority over finding a place to stay – well it was well into lunchtime when we arrived here today so I guess that there was little choice. It was the thought of lunch that pushed us along on some less than pleasant roads today. Starting at lake level and ending on the same lake meant that every meter we gained in height we would also lose today but with hills in the way and reports that we had read of this road we knew it wouldn't be easy when we set out this morning

It wasn't until a bit until after 7 before we were up and were ready to roll at 9 on a breakfast of pans, no oatmeal this morning as we hadn't bothered setting any to soak last night. We were keen to make steak lunch in San Martin de los Andes. We decided that we should look around this place before leaving and just inside the main entrance we find a map of the area that we missed last night. It shows directions to four beaches around this little peninsula so we spend time exploring tracks to the beaches. We find the ranger's house but although there is a car parked there seems no sign of life yet so we discretely carry on. The German woman we spoke to yesterday met the ranger and was told camping wasn't allowed but it was OK for her to camp. We are back at the gate and ready to roll at 9:45. Immediately three buses roll by heading to Chile and then a truck, our first dust of day and we haven't been on the road yet! It may seem early for the buses wanting to catch the ferry but they will have to get through the border checks first.

Immediately we start climbing for 8 kilometers to reach our high point of the day. It's dusty going whenever a vehicle passes. As the sun rises we are thankful of the forest for shade. We cross the road to the outside on cambered corners of switchbacks as it is impossible to go up inside of these corners as it is too steep and rough. The road is very wide and we can hear cars coming so this is not a problem that we are on the wrong side. It's cars and dust from now on and it seems to go on and on on a freshly graded road of rough large gravel. After an hour and a half riding hot and dusty (2 hours with rests) we decide to stop in the shade. I get out the stove to cook soup that we have with crackers with a cup of tea for energy.

We move on around a corner and find that we stopped only a couple of hundred meters from the top. The landscape has been getting progressively drier and the forest less dense and now it opens up and we've passed the last of the real forest and shade. We can't go fast downhill as the road surface is so bad just as we had been told by the German woman that we met yesterday. We do get a few small uphill but mostly we are on the downhill. We even pass a sign "Despacio Ripio Suelto"- Take care loose gravel, we had figured that out well before the sign but doubtless Argentinian drivers need reminding. There are many cars, twin cabs, on the road now as the day gets on, all off for the weekend, some crazy drivers race past maybe thinking that they can still make the ferry but others slow for us and we exchange waves. We travel along a long straight and in the middle a few cars are parked beside the road and signs indicate a walking track off to the nearby hills. We cross a flat bit and a last small climb before the final drop to San Martin de los Andes. We are still well above the town and we have a few kilometers of downhill on rough road.

We pass some sort of drum and percussion jam going on, maybe 40 to 50 drums all going at once. It needs to be well out of town from the volume generated. After rolling some more downhill we stop at a lookout over the town, like so many lookouts it needs a chainsaw to clear the view of the trees that have grown since it was constructed. A women on a motorbike has also stopped there, she tells us that she lives in a small place nearby where all her extended family also live. When she hears we have biked from Chile she puts her arms around us and hugs and kisses us both in that Latin way that those of us of English and Scottish stock are unaccustomed to - what a welcome to Argentina.

Off again downhill we then reach a junction - seal and uphill to the right, downhill gravel to the left, we go 50 or so meters to the left before we ask and are advised we should have gone the other way. Both would have got us there but the steep short uphill is followed by and even steeper downhill on perfectly sealed road

into town and that was the quicker route.

We arrive downtown at 3:00, and look around for late lunch, a local lady who speaks good English recommends a place but just as we get there 45 schoolies with parents (Australian term for end of year school trippers) arrive. They must be Chileans as we talk with one of the mothers and she says welcome to Chile! (note that Chile once did claim this area until not much more than a hundred years ago as the watershed here is out to the Pacific Ocean). Anyway the restaurant suggested another place would be better for what we want. We find it and order a couple beers and an Argentinian parrillada, meat and bread. Steak, skirt steak, other bits of steak, chicken and sausages, blood sausage, add some grilled vegetables as an extra and we amaze ourselves eating all except the blood sausage. It's then that we find out that credit cards "con chip" don't work here. Well we got money out at the bank the next day but here at the restaurant it doesn't seem to work. Apparently it's only in San Martin de los Andes. We are confused. I say that we have Chilean pesos, .. Dolares.... Then the man behind the counter's eyes light up, they are happy to take US dollars so we pay with the \$50 note that the man in Valdivia didn't want because it had a mark on it and we are on our way.

We then set out for a place to stay. The much mentioned casa de ciclistas seems to have closed. A local cyclist out on his bike directs us to Hostal Las Pumas a few blocks away, we observe him there later, I wonder if he was hoping for a commission. We get a room, a bit expensive and we initially thought of a shared hostel room and started moving in but then decided our own room with bathroom was to be preferred. Other cyclists are there already. We shower, put the tent to dry, do some washing and catch up on jobs. It's a busy place some Germans & other Europeans and locals including an Aussie, John, heading south by bike but he may skip part of the Carretera Austral because he has heard that the road works are so bad. There is a Swiss family with two young children, one in a trailer and one a trailer bike.

Alison shops at the supermarket a couple of blocks away and I do some bike maintenance on my clicking pedal and other odd jobs. After such a big late lunch we have a light meal of a few breads in the evening. Hostels are noisy places at best but here in Argentina where they eat after 10 noise continues but we are working to the sun still. Thank goodness for earplugs as we retire to bed as our room is closest to the kitchen common room.

A Lazy Day on Smooth Seal

San Martin de los Andes to Junin de los Andes

www.pppg.pictures/SMartinJunin.htm

Our tent is set up under some willow trees next to the river. Its the sort of wide gravel river we are familiar with in New Zealand, there is an expanse of river bed of round rocks before we can reach the water. When we arrived there were lots of people here, some sitting in the shade of the willow trees and some out sunning themselves in deck chairs on the "beach" maybe watching the children play at the waters edge. The water is a bit swift and cold for swimming – I dipped my toes in but that was all. All in all we thought that we would appreciate another Argentinian steak before returning to bikers rations so it made sense to take another day before heading back to Chile and taking an easy day to Junin de los Andes got us closer to Chile the easy way. We had originally planned a rest day in San Martin and it is a very pretty place but we have got a bit behind schedule and need to keep moving to meet our deadline for arriving in Puerto Montt. We realize that we will have to catch a bus at some stage now so we might as well take our time and enjoy the remaining cycling in this section of the trip. We weren't quite sure just where we would stay when we arrived here but saw a sign for camping at the edge of town and here we are.

This morning we talked around the hostel with cyclists and backpackers staying there. There was a Swiss couple with young kids (trailer and trailer bike for the kids and Rolhoff hubs on the bikes to make towing easier). I was asking about buying Bencina Blanca (white spirits/gas) for our stove as we had used quite a bit and I was not sure we had enough for our days camping ahead. I figured that they would know the sort of place to buy some having been traveling longer than us. In the end they had plenty and they gave us some to top up our bottle as this is Sunday and the hardware stores won't be open and then they refused any payment for it.

We get away well after 10 to a first stop at the nearby supermarket. At the bread counter Alison spots a bag of yesterdays croissants and sweet pastries at a good price, her late mother (the inheritance from who it could be argued is part of the finance for this trip) would approve of such a bargain so we pick them up. We can't buy a lot until we get to the bank to take out some cash as we seem to have already used the Argentinian pesos we got back at Auckland airport when departing. We know the automatic teller at the bank won't be giving us a good exchange rate but have little choice. We then head down to the foreshore for a quick look and finally leave about 11:15. It's a clear day getting hot already.

We ride through the flat area of downtown and then it's a stiff climb for a kilometer or so to get to the upper part of town. Then gentle climbing and some downhill and town sort of ended 6 kilometers on where a large new supermarket had just been constructed - somehow supermarkets on the edge of town is a familiar story around the world. As we continue out here there are new housing developments, some are of smaller cheaper houses for the local workers no doubt as most of what we have seen closer in is far more luxurious. We then climb steadily to a saddle at about 15 kilometers from downtown. This marks our crossing from the Pacific to Atlantic watersheds. Although well into Argentina the quirks of iceage glaciations have carved through the Andes here so that the border and the Andes are not along the watershed line although the two countries argued on this even after a treaty in 1881.

Then we are racing down on sealed hotmix road, the white line is on edge of hotmix with a 5cm drop so there's not much chance to get off away from the busy traffic of which there is lots including a lot of buses. The wind is behind and we are doing, 30kph hardly pedaling. We are thinking we need a stop out of sun for a while as it was past midday and breakfast wasn't a lot. In this open landscape we are on the lookout for a place and at about kilometer 24 we find the perfect shady spot just before the airport entrance on other side of the road, it is the cemetery. It has lovely shade and a seat, watered grass and even a clean toilet that flushes.

Time for lunch or is it 2nd breakfast, we need some food anyway. We take a walk around the well-watered and shaded cemetery, such a contrast from the parched land around outside the perimeter. Then we

are on the road again we continue downhill to the river at 31 kilometers. Along here we see a couple of large signs to Golf Resorts, we can even see one stretch of green fairways - that must take a lot of water in this dry landscape. We then start to undulate as we head up river to Junin on a wide open river plain. It's gently climbing, hardly noticeable. With 7 kilometers to go we see the turnoff towards Chile for tomorrow, we note a police check point on the side road. But a sign says 4 kilometers to go and not 7 as expected and we soon enter the sprawl of Junin which is strung out along the highway. Several subdivisions of different standards go off the road, the poorest is the furthest out of town. We take a cobbled cycle way on the side of the road through these outer areas but it gets too rough so we return to road. Junin has a wide double lane road with median and parallel local roads through it but also has sets of traffic lights unsynchronized to stop traffic, understandable I guess otherwise people (Argentinian s) wouldn't slow down.

Entering town, or at least what seems the beginning of more continuous housing we see a sign for camping just as the river curves back near the main road however we continue slowly through town looking for a Parrillada to eat. We are nearly to the other end before we find one, busy with Sunday lunch. We are a bit later than most and our order takes ages, over an hour to get our food but we don't care as we are going nowhere and it's hot. I almost fall sleep while waiting. Possibly the sips of local red wine while waiting didn't help or I could blame all the noise in the hostel last night. We finish our meal and on leaving see a corner shop so buy some supplies. We can't get cheese as the Sunday worker doesn't know price.

We head back to the camping sign and turnoff. Now the countries down here have adopted the word camping from English and various forms of the activity we mean by it. However what they call camping is often what we would call picnicking and then they all go home at night. I suppose we should remember that in Spanish the word "campo" means countryside so we can understand it's anglicized use for a day in the country a bit better. So the place is full of cars and people, a few kids in the river and women who shouldn't be in bikinis sunning themselves on the rocky riverside. There's a few fires in the fogones burning out and signs of the parrilla lunch that happened there and lots of picnic tables. A few men are playing Tejo, a sort of pétanque with flat wooden discs popular in Argentina and Uruguay. The only lawnmower is a horse on a rope but today he has wrapped his rope around a pole and it's probably best that he is on a short lead with all the people about. An old caravan indicates that people do stay here overnight even if it doesn't seem to have moved in quite a long time. Kids are on a trampoline and one big family group is having a birthday party. When you think of it there's not a lot here really. An old man seems to run the place, not the easiest to understand for us, Argentinian Spanish is not much better than Chilean for us to understand.

He tells us the overnight price and that everyone will go soon and then we can select a spot for our tent. He'll put the gas on for the shower later. So we wait a while, I walk around a bit exploring the place... Alison goes back to town to look for a Mate bowl. While I was off walking around the old man gave her a sample of his Mate and she has always wanted one since not getting one on our last trip years ago. That and steak were probably the only reasons that she agreed to be subjected to the whole trip so that she can come to Argentina. I see some men come and buy some beer from the small shop he has here - exchanging their one liter bottles. Some bottles are left behind at the picnic spaces the purchasers not bothering to reclaim their bottle deposits. I do wonder that selling a few bottles to patrons of beer just wouldn't be allowed at home - laws are far stricter - but there seems no issue here. At home you might expect to see lots of beer cans and small bottles littering the place but no one seems to have drunk excessively and it seems quite civilized.

People start to leave about 6 and are mostly gone by 8 except for a fisherman and a car load who have lit a late BBQ. We eventually decide on a tent spot. After our late second lunch we don't need much to eat so we have a large can of fruit salad for our evening meal and set the oatmeal to soak for the morning so we can set off on a good full stomach. I realize that the pole a couple of meters from our tent has 3 power points on it - hardly the standards for electricity safety that we would expect back home. I take the chance to charge the Garmin and top up the computer battery and add a bit to this page. The wind has died down and it's starting to chill a bit.

In conversation we learn that the man running the place is 80. He has traveled even to Spain and has a son

somewhere we don't pick up. He lives in a small hut over to one side of the park area. Later he comes over to ask if we want a shower, he says 20 minutes, we don't quite understand, then later he asks if we want warm or hot, we say hot so he says another 5 minutes, then he comes and tells us it is ready. The shower is a small bit on the back of the main building. It has small tank with an immersion heater that he heats as needed and you get hot water until the tank runs out and then just dribbles, better than nothing. We share to get most out of it. It's a bit nippy as the evening chill starts to set in. Darkness is falling and we realize that the pole with the power point also has a light directly above our tent – not the best to sleep under. It seemed to get turned off sometime in the night.

Onwards Back Towards the Chilean Border

Junin de los Andes to Laguna Verde

www.pppg.pictures/JuninLgnaVerde.htm

Tonight we are camped up at Laguna Verde, it's a rather pleasant lake but we are a short walk from the lake itself. We are near the stream that runs into it from the much larger Lago Curruhue that we biked along most of the afternoon. In the quirks of ancient glaciations the water runs west here towards Chile and not out the valley where we have come towards Argentina like you might expect. It's a jolly cold wee stream. We may have entertained the idea of a bit of a dip in it to wash the dust off but on dipping our toes in the water such aspirations were soon dispelled, these lakes are snow fed from the high tops around us. In the end we did splash a bit of water over ourselves in a sandy pool in a curve in the stream such was the need to wash off sweat and fine volcanic dust. We are not the only campers here, the two Argentinian women we met a few days ago at Puerto Pirihueico are here having looped around in the opposite direction to us. When we set out this morning I thought that we may have camped at Lago Curruhue Grande but we were told the camping was better here just a little further on so here we are.

We were up early with the light yet again and we heated up the oatmeal that we had set to soak last night in the hope of an early start. The man here was very friendly and chatty and we felt almost rude to have to make our excuses to depart. He may have been busy yesterday being a Sunday but I guess it's quite a solitary existence running this place so he was happy to talk today. Before we leave he gives us some flyers advertising this place in the hope that we will drop them somewhere where other travelers will see them. We note that toilets are included in the facilities – is that somehow very Argentinean that a place like this needs to list that it has toilets. It may seem a very low key place but it would seem that it has a facebook page such are the seeming contradictions here.

It's the usual 2 hours before we head out on the road. We roll back downhill to the junction to our turnoff, well we spend some of the time on the paved cycle track that turns into a dirt track rather than stay on the road itself as the Monday morning traffic seems busy. We see one of the San Martin local buses go by so this place must be a cheaper place to live for those who work in San Martin. We turn off to the gravel road and a young policeman comes out of the porta-shed that is the checkpoint. He just asks where we going, I ask what happens here, he is very friendly and he says nothing happens here. We wonder what the point of him being here is then but we will never know, maybe it's just a residual of those times when Argentina was under more authoritarian control.

Now we start the 20 kilometers to the junction with the alternate route from San Martin via Lago Lolog that was the way that we had originally planned to come. We were on a gravel road that followed a flattish wide river valley gently climbing but with a few ups and downs, sometimes we struck sandy patches in the road. At one stage we come across a water race that has taken water from the river and supplies water for stock on the dry flats. Along the way we saw 2.5 gauchos - that is to say one was far away over the fence and Alison didn't see him but the other two we passed on the road. We only saw 2 cars on this stretch. There were pine plantations between the river and us quite a bit, not the most vigorous that you will ever see on the dry boney soil. I was surprised to see some had recently been production thinned taking out some of the millable trees, this is something not usually associated with pinus radiata forest management. Maybe the demand for wood for construction in the booming San Martin de los Andes made it worthwhile. There are not a lot of trees to be seen over here in Argentina and even less suitable for timber. These pine plantations are about their only source of local timber. We get some clear views of the snowy cone of Volcan Lanin ahead to the north. It's a blue dome day and the sun is getting hot shining down upon us.

We have been going nearly a couple of hours by the time we reach the junction. There is a shaded spot off the road with some evidence of fireplaces. There are two dogs there in the shade, friendly but skinny, who knows how hungry they are or how they came to be here. We decide that it's time for a stop and have the last of our media lunas from San Martin, pastries and fruit. As we leave there are several signs, one says 9 kilometers to Lago Curruhue Chico. Another sign says works for many kilometers ahead.

Three kilometers later beside the road there is a brilliant white house that turns out to be our immigration exit from Argentina, the border is still 50 kilometers away. There is a barrier across the road so cars have to stop. One officer in uniform is working in the grounds but has to come in and stamp our passports. Another younger fellow is preparing some beef and garlic for what looks like will be a stew. He has the younger eyes needed to adjust the date stamp for our exit as we are the first customers of the day. A kilometer or so on there is a large portal over the road and in another hundred meters some buildings for the entrance to Parque Nacional Lanin but they are closed up and deserted – we are too early for the tourist season.

Then the road starts to climb and fall a bit over the next 3 kilometers to the Lago Curruhue Chico campsite where we head in off the road for a proper lunch spot. It is clearly well used at times with a closed kiosk and plenty of fireplaces. It would have been a good place to camp if needed except that the toilets were locked. We heat a brew of soup and some toasted bread to fill our stomachs for the road ahead. It's getting warm now. We walk down to the lake edge and look around and some other tourists turn up in a car.

After about an hour resting it's time to move on and we start out and climb getting above the lake. We then drop a bit to Lago Curruhue Grande, dropping because due to combinations of glacial advances and terminal moraines Lago Curruhue Grande actually drains to the north and not east through Lago Curruhue Chico and the valley we have been following. After reaching the lake we are still above it and continue to climb another 100 meters until reaching the 40 kilometer mark for the day getting well above the lake due to the steepness of the glacial valley sides.

There's lots of volcanic sand on the road, sometimes set mud - I'd hate to do this in the wet, it looks like it would become very boggy. It is slow going because getting through the sand is hard work. We stop near what seems the top for a break. Then just after we move on we come to a grove of Araucarias - monkey-puzzle trees - where we make a short photo stop. Then we start a long downhill to lake level with occasional ups, we can glimpse the lake below through the trees now as we have moved into forest. Forest is good as it means shade for us. There are several new metal pipe culverts in the road but those who put them in did a very rough job on rebuilding the road at each. We get closer to the lake and the trees get bigger then at 49 kilometers we get a vicious short uphill requiring walking and then through the trees we see the end of the lake ahead.

Here at the end of the lake is Argentinian camping again, no tenting. We see a toilet block as we enter but it is decrepit with pans missing or broken but people have used the buildings anyway. We walk a little to the pleasant gravelly beach. A family is there down by the lake shore under the trees firing up a fogon to roast a slab of meat and blood sausage over a fire. They had passed us on the road a way back and witnessed one of Alison's two unplanned dismounts for the day on the rough road. We talk and they offer mate to try. The young lad is keen to try the English that he has learned at school with us. A sign as we entered had said Laguna Verde 400 meters further on and they tell us that it's better there for camping so we move on. It is a base for workmen working on road at the moment and they have a generator that ends up running into night. There is a pile of those large corrugated steel pipes used for culverts and that explains the new culverts that we have passed over with corresponding short sections of difficult new rocky road.

We follow the road into the camping area and there we meet the two women from Buenos Aires that we met at Pto. Pirehueico some days ago. We later find out that they are mother and daughter. We find a camping spot under trees near the river. Around here everything is covered in volcanic sand and dust from some eruption not so many years ago. There are many concrete fogones around, some look quite new. As a whole however this camping area has seen better days. It seems we have the usual Argentinian toilet story, the building is askew and all fittings and toilet pans have been removed - this hasn't stopped some people using the open hole however. If we need to go we will take our trowel and scratch a hole amongst the bushes – odd bits of toilet paper in the bushes testify to the need for a new toilet here.

Nevertheless it is a very pretty spot we have not far from the river. Our spot has a Fogon and a picnic table although it has seen better days and is missing some planks. Time for a bit of a wash but the water in the river turns out to be too cold to get in properly - probably snow melt off the peaks above but we wash the

dust off in it. We leisurely set up the tent is set up on some almost grass, and then walk down to the lake shore. We make some easy mashed potato for our meal and set a brew of oats for the morning.

The night may have started warm but at 1000m we are at probably our highest camp of the trip, there is still snow not far above us and we get very cold at night. We decide that we have to join our sleeping bags in the middle of the night for shared warmth but that goes awry when one of the zippers fails. We were glad to see the sun rise.

Ending the Days Riding Soaking in a Hot Pool.

Laguna verde to Termas de Hipolito Muño

www.pppg.pictures/LVerdeTermasHM.htm

We are camping at some thermal hot pools tonight, not only do we expect to be warmer in the tent tonight but we will be warm and clean after a good soak or two. This place is certainly more rustic than the commercialized hot pools at home. There is one main hot pool down by the river and some small private tubs up the hill a bit, we will be giving them all a try. There is another pool near us but it is empty, perhaps waiting for the tourist season, the number of people here hardly warrants it being full. There are more hot pools across the river including a warmer “hole in the river bank” fed by warm spring water. We walked through the river, almost waist deep in the middle, to get over there for a look but worked out that they must be a separate business, a road does come up the other side of the valley to them. It is certainly turning out to be a cultural experience staying at this place. When we arrived there were some people lying in the sun on mattresses outside their tents. Down below where we parked up a family were having a day trip but they had brought their mattress in the van and were lazing on it. We arrived mid afternoon, this place had always been planned as one of our nightly stops so we knew where we were heading this morning even if we didn't know exactly what was on the way here.

Our morning started out cold and we are up and waiting for the sun to creep our way above the mountains to bring us its warming rays. It is yet another 2 hour departure morning. It's impossible to get the tent fly dry so it gets rolled damp and dirty covered in fine volcanic dust as it's not possible to find a spot large enough to spread it out away from the fine volcanic sand and dust of the area.

When we set out it was still chill. Out to the road and across the bridge we are riding along on the other side of the river that joins the two lakes. We can look across the calm estuary to the area where we camped last night. Then it's a small climb away from lake. Soon the grader from the camp passes us and we wonder what he has in store of us. Initially the newly graded road is not too bad and we are in old forest. We pass Laguna Del Toro, a small pretty blue lake. We have to climb but then it's mostly down and across the river again towards Lago Epulafquen, the river is well below us but the road is rough in parts but thankfully mostly good.

At 5 kilometers we stop and take a walk to look at the scoria flow from 400 years ago. There is a good path that looks like it was once a road and various information panels. Back on the road we then catch up with where the grader is working along slowly. He is making a mess with big rocks pushed from the edges into the middle of the road, I guess he will push them back on his return. We wonder that if a car came how it could pass but I presume that they are doing this now before the summer season while there is little traffic. The messy surface has us going slow and pushing on bits that we might otherwise ride. When we catch up with the grader it was impossible to attract the driver's attention for him to know that we are there. We manage to pass the grader when he is dead slow on a wider good bit. Even though the surface is better now we have passed we still have to walk some short steep bits, as much due to the poor rocky and loose surface as the gradient.

At 11.5 kilometers we come to a pretty little stream and stop for a welcome cup of tea and crackers with our tomato that we can't take to Chile. Not much further at 12 kilometers is a building for Termas Lahuen, it doesn't seem much and is closed. A few meters on and we see parking and yet more fogones, it must have better times. We see the pool area below as we start to climb a bit, then there is a large new building below but we carry on without investigating. Soon we come to a small bridge with a horse standing on it. We wonder where he came from and we continue to see his hoof prints for several kilometers to come. Gently we have started to climb to the pass and on some short steep bits we walk or pedal a bit and rest. The grader has already been on this section and the road here is good as a few vehicles have passed after it and have compressed the surface to solid dirt.

We are heading up a valley but we soon have to drop a little to cross a small bridge across to the other

side. Down we go and over a bridge and then it's very steep climbing out of other side for a couple of switchbacks, there are a few sections of pushing again. We try to ride a steep bit but we are going dead slow because of the rocks on the road when Alison has a controlled dismount into and ends up lying in the gutter ditch with her bike on top of her. She is OK but it helps that I lift her bike off her. The steep bits and rocky surface make for miserable going - it will probably get better after some more traffic has been over it. When planning the route there were some bits of steep gradient here but I put it down to not being able to map the road well - it turns out that they really are steep as we go up and back on the of switchbacks. Then to our surprise the road eases off - surprise I suppose because I hadn't checked out the route for today before starting out. We even drop down a bit after we cross a bit of a saddle to the north side of the ridge.

We can see Volcan Lanin to the north in the distance between the trees. Soon the road passes between two monkey puzzle trees that I have seen a photo of on Google earth. It was one of the photos that made me want to come this way. Then it starts to rise again but the gradient is not so bad but for a while there is a terrible rocky surface. We haven't got a good idea of distances that we have traveled or what we have to go. My Garmin GPS recorder takes a break when we are going dead slow assuming that we are stopped.

Finally we see the border, a large log porton that they seem to like here and it is fantastic road ahead. Within the last year or so the road on the Chilean side has been rebuilt wide with a good gravel base there are still smooth edges untouched since they were rolled down during construction and where we can ride down. It is very steep so we need breaks for our brakes to cool and our brake hands to rest. We understand what the two Argentinian women had told us about how steep it was for them coming up and how long it took them.

It's 3 kilometers and a 200m drop from the border to reach the Chilean border post. It is in an area of grassy hillside cleared from the forest there is a white and green weather board building by the road and a barrier arm across it. We park the bikes and go in. There two officers fill out our entry forms for us and they have to change the date on the stamp so we are the first today. We chat with the Servicio Agrícola y Ganadero (SAG) man while this is being done but once the passports are stamped we have to fill out his forms. He then takes us outside to our bikes and wants to search our panniers - well he's had nothing to do all day and has to justify his existence apart from us. Half way through our search a motorcyclist arrives from Argentina and the SAG dog shows more interest in the motorcycle than us so the man gives up on us and we are let through.

More and more downhill, there are flash new wide concrete bridges obviously built with the future in mind. We are on the lookout for a place to have a bit of late lunch but because of recent road reconstruction not much appeals. Eventually we stop under some shade on curve and brew soup and warm some bread from the other day that is still quite OK and rebaked by the heat in Alison's pannier on the hot sunny day. We discover we still have some salami that we had meant to eat earlier so it was a good job our SAG man gave up on us. We reach the first farm and the road levels a bit but it narrows and the surface gets worse, I guess that it is only the last section that was recently upgraded but least it's not so steep now.

The valley starts to open up a bit with some farms on the not so steep slopes. We eventually come to Termas de Hipolito Muñoz where we plan to stop for the night. Rustic is perhaps the best word to describe it. There are some cabins, one is being extended. There are quite a few people there, a bus load in fact, some are in tents under roofed shelters. Some men are asleep on mattresses in the sun. One tells us that the señora is in the house just after we entered. We knock on the door and she comes. Having paid she tells us to go anywhere. We see a nice spot close to river but it has a family day camping there so we decide that we will wait until they leave to set up the tent. There's still plenty of the day left and so I take the tent fly down to the river and do my best to wash the fine volcanic dust off it and then hang it on a long fence rail to dry.

We wash and explore the place a bit. Only one of the pools is currently full and it's HOT. There are some hot spots in the river and pools on the other side of the river and we wade through to go over and explore but come to the conclusion that it is a separate complex (Termas de Carranco). I take the bikes down to the river and wash the fine volcanic dust off the bikes and then oil the chains. For a while I have been having chain jams when changing to my lowest front sprocket and now see one tooth is bent. Without tools to remove it I

manage to straighten it a bit on the bike by hammering it with a suitable stone.

For now we have a nice sunny spot but with some shade trees. I start some notes for today's journal. Then we cook our rice, the last of our supplies and eat. With the family having day camping in our favored spot we have been waiting for them to leave before putting up the tent. Just as they are about to depart the man comes up with half a dozen bananas and gives them to us. "Muchas Gracias". They start to drive out but granddad has a last look at the pool and I'm walking down with the tent to occupy their spot.

Having set the tent up I sit in the pool for a while (Alison went in earlier while I started the days journal notes). In conversation I work out that the big group here are retired miners from near Concepcion and some of their families. The sun is down and it's cooling as we go up to the private tubs. These are small cubicles with a big square tub (room for two), a hot and cold tap and big wooden bung to plug the hole. After half an hour or so it's time for bed, thankfully warmer than last night.

Apart from the grader we had no traffic until the Chilean border when the motor bike arrived after us, one car went up and then down the road to the border post as we went down. It was a very quiet but spectacular day on the road and we are glad to have come this way.

Back to a Blueberry beer

Termas de Hipolito Muñoz to Choshuenco

www.pppg.pictures/TermasHMChnco.htm

Tonight we are ensconced in a cabin in Choshuenco again and I'm writing today's journal having had another blueberry beer. I confess that I don't deserve it as much as I did last time we arrived here. Overall we lost several hundred meters of height but we probably climbed that much as well so we figure we deserve some little reward. After 3 nights in the tent we decided that we could splash on luxury again and get some wifi so we headed for the same hotel that we had stayed at a week or so ago. We could have probably taken a more northerly route through Coñaripe and reached our target of Panguipulli tomorrow but we wanted to pass Lago Neltume and we had heard there was serious construction on the alternate route. With this plan we will have seal tomorrow so when we set out this morning we knew we didn't have a most strenuous day ahead.

The day started with us up at 6:15, a good early start. We did the usual jobs of packing and breakfast. It was warmer last night as we are only a few hundred meters above sea level rather than a thousand but there was considerably more condensation on the tent fly. I set about to start the stove but things didn't go well and it sort of petered out with the water half way boiled. To make matters worse in realizing there was a problem I upset the billy spilling most of the water I had warmed. The residue went in last night's leftover rice to warm it up a bit. After mucking around I tried the stove again and all went well – I think that I hadn't given it enough of the preheat stage when starting it. With the left over rice we had the last of our bread and a banana. All packed in our usual two hours we realized that we would only be here once so we decided we had time to get in the hot pool for a while before leaving so it was 9 before we struggled up the steep road out of the camp to the main road.

After a little climb we resumed our downward ride. We were soon struck with a climb or two keeping us well above the river in the steep valley below. We were in forested hills with some small bit of farming of the easier slopes. There were signs of timber milling along the way with a pile of slab wood offcuts and sawdust where a portable mill had recently been in action. A kilometer on the way we crossed over our river as it ran through a deep steep gorge. Almost immediately after the bridge was the road off up the other side of the valley leading to the other hot pools across from where we had stayed. A bit of a climb followed where we met a man walking down the road with a chainsaw over his shoulder.

After an hour or so we came to the pueblo of Las Cascadas. As we approached we saw ahead that it was downhill to sealed road - an unexpected pleasure - and two touring cyclists were coming up it. Two young fellows from Buenos Aires, they had started in San Martin - why do these Argentinians go this way clockwise on this loop making it hard for themselves uphill this way? We exchanged a few words, these short trip locals aren't as inclined to conversation as longer distance tourers. Needing some supplies we stopped at the edge of "town" at the first place we came to and bought some cheese and a tomato. It was a small shop with not much but we didn't know more shops were ahead.

We then joyfully rolled on downhill on the smooth seal. Houses lined a long stretch along the road of Las Cascadas that then merged along the road into the town Liquine. I had no idea it would be so big being spread out along the road for over 3 kilometers. I had told Alison that there would be nothing along the way today now she will never believe me next time that I am right. We asked a lady watering her lawn how far to the turnoff - 7 kilometers was the answer. We see more shops and Alison goes in to buy bread. I get out the laptop to check the ride today as I hadn't transferred it from computer to neural memory like I normally do. Seeing me the young woman behind the counter offers us the local wifi key and confirms the 7 kilometers in clearer Spanish. We thank her but we figure we want to press on and we have no real use for the Internet just now. On the bikes again almost immediately we smell the local panaderia, we could have bought some really fresh bread here had we known, it smells so nice that we are tempted but resist.

We get to the edge of town and the seal ends - the road has been steadily worsening since the border - I

guess it gets more use to wear the surface and from here on it is rutted with loose gravel. It's steady 10kph progress on the ripio until on queue 7 kilometers later we reach the a sign for the turnoff for Neltume in 24 kilometers. Just on the new road is a sign almost hidden by trees with half a dozen pictures on it, there is a fish, a bicycle and a hiker and three I don't recognize. Let's hope this means good riding ahead. Across the valley floor we go looking for a place to stop and eat our unexpected purchases before the hill we know is ahead. We cross the river and see the climb starts almost immediately so we stop for our second breakfast of bread and cheese on a flattish area, probably an old work area from construction. It's hardly the nicest spot that we have stopped at but it suffices.

Then it's the climb. Steadily sweating in first gear we are grateful that we have some shade from the trees edging the narrow road as the clouds start to burn off. Thankfully we don't meet any cars as the road is a bit narrow for a kilometer or so but the surface is good with compressed dirt and gravel with small loose chip on top. Climbing up we can get some views north west to where we could have taken an alternate route out of the mountains towards Coñaripe. I had read a description of this section of road that we are on as one of the worst someone had struck in Chile but that was a few years ago and it's actually one of the best here, almost better running than coarse chipseal.

After 1 ½ kilometers the climb eases off and we have some up and down for a few kilometers staying high above the valley below. Although we are following the river flowing our way it cuts in to this side of the steep sided valley here so we have to be well above it gaining 200 meters in height. There are some old bridges along the way that are built on two huge logs across the gap. This is the way many old bridges were first built here, from logs easily at hand. We meet a small bus as we reach one, we can only assume these logs are still sound enough to carry such weights. We get views across the valley to patches of farming cut from the forest on the easier hillsides.

At one point we come across a tarantula like spider in the middle of the dusty road. When Alison puts her foot beside him for some perspective in a photo he rises up on his hind legs as if to attack. Later we were told that these spiders are harmless and are called Araña Pollocitas or Baby Chicken spiders because they are the size of a newly hatched chicken.

Then Lake Neltume comes into view with Volcan Choshuenco behind it in the distance and we start the drop down to the lake. Here the road does get rougher and in a short stretch where there has been recent damage from slips and the road is quite rough with large rocks. It's a long way downhill and we rest a few times as riding downhill on a rough road is hard work. Soon we are down to lake level, some people have camped around here on the flat grassy areas. We traverse 3 kilometers along the edge of the lake to its southern end, we do rise and fall but only a little. Some of the houses along here look lived in by locals and others like holiday homes.

Some photos can not or should not be taken. We come across a Mapuche man collecting firewood. He has dark weathered skin, a leather hat and jacket, vastly overdressed for the temperature by our standards. His wood looks like driftwood collected from the lake below, he has a sack and a cart. The cart is rough wood with two 12" round slices of tree trunk for wheels. He may not be that old but with head bowed down as we pass he looks to be carrying the weight of ages. Less than 5ft tall he is the nearest I have ever seen to an inhabitant of middle earth with his cart. Oh to have had that photograph as he looked at me but to have asked for a photograph would have seemed like patronizingly stealing any dignity that he had. We have seen other Mapuche and would love to photograph them but it would seem an inappropriate invasion of their souls.

It's then a short climb away from the lake and there is a dirt gravel walking track beside the road – we choose to ride along it for a kilometer or so as the surface is better than the road. Soon in the distance straight ahead we see the junction with the road from Choshuenco to Puerto Fuy. Then after a bit of a rest down we go, much faster than we could go up those few days ago. The road is suddenly much worse as we bounce around on the corrugations. Four kilometers and we reach the seal for the last 4 kilometers into town. We roll into the hotel where we stayed last time we were here at 2:00. They have a cabin available but it's not ready yet, that's no problem as we need lunch. So a blueberry beer and lunch and we set things to dry, especially

the tent fly as it was rolled up wet. It's a hot afternoon and we are glad to be off the bikes early. There is time for me to catch up on the online journal as it is behind due to us not having a rest day since we were last here.

So we ended the day deciding to cook in our cabaña. We know where the shops are here this time so Alison went off to do the shopping while I journaled. I instructed her to buy me an icecream but in the end she disobeyed and came back with a 1 litre tub of chocolate icecream and some fruit salad. We then had the onerous task of eating it all after our meal of fried smashed potato and vege with an omelet. A pisco sour didn't help the day's recovery. We paid for our stay this evening having learned from our previous stay and went to bed prepared to make an early start in the morning with the wind still blowing. Back in Chile where they are very trusting and honest it is normal to pay when you leave but in Argentina you are expected to pay on arrival.

Riding to Catch a Bus

Choshuenco - Valdivia

www.pppg.pictures/CshncoValdivia.htm

We are back in Valdivia in the same hostel that we stayed in when we arrived here in Chile nearly two weeks ago. We arrived back here in the early evening by bus. We weren't exactly sure where we were headed for when we set out this morning. We knew that we were biking to Panguipulli but as to what buses we might be able to get from there to get south quicker we had little idea. In the end when we arrived in Panguipulli around lunchtime we found the bus station to be a bit more regional than we hoped. There were fewer larger buses capable of carrying our bikes leaving for the big cities south than we had hoped, perhaps earlier in the day would have been better but that was never going to happen. So we took tickets to Valdivia and by the time we arrived we thought it a bit late to try for another bus to Puerto Montt this evening so here we are. Valdivia is a pleasant city for a few more hours before we leave tomorrow.

We planned to start the day early to beat the heat of the day and to get to Panguipulli to catch a bus somewhere. It was however 6:30 before we were up and about, that may sound early but the light here is early at this time of year. Breakfast was some of last night's leftovers and another omelet and toasted pans. It was great being able to cook in our cabin. Today the hotel Internet was working outside on the patio which used up some of our time prior to departure. The restaurant wasn't open as the only other guests were a young couple and they were cooking in their cabin - our cabin from our last visit and adjoining the one we are in this time. Having learned from our last stay here we had paid the bill the night before to enable a quick getaway but in the end it was a bit after 8 before we pulled out onto the road.

The first 4 kilometers were gently uphill - our 3rd time on this short stretch of road. Then we turned off to follow around the north side of Lago Panguipulli. This road was only sealed a couple of years ago when it was rebuilt wide and has a good shoulder outside the white line most of the way. We did see some remnants of the old road, not much more than a track. These snippets of the old road are consistent with a few stories we have read about the road prior to reconstruction, windy and narrow. In rebuilding the road some of the corners were straightened out and we had some jolly good crawler climbs today. In fact in total we climbed the most of any recent days but on the seal it was relatively easy.

After 5 kilometers of easy running we have our first climb of the day over a bit of a saddle at the neck of a peninsula jutting out into the lake. The air was still chill from the night and the road is often shady being on the north side of the lake and that was great for uphill but racing the downhill our self created breeze was brisk. In constructing the road 5 or 6 miradors - viewpoints - were added - not fully designed for entry when going our way I'd have to say and not a toilet at any of them. The biggest and our first stop was at the bottom of this hill. There were half a dozen picnic tables and even some bike stands. The problem was a high kerb with no break we had to pull our heavy bikes up over to get them off the road. The second stop was not much further on and we made several stops in all at these miradors to admire the views across the lake. The light was a bit hazy for good photographs but the changing views of lake and mountains were spectacular.

After 30 kilometers we had a long climb away from the steep sided part of the lake and left forest and entered farmland. We did drop down to the lakeside again and somewhere after 40 kilometers we got away from the lake for a final long but not too steep climb to the town of Panguipulli. As we were doing this section I kept thinking that with our plan now to bus ahead I really wouldn't miss days of the same old scenery through farmland and the persistent smell of dairy farming we were now encountering. The smell from what comes out of the back end of a cow is just like some of our rides at home. Chilean farmland with plenty of trees is however prettier than the farmland around home.

So it was around 12:30 when we rolled downhill into Panguipulli. I remind myself that I had meant to find the location of the bus terminal earlier but we hadn't so we ended up asking people as we got ever closer - it is off on the south side of town. When we got there I went to the counter of the company that the man at our hotel last night had told me was the one that we needed. Most buses were too small to carry our bikes. They

had a small bus leaving in 15 minutes but that was no good to us as it didn't have room for our bikes. At 1:30 they had a big bus going to Valdivia but no more to Orsorno today so Valdivia it was to be.

I headed across the road to some shops to find something to eat. While sitting at the bus station minding the bikes Alison got into conversation with a local woman who was seeing her sister off to Valdivia. Like many Chileanos she was very friendly and interested in our trip. She asked us back to her place for lunch but with not much more than ½ an hour more to wait for our bus, we had to decline. We told her we hoped to be back this way again in 3 months, so she gave us her number and said we should call her. Unfortunately our plans changed and we didn't get the chance. There wasn't too much other baggage and we were relieved that it wasn't any trouble getting the bikes on the bus. All on the bus it was warm and we both fell asleep on the trip for shorter or longer times.

It was 4 by the time we arrived in Valdivia. We checked out buses onwards but by this time we would be getting anywhere overly late. We decided to stay here and phoned the hostel that we had stayed previously and they had a room. We decided that we might as well get to Puerto Montt a day early as we had been caught out by weekend closing of shops the last 2 weekends. Back home we have 7 day shopping for most things so we are not in the mindset for weekend closing any more. On checking with the bus company with hourly departures to Puerto Montt we were advised to book now for tomorrow as it was Friday and that meant a busy day - something that we found out just two weeks ago. So our tickets were bought for a 1pm departure tomorrow.

Back at the hostel we are settled in. We paid for our last visit by Paypal and in the rush and with a poor Internet connection I ended up paying in NZ dollars rather than US dollars. That had been sorted by email when we were in Choshuenco the first time but it was nice to be able to apologize in person and know it was all OK. We headed out and ended up having our evening meal in the same place we had eaten lunch a couple of weeks ago. Back in our room I was able to write some of my journal before bed – it was a quieter time here than last time.

So for a while that's the end of exciting days, no more bikes for a few days. Riding the bus re-enforced that after having the experiences where we have been to Argentina and back then riding south would be tame and we don't feel much loss at cheating a little bit. A few days will give me a chance to write up the notes for some missing journal days of this first section before we start the Carretera Austral.

Busing South

Valdivia to Puerto Montt

www.pppg.pictures/ValdiviaPMnt.htm

Tonight we are at Casa Perla in Puerto Montt in Chile. It's a hostel that many cyclists and backpackers have stayed at over the years. In the past Perla and her husband offered Spanish lessons. These days he shuffles around not saying much, he's either had a stroke or has some neurological disorder but we are too polite to ask. Perla has some cats and new kittens, one of them bit her here today and her hand is swollen and sore. We are here a day earlier than originally planned, we had booked here for tomorrow before leaving home but phoned last night to confirm that we could have a place tonight as well as tomorrow. Our original plan didn't factor in the shopping we need to do and we can't do it when the shops are shut. So today's riding was rather minuscule - to one bus station and from another but getting to Casa Perla is a short sharp climb especially when we are stiff after having been on the bus for 3½ hours.

The day started late when we slept in until 7:30, blame the west facing window not letting the sun wake us. Once up we had little to organize but a bit of shopping. Alison found some ginormous strawberries and I found a new adapter plug for all our electronics as I seem to have left one at the last place. I remember that for once the wall plug was tight and I probably left it behind when pulling out the charger, I had left it in until almost the last minute to maximize charge levels. At least I lost it when it was easy to find a replacement. We found some empanadas and some breads at a small bakery for a bite of early lunch before heading off to the Valdivia bus terminal to see how things worked there in plenty of time for our 1pm bus.

The buses only spend a minimum of time at the gate so when ours arrived and the baggage man saw our bikes you could tell he wasn't exactly enthused. This bus had more but narrower luggage bays underneath than our one yesterday and he indicated he wanted me to take the front wheels off. There were lots of people with baggage and even some big boxes so it was going to be a squeeze. Eventually the bikes were crammed in with a little less care than I would have liked, we gave the man a small tip, probably not enough by the look on his face. You might have thought it was our fault that the bus was a little late leaving but it was quite full as had been predicted when we bought our tickets yesterday. I should say that the way the buses work here is that each bus has a driver and a ticket/baggage man. There is a door behind them at the front of the passenger area between them and the passengers - don't expect to see out the front as we drive along.

The first section south east out of Valdivia is through gently rolling country forested in mainly Australian Eucalyptus - E.Nitens - a variety that likes wetter areas and to a lesser extent Pinus Radiata with the native Nothofagus related to NZ beech filling the gaps. After 50 kilometers or so we reached Ruta 5, the Pan American Highway. Then we started heading south towards Orsono and Puerto Montt through rolling farmland. These farms are much bigger than the small holdings in the mountains, large paddocks of cropping and dairy. Very soon we got our first glimpses of Volcan Orsono out to the south east, a perfect white cone floating above the haze, we couldn't see the mountains behind or the flanks below. It grew as we approached the city of Orsono. There the bus turned off the highway and into the narrow town streets. There it dropped over half the passengers and picked up more.

Leaving Orsono we could soon see Volcan Calbuco to the north east of Puerto Montt. All this time we have been traveling through the same gently rolling farming country, this is Chile's agricultural heartland. Here at least they leave occasional trees in the paddocks but it is predominantly dairy country. We pass a huge milk processing factory just off the highway. At one stage I notice a tractor towing a large tanker spreading dairy effluent and almost immediately that dairy smell enters the bus.

As we approach the last stretch into Puerto Montt the ground becomes more glacial outwash land with large stumps left in some of the wetter areas as testament to the large forest that once covered this area. It is very reminiscent of the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island. This is only the second time I've seen gorse here to help complete the New Zealand comparison. Scotch Broom is everywhere and blackberry but the only other gorse I saw was in a forest near Valdivia. This information may not interest most readers but

these weeds are the nemesis of plantation forestry and the preservation of our ecological heritage in New Zealand and I can see them along with wilding radiata pines spreading across Patagonia in years to come. We get an occasional glimpse of Lago Llanquihue out to the east before dropping down on the final stretch into Puerto Montt.

We arrive at the bus terminal in Puerto Montt which is on the edge of the waterfront. I guess from a vague memory that it is more or less where the old railway station used to be but the railway is gone from here and the new railway station is somewhere up on the hill on the higher part of town now.

It's a frenetic unload off the bus - maybe we should have tipped our ticket man more but he looked a miserable type anyway. The bus terminal here is the largest we have been in yet and it has a bit of a reputation for thieves so with all our panniers about us we are anxious to load up and secure everything as quickly as possible. Then we get things back together all loaded on the bikes. We start riding but as we get out of the bus station something is rubbing on Alison's bike but it turns out that the front mudguard has been pushed out of alignment onto the wheel when the wheel was off. Once I realize the problem it only takes a minute to fix. So a check of the map on the tablet and we are off toward the port at first. A large cruise ship is in port today, no doubt good for the market down that way. Then we have to start up the hill left right 2nd left right left 3rd left. Some sections are jolly steep and Alison pushes but I'm so keen I pedal uphill a couple of houses past our destination.

The large door off the street is opened into the storage area for us and our bikes will be under cover. We are given the downstairs room, this is fine as we don't have to carry our bags upstairs. The disadvantage is that we are next to the downstairs bathroom which is also used by those camping on the back lawn. The Bathroom does have the advantage that it has doors to both the inside and outside and is a shortcut to get our bags to our room.

It's time to go out for a meal. We decide rather than going directly down the hill that we will go up and around on a longer route. This brings us along a road above the main part of downtown but we do end up passing a hardware store that is still open. We decide that we might as well go in and see if we can get some Bencina Blanca to save one job from tomorrow's list. We find the Bencina Blanca in the paint section but it is the usual story, we get the ticket we pay at the cashier window and then down the back to collect our goods. We then notice down in the opposite corner that they have plastic sheeting. The sheet I brought from home for a floor in the foyer of the tent was a bit old and is cracking along the fold lines so we had decided to buy a new one. We select a nice yellow and while the man cuts a couple of meters off the roll for us we go through the same pay process to collect at the back counter.

Pleased that we have made our important non supermarket purchases we head down to the promenade along the foreshore. There is a huge statue of a couple looking out over the sea and a local woman insists on taking our photo in front of it. I guess we don't actually get many photos of the two of us together. We then head up to the Plaza to search out a place to eat. It's a bit like many downtown areas - places to eat in the daytime and not many open in the evening, there are a couple not open as we are too early but we find one small place at which we are some of the few customers.

Returning back up to the hostel it seems the quickest route is up a steep road that has a few seedy bars, if there is a red light district in Puerto Montt it is probably here. One of a pair of drunks asks for a light but of course we don't have one for which I am called a prick by one. This is one of the few negative interactions we have had with Chileans but there are drunks everywhere I guess.

Back at Casa Perla there were a couple of young Germans who had walked the Lago Puelo route from Argentina near here that we may do in a couple of months so it was good to chat with them before heading to bed. The Lago Puelo route has existed as an official border crossing for many years. Some of the first settlers in Rio Puelo valley came through from Argentina this way as access from Chile necessitated crossing Lago Tagua Tagua, a lake with steep glacial sides too steep for any track. There is now a ferry on the lake. The route can be crossed by foot or on horse back and maybe bullock carts could traverse the tracks once and some hardy cyclists have been this way. Lago Puelo can be crossed by boat but only a jet boat can cross the

rapids between the twin lakes where the actual border is. The boat is expensive but track along the lake side is challenging.

Chile and Argentina have agreed to create a new vehicle crossing route this way. Chile is blasting a new road along the line of the old bullock track but by the 2013/14 summer still had some hard kilometers to go then a new bridge across Rio Puelo and then more road building to reach the border. Argentina has far less forest than Chile and has an ecological lobby that values what it has more so is building a ferry to cross from the village of Lago Puelo to the border. The Chileans have plenty of ferries on lakes and fiords and one can speculate that they would be better at getting a suitable ferry built. A road would however be relatively simple to build as the Argentinian section of the lake side is not as steep as the Chilean section. The ferry ramp is completed but the ferry will not be needed for a while. This was all supposed to happen by the end of 2014 but at the current rate completion seems at least a couple of years away. When it is finally open it will be a great new connection for tourism in a gap where the other road connections are well to the south or north.

No photos today until Puerto Montt, I didn't think they would be much from the bus window and I'm still of the opinion that we haven't missed anything new by not biking this section.

Now We Are Three

Puerto Montt

www.pppg.pictures/PMntSaturday.htm

From tonight we are three for the next few weeks. Our friend Frebis from near Toronto in Canada has arrived from some exceptionally chilly weather to cycle the first part of the Carretera Austral with us. It was an easy day having achieved our major shopping purchases last night. Our biggest event was to meet Frebis at the airport. In the evening we had a reunion evening meal downtown.

Today I only went down and looked at the bikes, it was a day off them in Puerto Montt. We were shocked to see it was 8:15 when we first looked at the clock. The hostel had been quiet and it was cloudy and so the light hadn't woken us earlier as it would have had we been in the tent. It was quite quiet but we had nowhere to go today until the airport later in the afternoon because we had bought our essential items last night. Perla of the hostel suggested that Saturday was the best day to go and look at the market at Angelmó before 1:00. We had been there 23 years ago but wanted to go again.

With some washing done off we went for a walk down the hill where we had come up yesterday and then the kilometer or so along the port to the market. We pass the main wharf area for the port. There are large tubular containers parked up – each containing parts for wind turbines. Now these could have come in here by ship for local use or be destined to be ferried further south where the wind blows a lot more.

The market is a combination of tourist stuff and a food market for locals. There are permanent covered places for regular businesses like any other market and that's where most of the fish sales were. But being Saturday the open parking area was full of locals selling mainly fruit and vegetables. It was interesting to see the stalks of the giant rhubarb like Gunnera plant that we see along the roadside for sale. We were told it is OK to eat as long as it is the juvenile stalk is cut before the leaf unfurls. There were some stalls and locals selling dried shellfish strung on strings and smoked. There was a big choice of cheese and fish and fresh vegetables, much like a market anywhere. There didn't seem to be the number of restaurants that we remembered but there were still some. Down on a boat tied to the wharf someone seemed to be selling portions of a sheep carcass, that would hardly meet food standards at home. We managed to buy some cheese and a few other things there but no fish!

Then it was back to the hostel for a while. We shifted to a three bed upstairs room as we figured it would be easier for the three of us before heading out for lunch downtown. Although the streets were busy it looked like it was mainly morning shopping only on Saturday. The Bomberos (firemen) had one of their trucks out and were fundraising by selling raffle tickets. The young girls could get their photo taken with a hunky fireman for a donation. We managed to find another Cazuela for lunch. There was a group of young women at another table near sharing an interesting looking dish. On a base of potato chips is a mixture of pickled vegetables (carrot, onion, cauliflower, gherkin) and pieces of fried sausage and meats, a boiled egg and topped with a pickled sweet pepper. They have sopaipillas, (fried breads) as an accompaniment. It looks tempting, I think that we will have to try it sometime, we asked what it's called: Pichingas. Heading back after lunch the streets were a lot quieter than before, there's not so much chance for some buskers to make money now.

We made our way to the hostel via the waterfront promenade and supermarket across from the bus terminal. I continued on with the backlog of writing our journal entries and Alison headed back down to the supermarket to stock up on food supplies. Then it was time to head out to the airport to collect Frebis. From what we could learn we decided that the hourly bus out to the airport would suit us. We got our timing a bit wrong and arrived at the bus terminal to discover one had just left a couple of minutes earlier. The bus terminal had some shops to explore while we waited for the next.

On the way to the airport I noticed first a soccer field and then a rugby field beside the road with a match being played – now Argentina across the border is a rugby playing nation but I wasn't expecting any sign of it here in Chile. We arrived at the airport only a few minutes after Frebis had claimed her baggage and she hadn't had time to not find us so we almost immediately reboarded a bus for the return. Back at the terminal

we needed a taxi for the final hop up the hill with her boxed bike. In reality it would probably have been just as economical for us to get a taxi all the way from the airport.

Today Perla has been of to the emergency department. The cat bite is infected and her hand and lower arm were really swollen. They put her on an antibiotic drip for a while but she now is deemed well enough to be home again. There have been family about making it a bit hard for us to know who is family and who are guests. Perla's daughter married a young American lad who turned up and here as a guest and got more than the usual service it would seem. They lived in the US but have recently moved to Chile with two young children driving down all the way overland. They have a plot of land outside Puerto Montt where they will build a house. The Chilean government has policies supporting small land holders but as we see all these small farms I have to wonder how they can generate enough income to support their owners.

With Frebis settled into our room it was well into the evening and we then headed out to find a meal to celebrate our reunion as we hadn't seen each other for a few years. With three of us we could justify a large bottle of beer. So we are now three to begin the Carretera Austral.

A Family Picnic Chilean Style

Puerto Montt Day 2

www.pppg.pictures/PMntSunday.htm

Our second day in Puerto Montt started with us arising after 8 again, blame another day starting with low cloud again but true to Perla's prediction it cleared. Thankfully her infected hand seems much better today. At breakfast Perla was inviting those at the hostel to join her and her children and grandchildren to come with them for a family picnic on Isla Tenglo, the island the other side of the port channel. We accepted not knowing what to expect. We were to leave at 12.

So for the morning I caught up on my backlog of journal entries and assembled Frebis's bike while she and Alison went for more shopping at the market. We were assembled around 12 with 2 others from the hostel and the family but had to wait a bit longer as her daughter and son in law were off voting in the runoff of Chile's presidential elections. The two candidates standing were both women and had been at school together. The father of one had been high up in the Pinochet regime and the father of the other had been an opponent of the regime and is one of the disappeared – it is she who won in the end.

As we are getting organized and out the front door Perla's husband is leaning in the upstairs window watching us looking like a man looking forward to a peaceful Sunday. Then off we went, Perla and grandchildren in the car and the rest of us with her daughter and son-in-law walking down to the bus to get to the port from where we had to cross the channel on a small boat. Perla and the children were waiting at the boat when we arrived. After the short boat trip it is then a walk of just over half a kilometer on a narrow dirt road/track across the narrow island.

When we arrived we entered a gate and there was a sort of shed with tables set and meat roasting in the other end over a fire and ladies frying sopaipillas (thin breads). Lots of greetings were exchanged as the people who run this establishment are old friends. We are soon served up a plateful of meat, potato and other stuff that we are not sure about. One is a sort of flat fried potato bread that we are told the crunchy filling is sea lion - well traditionally it may have been but this is pork. Take the pork fat bits cut up and slowly render out the fat until you get the crunchy stuff left - Chicharrón - it's popular here and was in the bread rolls we had the other day in Valdivia. I have to say I haven't seen an anorexic looking Chilean yet. Susanna, Perla's daughter put a plastic container on the table and we are invited to put our blood sausage there if we don't want it. Most of us do but I do try and brave a bit of mine knowing from previous experience that I haven't yet acquired a taste for it. In the end everyone contributed their excess there for the family to take home where Perla's husband enjoyed these leftovers later in the evening. A bottle of wine came from somewhere and we had brought a little tetra pack of red wine and some juice that added to the table.

Meal eaten we all walk out the gate a few meters down to the beach where we sit and the kids play in the sea. Walking along the beach front there are several establishments offering similar hospitality. At one some young men are playing soccer and at another the BBQ is just starting.

In the end we head off with instructions to wave to the boatman on the other side and he will come and pick us up. Buses for us are only going one way and that is our way so we don't need any help working the system. Back at the hostel I work on the bikes to get sorted for our departure in the morning. Alison and Frebis head off to the supermarkets down by the bus station yet again. To end the evening we have a pile of fruit salad with strawberries, raspberries and icecream, we may not eat like this again when we are on the Carretera Austral. We have so much that we share with Sara, a fellow cyclist heading home to the UK. She has been cycling down in Terra del Fuego with some friends who are now heading north, she gives us the address of their blog and we wonder whether we will meet them as we head south.

When traveling you can see things and have adventures but today we were lucky to experience a part of Chilean life that most tourists wouldn't and that all goes to understanding the country we are in and enhancing our trip.

The Carretera Austral Part 1

Puerto Montt to Coyhaique

We set off on this section of our journey as three. We are not sure how far we will get with Frebis as she has a deadline to fly out of Puerto Montt back to Canada's frigid winter early in the new year. It's hard to know just what buses and connections she will be able to make for the return to Puerto Montt so we will be playing it by ear as we go.

Our first day we head south east along the shores of the Gulf of Ancud, we expect to hit gravel along here but we are not exactly sure where. Our first short ferry hop will take us across to the other side of the Gulf where we will leave the Carretera Austral for a short time and take the coast road heading south west along the gulf. We will rejoin the Carretera to make the last stretch to Hornopiren. From there we have a four hour ferry trip south after which we cross a small isthmus for a shorter half hour ferry. We will then be in Parque Pumalin and head to Chaiten where we will see the devastation to the town resulting from the eruption of Volcan Chaiten a few years ago. From there we head almost dead south for a few days through the towns of Santa Lucia and La Junta to meet the sea again for a short time at Puyuhuapi. Just after Puyuhuapi is the much photographed hanging Glacier followed by a 17 switchback climb. A few more days of easier roads heading inland through Villa Amengual and Villa Mañihuales should bring us to Coyhaique

I Do Like to Ride Beside the Seaside

Puerto Montt to Contao

www.pppg.pictures/PtoMntContao.htm

Today we ended up at the Hostal and Restaurante Al Sur a couple of kilometers short of the small town of Contao. After a day of great views we had been pushing into a blustering head wind when we came across this place across the road from the sea so we stopped to check it out. Within what seemed just moments after stopping a woman was out the door to solicit our custom and now we have settled in for the night with rooms overlooking the sea. For the moment a bunch of mothers and a plethora of children are keeping the place less than quiet but as they have changed from swimming gear and are being fed we expect them to go soon and we hope to end our day quietly.

We started with arising after 8 yet again, no matter we were well on the path to being packed the night before and we didn't want to start too early in Monday morning traffic. So it was 10:30 by the time we were out the gate. We decided to head down to the water front the way we had come up on arrival as it was less steep than the way we had been walking to and from el centro (downtown). We soon realized that we had followed the one way system up and spent most of our time on the footpath as getting on the right way would have meant going uphill first and that didn't appeal at all.

Finally down to the bus station we cycled along the waterfront. When we were here 23 years ago this was railway track but now it is promenade between the downtown area and the sea. Within minutes Frebis stopped to take a photo and was being chatted up by some Frenchman. From the inception of this trip over 18 months ago the Carretera Austral was its symbolic heart. We are only a few hundred meters away from it's start, I'm in no mood to be held up by some silver tongued Frenchman. Returning and dragging Frebis away on we went. At the eastern end of the waterfront there is a big mall and in the center of the road a sign – "Carretera Austral", the reason we are here - we were finally on the road south.

The first couple of kilometers are along the seafront. It's not long before we stopped for a few minutes at a sort of market place where a couple of men are sorting some small fish. A bit further on is what must be Puerto Montt's main beach, Playa Pelluco, there is a lifeguard stand in the middle of the gentle sandy beach but on a Monday morning there are no people. A bit further on we spot a group of small shops by the road including a panaderia and we buy some bread for our lunch later. We now move away from the shore for a bit at heading towards Chamiza. It's only about 6 kilometers from the beginning of the Carretera when we get our first of 2 stiff climbs for the day, it's a bit over 60m in height but the grade is not too bad and we crawl on up in low gear. The sun is out and we are sweating a bit. It's then down and around through Chamiza. We are ambling along on the flat when suddenly two cyclists are passing us, Americans by their accents with light mountain bikes and long handlebar bags. They are traveling light and racing along. A few words are exchanged on the comparative merits of their mode of touring compared to ours before they are off ahead of us. We wonder that they may finish the Carretera Austral in a few weeks but we wonder what will they see apart from the road in front of their wheels.

We are quite a way from the sea here as we cross the delta area of the Rio Chamiza. Then we reach the coast again for a few kilometers again for a while before our second good climb of the day with a switchback near the top. Frebis walks but is just about faster than me on the bike as I settle in at low gear. It's sometimes amazing having climbed uphill how much you seem to go downhill and this was one of the times, we enjoyed a long downhill. We were now on the lookout for a stream or good spot for a lunch stop. We come to where the road is running beside the sea, separated from the beach by a narrow strip of low bushy trees. We are racing along we almost immediately see a track through the strip of trees. We double back and go down and see we are at a long jetty near a fish processing factory one way and in the other direction ahead a family group are swimming. It's a nice spot for lunch (Quillaipe). We stop awhile to eat in the shade and walk out on the jetty. In the distance across the bay we can see the faint line of the road from out of Caleta Puelche towards Contao where we are heading today.

We move on and follow along the coast for a while eventually reaching Metri, a very picturesque set of rocky coves where fishing boats are tied up. Here there are a couple of signs for Camping or acampar (there are various translations of the English camping into a Spanish verb but often the English is used) and more cabañas. There are certainly plenty of accommodation options along this road here. We then leave the coast on and off around Lenca before returning to it at Chaica for the last 7 kilometers to La Arena where the ferries come and go. This last section is cut into the steep rocky side of the fiord. It has very recently been improved. We are expecting to hit gravel road but in fact it has almost been completely sealed. On one section we are on one lane of new seal while the other awaits seal in the next few days. A couple of detours around rockslides that have fallen onto the new road are our only gravel until the last 100m or so down to the ferry ramp - why that last bit is still unsealed remains a mystery.

From La Arena we have to get a ferry for a short 6 kilometer ride across Estuario de Reloncaví to Caleta Puelche. As we have been approaching so has a ferry so we figure we should catch it. There have been signs all along the road for empanadas on sale here but we don't have time for any as they have to be cooked for us - a large bottle of juice will suffice. Bikes are first on the ferry - but last off at the other end. There is another ferry going the other way as we cross, this is clearly a busy crossing here. Off the ferry we would now like something to eat but the only place there has nothing apart from plastic packet stuff so we get out our crackers from San Martín and add an avocado, tomato and cheese for a snack. There is a nice new building here as a bit of a passenger terminal where we can shelter but it's so new that the toilets aren't open yet. Now we were expecting gravel from here but as the ferry approached we could see a welcome black ribbon of newly sealed asphalt road heading up the hill. The reason we could see the line of the road from so far off was the exposed rock roadside after recent reconstruction.

There is a bit of a climb at first away from the ferry terminus so we are very pleased when the seal never ends. Just after the start there is a gravel road off to the left heading north to Lago Tagua Tagua and Cochamo, this is a route we had considered coming down at one stage of our planning and is one way to the Lago Puelo route through to Argentina. We drop down and start following near the coast again in little more than a kilometer. Out to sea just off the shore is the first of many Salmon farms that we will see. We seem to strike a headwind that we have been sheltered from until now. In the distance towards Puerto Montt we see a huge cloud of smoke blowing away from us. We think the only thing it could be is a volcano erupting. We never hear anything of this and it's not until a couple of weeks later we hear that an eruption is exactly what happened but it's such a regular occurrence that it's not news worthy. There are houses on small holdings where there is enough flat land between the sea and the mountains rising up away from the shore. Across a couple of bridges the local cemetery at Mañihueico is between us and the sea. It's a very colorful cemetery and a nice spot to be laid to rest beside the sea. Within a couple of kilometers from Contao we see this restaurant and hostel between the road and the hill. It has a sea view whereas if we found something in town we may not have a view so here we are.

The kids are all around while we have a beer and I write some journal and they are very interested in us trying their English. It seems that at least here children learn English in school and they are quite good. I miss Amelia arrive, the Surly LHT rider from Colorado, she has come from Cochamo way. The children go and we have another beer. Eventually we all have Salmon, grown out in the bay, a la plancha (grill) with salad for our meal. Time for bed and a soccer game is blaring on the TV below with quite an audience but it soon ends. A few last trucks roll by on the road outside but the ferries don't run at night so that goes quiet as well. We can see the distant lights of Puerto Montt across the sea to the northwest in the dark.

Not mountains and lakes but a great day cycling along the coast, photos can't do it justice, it was a matter of just enjoying the ride. It did get rather hot and sunny and we will have to think on how we manage our days riding to avoid the sun at its height.

Back to Reality – Gravel Again

Contao to Hualaihué

www.pppg.pictures/ContaoHulhue.htm

Tonight we are keeping company with a Señora who runs, or used to run, our hospedaje for the night. It took us longer than expected to get here, we were tiring as evening was coming our way. A day of gravel roads had tired our legs but the decision to come the long way around the coast was more than justified by the scenery. It was only by the luck of seeing a couple of other cyclists leaving out the gate here that we found this place. As the sun sets we have a fantastic view across the inlet of the first part of our ride for tomorrow.

We were up not that long after 6 this morning, it was light and a few trucks on the road outside our windows had woken us. It didn't take all that long to get packed but breakfast came with the room so we stayed to eat it. For some reason we weren't sure if breakfast was included – I guess we didn't ask - however it usually is, today was toasted bread, sopapillas (fried breads) and cheese.

So it wasn't long after nine that we hit the road, the first task to find some bread in Contao. We had a couple of kilometers to ride to get to the turnoff into town, it is also the turnoff to the coast road that we are taking today. Just after leaving at the Rio Contao estuary off towards the sea we could see the asphalt making plant that has been working hard to seal our road of late. It hurts to leave the asphalt but we had been told it ended soon anyway. We were also leaving the Carretera Austral after only a day but we figured from what we had read that the coast route would be more interesting and indeed it turned out that we weren't disappointed.

In the small village of Contao finding some bread turned out to be harder than expected. We rode around town discovering several small supermarkets but they were shut, not open until 9:30 or 10. Eventually we found one open but were told we could find bread on the only cross street that we hadn't been down (Contao is very small), 1 ½ blocks from the plaza. Indeed we could smell the fresh bread a few houses away from where it was being freshly baked, not that any signage would have led us to believe that this was where the towns bread was coming from, just another shop. Perhaps the observant might have noticed the vent chimney on the building that was disgorging that wonderful fresh bread smell. It was hot out of the oven and as well as buying plenty for the day and even tomorrow we got one each for immediate consumption. We picked up some other supplies as well in the shop. Finally it was around 10:00 when we headed out of town.

Ripio was now the order of the day as we left town, and on the ripio another grader. For the first six or so kilometers we are mostly running just off the beach but ten or so meters of gorse and scrub obstructs our views except for the occasional break or access way to the beach. When I say beach it was really just a gentler rocky shoreline, no sand in sight. There are signs of grading on the road and we soon hear the grader ahead and then we reach him. I'm not sure if he is doing much good but the road surface seems to be worse after we have passed where he hasn't been yet. As we come to some inlets we see the first for the day of what turns out to be several boat builders beside the road. Wooden boats in various stages of construction at each yard from skeletons to nearly completed boats. Each had a long steel tube on a slope and a fire at the bottom used for steaming the wood so that it can be bent to the curve around the ribs of the hull.

We come to the large inlet at La Poza. The road remains by the shore and there are houses on the flat strip between the road and the hill behind. As we pass one small house a woman comes down to the road and greets us. I am ahead and she noticed me first but I got a bit past before turning back as the others stop. She doesn't look like a local and it turns out she is from Paris and this is her holiday home. She invites us in for coffee and we can't refuse but any hopes that she has brought the real stuff from Paris are soon dashed. She has been retired for 3 years and is slowly improving her small place, a hammer and other tools are on a table. We get by in Spanish with a little French from Frebis (who is Canadian) thrown in. She likes it here but clearly relished the chance to talk to someone not a local. She did tell us that she was robbed of money in Puerto Montt Bus station on a previous trip. We had read that it has a reputation for thieves. Half an hour later we have finished our welcome drink and we must all too soon be on our way as we have a long way to go today.

Soon we have to leave the coast for 4 kilometers or so. It's a bit of a climb and we had been looking for a place to rest and we end up stopping near Aluen by the side of the road. In front of us the road heads straight ahead with up and down but without much sign of any nice shady spot for a stop. Here at least there are bushes that we can pop behind for a necessary toilet stop. This is glacial outwash country, stony and swampy in parts, and the land looks hard to farm but there are houses on small parcels of land all along. Moving again we eventually return to the coast for another few kilometers and we get views of the Isla Queullin. After 2 ½ kilometers by the sea at Tentelhue we head more southwards up a small valley taking a couple of kilometers to cross a peninsula to get to the western coast. The road climbs again slowly but then drops down quickly to Posta Rochela.

While Alison is still up the hill thinking about buying some drink at a small store the man running it closes it for lunch. In the meantime I've gone a hundred meters or so down the hill and turned off towards the local fish factory and end up talking to a local on a bike. He confirms that we can get lunch in the place the two of us are stopped outside. We all go in the gate and before we have readied ourselves a woman comes out offering us lunch. It smells good but that was the locals lunch of Cazuela or something similar and we are offered something more touristy and ushered into the family dining room with comfy chairs to sit in. We agree on Congrio, a local fish, fried and with salad and rice. It turns out most delicious and the New Zealand fish I would compare it to would be blue cod and we have it with rice and salad. We are invited to sit a while but while the sane locals would do just that after a meal in the middle of the day we have to be moving on. We say we will be looking for a place to stay in 20 kilometers or so, she writes the name of a friend on her card and says just ask anyone for directions.

After lunch the sky seems to have lightened up a bit and the clouds broken a bit. From Posta Rochela the road follows the edge of the sea on a large bay for 4 kilometers or so then another couple before taking a turn more southeast. Here this exposed coast must get plenty of westerly wind because the coastal trees are very lopsided leaning away from the sea due to the prevailing wind. There are not so many harbors for boats along this exposed stretch apart from the estuaries of a couple of small rivers. We are glad that it's a calm day today. By the time we get this far the sky has darkened and while its still great views some of the sparkle has gone. We pass a small creek at Chauchil and over a bridge and there are some boats tied up beached on the low tide. Soon we pass another pretty creek inlet with more beached boats coming to Lleguimán. It's not quite so interesting here and after Lleguimán the road is so close to the sea that beach sand has blown through the patchy line of coastal trees and on to the road making tough going and we walk through it at times as it is too soft to ride.

There is a sign for camping just after we leave the sea but we continue on as we are expecting the promised place to stay soon. Our 20 kilometers seems to have gone by without a sign of our place to stay. At one stage we see a sign for a shop 100 meters or so up a track off the road so up we go. We buy an icecream and ask about this place we are looking for - further on we are told. Here it's a nice place with farmyard animals and we have a cup of tea after finishing the icecreams before moving on. We see a man and he tells us the place we after looking for has closed and there may be one further on.

As we get closer to Hualaihué we have to go up a little rise to cross a peninsula on which there is an airstrip. While I have crept ahead and up the rise I don't know the others have found some more instructions - the white house on the hill after the church around the corner with a sign. So after we have passed the pueblo we are now heading north east and we see a big gate ahead and it looks like it might be the place but there is no sign as had been described to us. Then out of the gate are coming two loaded cyclists. They stayed last night back in Posta Rochela where we had lunch today and have been in this place up above us and had some cake and were offered a place stay but they think they should move on. She is Swedish and has an interesting folding bike - tires maybe a bit narrow for the road that we've been on, he is Argentinian. They tell us the story that the woman who runs the place husband died and she decided not to keep the business going. So he opens the gate for us and up we go anyway. Yes the old lady has rooms but no food, fine we have plenty of the fresh bread from this morning and have had lunch, all is well.

The house has plenty of rooms and bathroom from when they ran accommodation but smells a little musty in our room - these Chilean houses have no insulation and from all the fire places and the blankets on the beds it clearly gets cold here in winter. Then begins the shower saga. The gas bottle is empty and the new one is heavy so I have to help plug it in. I figure out how but the small switch on top befuddles me. I put it the wrong way and we can't get it to work. We eventually go over to the other house set up as a standalone facility - it has a Jacuzzi tub and a huge covered Fogon area attached. But still no luck with the showers there. So we accept it's cold showers so while I look about Alison and Frebis take the plunge I look around again at how things works and unplug the gas in case I did something wrong, cursing from inside the shower. The señora had got the gas going and I've just switched it off. So I plug it in but then can't get it going again. It's not until Alison has given up I figure this switch thing on top of the bottle and get it going again. Well I get a hot shower eventually.

This place has a fantastic outlook. There is one large long room that is the kitchen dining and living area with windows looking out to the east over the inlet. While there is an electric stove there is a large free standing wood stove in the center of the kitchen area which heats as well as cooks. So as the cloud clears we watch the sun setting on the hills across the inlet where we will go tomorrow and we have our meals in the company of the Señora - I think she appreciates some company but there is the language barrier again. With her we watch the local soap opera – we did see a couple of episodes elsewhere but we will never know if the scheming Fernando gets his comeuppance. It's getting dark by ten we decide its time for bed.

What I haven't conveyed well is the number of small inlets and creeks and small rivers we pass, all with brightly painted fishing boats tied up in them. It was a very scenic ride today and well worth the deviation from the Carretera Austral. There were a couple of camping places and hospedajes along the way, possibly the best being our lunch place. It may have taken us longer and slower than keeping on Ruta 7 but then we did hear that there are road works that way as the asphalt moves further south.

Road Works: The Best of Roads and the Worst of Roads

Hualaihué To Hornopiren

www.pppg.pictures/HulhueHrnprin.htm

After a day of road works the journal for today is written in our cabaña in Hornopiren having yet had another beer (Crystal) and we have bought our tickets for the ferry south tomorrow. We had several good climbs today. The road is being rebuilt for asphalt with new bridges and many culverts being replaced. In parts the road was good and in others tough loose gravel. At 34 kilometers it wasn't a long ride today but it was a good sunny day that got hot and we were glad to reach our destination early in the afternoon.

They day dawned bright and sunny, a heavy dew was on the bikes, it hadn't clouded again during the night after last evenings clearance. We heard voices after we went to bed and there are people outside this morning. Talking to them we later learn that they are Argentinians from Bariloche and they are kayaking around down the Carretera and have stayed here in the second house. It's a rather uneventful pack up and breakfast with the Señora - it's a pity her thick Chilean accent is almost impossible for us to understand. We are off at 9:01, the sky is clear and the sun getting up so we want to get on as best we can even though we know we only have about 30 kilometers to go today.

We follow around the inlet, the tide is out again giving us a view of mud flats. We pass some locals putting seaweed out to dry in the sun on the edge of the road. After a couple of kilometers we cross a small stream and then leave the sea and gently climb up the flat valley floor across flat farmland. The road is not so dusty as it has been watered recently. There are lots of dump trucks going up and down, they are getting gravel from near the sea and taking it to the roadworks up the road where Ruta 7 is being prepared for asphalt. We stop as each truck goes by as the road isn't terribly wide.

We turn to cross a large bridge when we see a couple of loaded bikes cross from a side road ahead of us. We see they have come from a place offering hospedaje, it must be the place suggested to us yesterday afternoon. Our initial reaction from a distance was that they were the couple from yesterday but when we catch them they are a young Chilean couple from Santiago with mountain bikes. All their weight on the back with rear panniers only. We chat briefly but carry on and end up playing cat and mouse with them all day. They may have been a bit faster than us but they had a couple of punctures on the rocky road.

Having left the open farms for more forest we finally rejoin the Carretera Austral but in store for us it has climbing and dust. At the intersection a sign points back down to the residencial the young couple stayed at. We have gently climbed to 80 meters but over the next few kilometers we climb another 100 meters in a series of steep and gentle bits and some downs. We are in forested country but we can sometimes see huge stumps in partially cleared areas. There are houses dotted along the way on the less steep slopes. There is even a large pile of firewood stacked alongside the road at one place. All these houses must have a small plot of land that many are trying to turn into small farms. The huge stumps indicate clearly that at some time in the past the forest has been cut down but regrowth is battling to claim the land back.

We drop down quite steeply almost to sea level at Caleta Pichicolo but then we have another stiff but short up and down and here the road works have started in earnest. Thankfully the road is pretty straight for the next 6 kilometers but we pass new bridges and culverts and some new cuttings straightening the road. Around here we are passed by 4 fuel tankers, clearly traveling together but not in close convoy thankfully, perhaps they couldn't all cross on the previous ferry together. They are some of the biggest and dustiest trucks that pass us. We gently rise towards Termas de Pichicol. There we stop deciding whether to go to the pools but they are quite expensive and we wonder what the point of hot pools would be on a hot day. We've been going a couple of hours so we have a first lunch, or is it morning tea, at their shaded table, very nice. We decide that with 9 kilometers to go that we will carry on to Hornopiren.

We had been told that the road works end near the hot pools but this is not correct, it's a last short climb and then the road levels off. Now all this newly constructed road is mostly not too bad to ride. Often along the side is a strip that has been rolled but not driven on and is smooth if a little soft and a steep soft edge awaits

any deviation. Out in the road it hadn't had time to get corrugated even though it may have a loose chip on top. We are stopped a couple of times by works control people and sometimes we are waved on anyway. We are nearing the top when we start to get views of the snow-covered mountains to the south, we now get the feeling that we are on the Carretera Austral.

A Range Rover going the other way stops and a woman gets out, they are a Belgian couple with kids who started in Brazil and have been traveling for 3 months. We chat, she thought that we must be Germans - we are always getting this as there are so many Germans about here so it assumed we must be German also.

With only a few kilometers to go we move on and out of roadworks and the road is actually rougher if more solid. We are soon down into Hornopiren, a town that will welcome its main street being paved soon. We have decided that a cabaña will be the best for us, plenty of space and we can cook our own meal. We get one of several at a place on the main street. When we ask the woman there she advises us that we should buy our ferry tickets today so we unload our panniers into our cabin which is still being cleaned and we head down to the ferry office.

We go right past and miss the office at first but as we come back the other way it's obvious right opposite the ferry loading ramp. For anyone coming this way there are now two ferries daily, 10:30 and 12:00 heading south (at least in summer). We are told that we can't bike between the two ferries anymore and there is a van but that it is included in the price - cheating is OK when you are forced to do it! There is no sign of the 4 fuel tankers and we are not sure if they would have made the 12:00 sailing but it was either that or they had their own ferry. Once these big trucks would have gone on other ferries via Chiloé Island but we now see why there is a big push on to improve the Carretera Austral. In the coming days we realize what we have seen in the way of roadworks is just part of a much bigger effort.

So on the way back to the cabin we buy some essentials for later - a cold beer for now and a warm one to cool for later - and some cheese and vegetables as well. Alison and Frebis decide that we will have an omelet for a late lunch from the eggs that I have carried for the last several days - a good choice as they were already stirred in their shells from the rough road. So after showering and washing some dusty clothes I get on with writing our journal and they head off to find money machine. They return and report that there is a real big supermarket across the river that divides town near the Plaza. They have bought more vegetables, spinach, zucchini, tomatoes and cilantro. We needn't have scoured the small shops in this part of town for what we need. So our meal is fried smashed potatoes with some sausage I found at a shop and sautéed vegetable, a nice change from the usual fare.

It was not such an exciting or long day but we are where we need to be. At least the beer is simple and good and comes in 1 liter bottles that we needed after today's dust. The only downside of where we are is that the house next door seems to be the base for the construction company for the road improvements and dumps trucks are up and down the main road with loads of gravel to the construction areas all the time. We are all feeling the sun but dare not mention the alternative.

A Long Ferry Crossing and a Late Ride

Hornoprien to Cascadas Escondidas Camp

www.pppg.pictures/HprinCasEdidas.htm

Our first camp on the Carretera Austral, our first time with 3 in the tent. It may be a 3-man tent but that means 3 packed sardine style. Luckily the camping ground, like many others here, has some shelters so a lot of our stuff is in there. The shelter even has a table. It all makes arrangements relatively easy which is good because we arrived here relatively late. After a day of 2 ferries we had a couple of hours riding to get to this camp area so it has been a long day if not long in the saddle.

The day began with us getting up a bit after 6. Being in a cabin meant that packing wasn't going to take all that long and eggs had been bought last night for another omelet that was consumed along with the heated up leftovers of last night's potato mix. It was 9 when Alison and Frebis rolled out to go to the bank and do some extra shopping but I stayed in the cabin a few minutes longer to use our last wifi for a couple of days.

We met down at the boat ramp before 9:30, the time we had been instructed to be there. It soon became apparent why we had to be there an hour before departure when a man with a printed list of today's loading came along and we were instructed to board. There were only a couple of vehicles on at that stage but over the next hour the ferry filled up, not completely but there was not a lot of space left to fill. In the end there is another cyclist on the boat, a Japanese fellow, we later learned his name is Jin. He started at Puerto Montt and doesn't look very road wise for the trip he has started. His bike looks brand new and without a drop of oil on the chain.

There's not a lot I can write about the 4 hour ferry trip, words can't do justice to the changing views along the way of spectacular mountains and fiords. Anywhere the land was a little less steep on the way there were houses with plots of land and fishing boats on the beach. Salmon and mussel farms occurred with regularity. The light with some hazy high cloud wasn't the best for photography but I was playing the camera-toting tourist that I once swore that I'd never be. Sadly my unfamiliarity with my new camera meant a lot of shots were unusable.

The Carretera Austral does continue past Hornopiren along the coast for 34 kilometers south to Pichanco, sometimes cut into the near sheer rock faces of the fiord. We saw some trucks running along it stirring up dust. The road ends before a side fiord heading back into the mountains but at its end there was a huge amount of work at what looked like a new harbor under construction (this is confirmed by satellite imagery taken a few weeks after we passed). I'm speculating that this would cut just over an hour off the ferry trip and that would be significant in terms of the possible number of trips each day. There are certainly plans to add more road in this section and eliminate the second ferry of our day.

As we head south we get distant views of Volcán Michimahuida near Chaiten in the distance. It grows as we near our destination, finally we are nearing the ferry ramp at Leptepu. With about ten minutes to spare we are up on the top deck just outside the door to the bridge watching our arrival when one of the crew comes to us and explains the system for getting us and our bikes across the 9 kilometer gap to the next ferry. He or us approaches people in the twin cab camionetas on the boat to get them to take our bikes and then there will be a van to take us. We have been talking with a German brother and sister who have hired one of these and so we tell them about this and it's fine for Alison and I. There is also another couple with a camioneta that Frebis and the Japanese cyclist get their bikes on. It's all very frantic as we unload panniers from the bikes and try to fit the everything into the tray of the truck that is not really big enough.

I'm still tying our bikes on when I'm told the van is waiting for us and it's time to go. The van wants to get to the other end first for practical reasons of meeting the ferry coming and which we will go out on. So off we go, our driver racing like a man possessed but again the road has been improved very recently and the surface is good. We start meeting other vehicles, most with their lights on so that they can be seen in the clouds of dust, at one stage we stop because of zero visibility. We can see why they don't want cyclists on this stretch of road at this time with traffic madly going both ways. We arrive a few minutes later at Theuelche and then

the trucks with our bikes arrive. They were at the back of the ferry so clearly some marshaling was done on unloading vehicles in anticipation of the loading order on the next ferry as there is not a lot of space at this end to allow reordering of loading traffic. The next ferry is smaller than the first and it's clear why two sailings are needed here for each one of the big ferry. It clearly makes sense to keep the bikes on the trucks for this next stretch. This ferry leg is only a bit over half an hour and we see a smaller double ended ferry going back the other way as we cross.

Now there are plans, or perhaps I should say plans to start planning to build a road up around the head of this bit of the fiord and then the ferry would no longer be needed. That would mean a new section of the Carretera Austral. There are also plans to build bits of road south from Pichanco with maybe a couple of short ferry hops. The ferry rides have been pleasant and part of the adventure of the trip but I think that I would enjoy cycling along these fiords. Perhaps there would be camping spots by the sea. Maybe we will have to come back one day.

We get to Caleta Gonzalo and are all unloaded. We offer a quick thanks to those who carried our bikes. All the traffic is off and the Japanese cyclist starts off, the road has a little climb for maybe 50 meters at first and he walks it. That doesn't seem like someone who came from Puerto Montt to Honopiren in a day – or maybe it is and he is tired. We know there is a café here that sells cake and I pop in quickly while the others are finishing loading the bikes but don't see anything exiting. Before we can all go in a young woman comes out of the visitor center and tells us she works for the park. Here we are the northern beginning of Parque Pumalín owned by American Millionaire Doug Tomkins. She has good English as she worked as a flight attendant for 3 years and has lived in Canada. She tells us that there is a good camping place 15 kilometers on - and not at about 6 as I thought. When we say we are going down the Carretera she also tells us of a new offshoot of the park just north of Cochrane but it will be a bit of a diversion from our route – but they are likely to have hot showers there.

Finally we go into the café for a cup of tea and now there is this sort of pear cheese cakey thing uncut on the counter. We are tempted with a cup of tea and it was quite nice. I suppose they make their business in the high season and out of their cabins but there's not much today. Maybe they made money out of the northbound traffic waiting to depart.

It's after 4:30 by the time we are looking to be back on the road. We see the small ferry coming in and think we might as well wait until its load clears the road. It turns out to be only the one truck and trailer unit carrying road building supplies that was too long for the other ferry and in need of this smaller but double ended ferry as it couldn't back or turn around in any of the space available. Off we go on for what is 9 kilometers of climbing, not continuous of course. The road is pretty good except for the short steep bits where many wheels have ground a loose rutted surface. We soon come across a nearly completed new bridge. In the end we lose count of the number (about 6) of new bridges in decreasing degrees of completeness that we come across, the last being just the abutments under construction. At these the road is really bad as temporary deviations have been made of any old river material and we have to navigate large rocks in the road.

It takes over an hour and a half with stops to get to the high point of a saddle that takes us into the next valley. On the way down we decide to look at some old cypress trees at the Los Alerces walk recommended to us earlier. The story of the cypress trees is that they were once very common in Chile. The Spanish settlers found them to be excellent timber and they were milled. They were used a lot for the shingles we see on the roofs and walls of older houses and buildings. Now there are very few left in places like this and they are protected and only rarely allowed to be cut down. Somehow these massive examples survived milling in a small clump.

Another two kilometers and it's 7 by the time we reach camp. It's a good campsite with shelters by each tent area. The grass is nicely mowed and trimmed paths to each shelter. Jin, our Japanese cycling boatmate, was there already with his tent set up and was fixing his bike. The toilets even have cold showers. The problem is that the interior of the building is painted dark green and the windows are small so to have a shower you have to have the door open in order to let enough light in to have any chance of seeing what you

are doing.

We decide to cook the Ravioli given to us by Sara, the English cyclist, back at Casa Perla. By the time we are all sorted it's time to squeeze 3 of us into our 3 person tent - luckily we can leave all our panniers in the shelter for the night.

It was a day in which there were many spectacular views from the boat. I spent far too much time taking photographs but as I only got my new camera a few weeks before I left I'm still learning to drive at and for some reason many were out of focus. The light was hazy so none would have been great quality.

We See Just What a Volcano Can Do

Cascadas Escondidas Camp to Chaiten

www.pppg.pictures/CasEdidasChaiten.htm

The luxury of another cabin for the night. After another day of hills and a long stretch on some freshly graded miserable gravel we settled on a cabin. For three of us it is just as economical as a hostel or hospedaje where we pay per person. Alison and I have the main bedroom and Frebis has a bed in the main kitchen/living area. The bathroom is ensuite to our bedroom so that does require some management. In spite of the devastation of the eruption of Volcan Chaiten a few years ago this corner of the town was spared and you would hardly know anything happened here. It's only a few hundred meters down the road to a different story however with volcanic ash over a meter deep burying cars and houses. Thankfully we were here in time to get this unit as the place filled up a bit as evening came. After our first night camping the tent was wet so we are glad to be here.

The night wasn't that cold in spite of an occasional drift of snow still remaining in gullies just a few hundred meters above us. It had clouded over and the forecast from yesterday was for morning rain. As the sky lightened a few fine spots of rain could be heard on the tent - but rain always sounds loud in the tent. It turned to light rain but not for long and by the time we made first emergence from the tent it wasn't raining at all. The clouds were thick above us but thankfully showing signs of breaking up. As I cook breakfast the rain does however come back and settles in for a while. We are grateful for our shelter.

So we wait around for a while and decide that we should do one of the waterfall walks, it's only really drizzle and almost dry under the trees. After some procrastination off we go to the first waterfall along a track with rustic wooden steps and stairs although they wouldn't meet health and safety requirements at home and need some repair. Under mossy trees it is probably more beautiful in the rain and the track is worth it for the walk. Not that the waterfall isn't impressive in it's own little way but there are many waterfalls in the world but not so many tracks like this. Back at camp the drizzle is lightening but we decide to cook a cup of soup each and have it with some bread. The rain is almost stopped and we pull down the tent, the fly is wet but it's possible to fold the tent only mildly damp.

It's 11 before we roll out on the road with our rain gear on although it's only light drizzle. We start with a little uphill but then it's fairly level and a bit over a kilometer on we take off our rain gear. The joy of the rain is that there is no dust. Another couple of kilometers and we see blue sky ahead. We're not sure if it's coming our way or has been there all the time. Soon we begin yet another climb up to a saddle to take us out of this valley to the next. The road has been very good smooth shingle, a few bad spots but otherwise good smooth running. We stop on a bridge on the way up as a large dump truck passes us going uphill and out of the bridge is a very steep bit. This small section is hardly more than the length of the truck but his wheels bump away in the corrugations and slip adding to the mess and we see why those very steep bits are so bad due to the heavy construction traffic. Below us is Lago Negro glimpsed through trees and just before the top is an excellent view of the lake and a little shelter. The trees have actually been kept cut down so that we can see the view.

Then it's a downhill towards Lago Blanco, a just reward for our climb, still on good road apart from the bits on the approaches to newly reconstructed bridges. Then begins a gentle uphill on a long straight road, it looks flat but is too hard going for a flat road. We then reach a double deck bridge with a new one built above the old of which the abutment has partially lost it's footing after the floods following the eruption of Volcan Chaiten a few years back. Here we stop on a side track heading down to the river for a bite to eat and a drink. We have a 3 kilometers straight of gentle downhill to the next bridge and on the way there is a sign for camping. We think that there must be a toilet down there then but the sign doesn't say how far. We go down anyway and after a kilometer decided that we might as well turn back. We later find that we were most of the way there. Chileans just don't bother with signs like we do! Back on the road we get glimpses of Volcán Michimahuida in the clouds up the valley to our east.

Thus far the road has remained good but over the bridge we are on the lower northern flanks of Volcan Chaiten and above us the trees are dead and gaunt stripped of leaves from the eruption. Just below the bridge we hear a chainsaw, there's a huge pile of logs washed down by the eruption and they have been collected from the river and lined up and some men are cutting one up. A bit later a camioneta passes us with a chainsaw hewn beam on the back.

For the next few kilometers the eruption has swept gravel and trees across the road and while cleared now the surface is still rough. To add to our misery it has all been freshly graded with fresh loose chip over the whole road. In some spots we can find a good line and others not. At times down near the edge of the road where large truck wheels have run it is smooth but can be soft. At one point I get too close to the edge and take what could be called a semi voluntary dismount from a slowly moving bike as my wheels slide off the edge. It's a warning to be careful as it's tempting to make the most of our downhill but unexpected bigger gravel is dangerous at speed.

The worst of this section is only 3 kilometers or so long but in total we had 15 kilometers of freshly graded road and in that we had to climb up and down considerably. The steep bits were just too much to ride all the time for all of us, possibly they would have been fine if not for the fresh grading - and we did see the grader.

We get to one last high point and see the sea to the west. We stop to enjoy the view and I notice that one of my front pannier clips is nearly falling off. It takes a few minutes to fix and I thank my luck that we stopped before it fell off and I lost the fittings. It's downhill to Santa Barbara where the road splits and runs either side of the airstrip - I guess it was the best bit of flat land around. We get encouraging cheers from some of the workers at the terminal as we pass.

Then as the road rejoins at the other end of the airport we see we have sealed road ahead - and a small store selling ice creams. We go in to make our deserved purchase and a man there tells us it's 9 kilometers to go to Chaiten. After the eruption of Volcan Chaiten there were plans to move the town of Chaiten to here but of that there is no sign. What that man didn't tell us is that it is over 100 meters we need to climb - and it begins very steeply - but after that it's on ongoing gentle climb - but at least it's all on seal and so much easier than the gravel that we have been on. Along the way each side of the road there are small lots of land carved into the forest, some with new houses and some not. Then we can see Chaiten in the distance it's downhill and almost to the waters edge and then a couple of small ups - the road seems mean to our tired legs - and then we are at Chaiten at 6:00. It has been a surprisingly long day.

We go around the first block and back to the information center on the foreshore. The others ask about places to stay while I check out the Cabañas across the road. Again for three of us the Cabañas work out the best deal. More like a small motel that we are used at home than the rustic cabins we have had previously but a separate unit. We are first in for the day but the others fill up by the end of the evening. We had spotted a restaurant around the corner, virtually over the fence behind our unit. A bottle of Chilean wine and the choice some Chicken, steak or fish with chips, salad optional - we all enjoyed a nice steak.

The cloud cleared but it was not as scenic a day as some. The enjoyment diminished by the newly graded road and we didn't manage a very good average speed due to the road surface. Plenty of climbing and while starting earlier might have been better it wasn't too hot in the middle of the day and the evening chill.

Time to Rest the Legs

Chaiten day off

www.pppg.pictures/Chaiten.htm

On awakening this morning it was decided that we should take a rest day in Chaiten. We need a bit of bike maintenance and we are all a bit tired after the 15 kilometers of freshly graded road we had yesterday. Our Picnic Sunday in Puerto Montt also was supposed to be more of a catch up day that we never got.

So the morning was spent with shopping by some and some bike maintenance and some catching up on the journal for me. It turned out that there is a hardware store in town that has a large selection of bike parts - including wheels. We were able to get some new brake pads for Frebis, the steep hills had already taken a toll on those on her bike.

Before lunch we did a bit of a tour of town. In 2008 Volcan Chaiten put out lots of ash over a period of weeks and that filled the river that ran behind the town and out into the harbor. With rain and snowmelt it then cut a new course through the middle of the town and deposited ash throughout most of the rest of town. People were evacuated and less than a quarter of the original population of around 4000 have now returned. So the town has empty lots and buildings left to run down. It's an interesting combination of abandonment and overgrown and cleared areas against life and new buildings. The river that carved a new channel cutting the town in half has had its banks lined with large rocks to keep it in its new channel and the plans to move the town up the road seem to have evaporated. In some ways it's reminiscent of parts of our own city of Christchurch after our earthquakes 3 years ago.

We then found a place advertising cazuela for lunch. They had different varieties on the menu at the door but when we went it we found that today they only had fish so we tried it - simple but tasty. Then in the afternoon I had a play with my cameras cleaning the lenses and filters for the Fuji X10. I went down to the port to experiment with some panorama photos and there was Jin from our campsite the other night. Somehow he had managed to get a German hitchhiker to hold his camera and film him coming up the road from the port and talking something into the camera. Then after this fellow was released from duties I was asked to say something into the camera from my bike. Jin had written some English for the Japanese he wanted me to say - I recognized "Patagonia" - so somewhere there on youtube or whatever you will find me speaking some form of Japanese for a few seconds - I have no idea what I'm saying or how good I am at it.

I carried on with catching up with my journal in the afternoon while Alison and Frebis found supermarkets, the panaderia and a Café. Wondering why they hadn't returned not knowing of the café discovery I decided to take a break and I went for a walk out on the beach. I took off my sunglasses to use the optical viewfinder on my camera and didn't put them back on immediately. It was after I'd walked a bit that I realized that they weren't in my pocket. After a moment of panic I decided to return to where I had taken the photo, luckily beside a recognizable log on an otherwise large beach, and there they were on the ground. It was a reminder that when you are away from the chance of finding replacements of anything essential that you need to be careful.

When I got back I discovered that somehow Alison and Frebis out shopping had managed to find a premixed bottle of Pisco Sour. We had it with our home cooked evening meal for which the ingredients of vege, potato and sausage had been gleaned from the local supermarkets.

There Nothing Like an Easy Sunday Ride Starting in a Café

Chaiten to Park Pumalin Camping Grande

www.pppg.pictures/ChaitenPumalin.htm

Tonight we are camping in a large mowed official camping area referred to as Camping Grande in Parque Pumalin. Mowed grass is a rarity here in Chile but when the park is owned by a US multimillionaire I guess we shouldn't expect things to be as usual. We are next to a large shelter with bench seats and an equally large table. We have been able to spread out the contents of our panniers around us and even the bikes will have a roof over them tonight. It's a bit of a walk to the shower and toilet block where the water tap is but that isn't too much of a problem. The block is very nice and clean and newly painted but the dark paint makes it a bit unnecessarily dark inside in spite of it having skylights. We are grateful however that it's not as bad as the block back where we stayed at Cascadas Escondidas. It is only a cold shower but a cold shower is better than no shower when you are a cyclist so we had a quick rinse before it got too cold in the afternoon. We are not the only ones here tonight. There is an American family in a camper van but the area is large with several shelters and with many bushes for shelter so they are quite a way off. We arrived relatively early and set up the tent and had a bit of a rest before heading on up the road to the higher camping area that is still not fully repaired after the eruption from Volcan Chaiten. Setting out this morning I was still confused a little about what we would expect here, there were some photos misplaced here on Google earth of the Termas Amarillo hot pools that are actually in the next valley. Now we know that those hot pools are for tomorrow so any thoughts we might have had this morning about a hot pool and a soak tonight are disappointed.

It's easy to start the day from a bed in a cabin and we were up after 7 and had an omelet with leftovers from last night for breakfast, the joys of having our own kitchen. We were in no rush to organize for departure as the bakery was not opening until 10:30, this being Sunday. Expecting to be camping for possibly several nights we need to stock up on bread. We had a leisurely pack and Frebis decided on a plan of action for when she was to leave us. A quick response to an email from a hostel on Coyhaique convinced her to fly out from there back to Puerto Montt so she booked a ticket online. So it was after 10:30 when we arrived at the bakery for bread and empanadas. Then it was just on 11 when we arrived at the café that Alison and Frebis had found yesterday. It is just a block from the bridge on the way south out of town. The owner had told them she would be open at 11 but, well, it is Sunday morning after all. It wasn't open but the owner must have heard our voices and she peered out from the upstairs window where she lived. She was soon down for her first customers of the day – after all there are probably not that many customers to be had so you don't want to miss any chances. So we had some Lemon meringue pie and the best Chilean coffee (which unfortunately isn't up to Alison's usual standard) to start the day. Consequently it was about 11:45 before we were heading out of town. We weren't that worried about the tardy departure as we knew it was an easy sealed ride to El Amarillo.

It was a good flat sealed road out of town, gently uphill and it wasn't until we stopped that we realized we had a 20 kph tail wind and that was why the going seemed so good. When you are traveling at wind speed things always seem to go well. About 5 kilometers from town just off the road there was a house and sheds with a huge number of bikes outside, why so many? Maybe they are all collected from the devastated town after the eruption, I guess we will never know.

At about 10 kilometers from town there was a sign for Cabañas beside the road and a young fellow was waiting on the side of the road. We stop and strike up conversation. He works in Valdivia and is heading home to Coyhaique for Christmas. He was waiting for the bus from Chaiten to go by. We talked and among other things he told us there was nothing much at Raul Marin (60km out to sea on the side road from La Junta) where we thought we might go if we had time. As we were talking we see the bus in the distance and by the time we have waved it down it was a couple of hundred meters further up the road. He had to run down the road to catch up with it waiting for him.

It was a great road for majestic scenery and we stopped often for a look and take photographs. At one stage we spotted a portaloos on the side of the road. The water in the ditch beside the road was eating into the

new road which was almost a causeway over the flat swampy ground and some works were under way putting rocks in wire baskets to repair the road edge and prevent further washout. Being Sunday there was no one working. It was a welcome sight after coffee and not to be passed up and the women folk took the opportunity to use it. You learn to never let a chance go by. Being a man I was able to jump down into the ditch for discretion and not have to wait my turn.

We arrived at El Amarillo a bit before 2:00. We just had to get the camera out for photos of the snow capped mountains around us and the first views of distant Volcán Michinmahuida as we approached town. We didn't know there was more to come. The scenery is just fantastic around here with mountains covered in icefields and glaciers.

As we had been approaching town a small plane was high overhead. By the time we passed the collection of houses and a couple of shops that makes the town and passed the road going south we will be taking tomorrow it had now landed. By the time we have reached the park entrance those in the plane have disembarked and walked across to it. It's an older man and a younger man and woman. They are interested in why we are cycling and the older man with the American accent has climbed Mt Cook in New Zealand. He seems to know a lot about the park and says he lives here. I ask if he is associated with it and the younger man tell me he is the park owner (Doug Tompkins). If we weren't unassuming New Zealanders we would have asked for photo under the park sign I guess. He tells us it's 6 kilometers to the Camping Grande and another 6 to the Glacier views camping. Such information is useful as there doesn't seem to be any map about.

So we set off up the road, it's loose rounded river gravel and miserable to ride on with the slight uphill. It's easier to ride on the mowed grass beside the road. Doug had told us that the road would improve and about a kilometer in it starts to get better as promised. We are passed the worst and see a nice spot with a tree for shade beside the road and we have first lunch of the empanadas we bought at the bakery back in Chaiten. We've been going a while longer when Doug and his companions pass us in a Camioneta and he offers a few words of encouragement and advice. We pass one camping ground area with a shelter but know that we are to keep going and we pass the road off to the Glacier views area. We are nearly to the campsite when they are coming back down and he says encouragingly that it's only a couple of small hills to go - which turns out to be true, so often people in cars have a different perception of hills.

It's a huge mowed area with patches of bushes, some shelters and a toilet block with showers, somewhat better lit than those at our previous camp site, although dark painted the high ceiling is white with skylights.

We made our late lunch, put the tent up and rested a while even falling asleep in the tent. It was quite hot inside in the mid afternoon sun. Just before 6 it was starting to cool a bit so we decided to head up to the glacier view. In the beginning it was quite steep and the road surface less than ideal riding with loose scoria from 1-3 kilometers and then a good bit then it was new loose river gravel for a couple of kilometers. It looked like it had been reconstructed after the Chaiten eruption as if the old road had been lost to the new river bed. In one section the trees were dead and gaunt due to the eruption and there was clearly fresh ash from then.

We arrived at the camping area but continued on the road around it to the far end before entering. At the as yet unfinished camping area there was a lookout, a new toilet block was a concrete shell under construction. Clearly from the ash under the bushes about 15 cm of ash has been removed from much of the area and grass re-sown. Hay bales were spread about to assist grass reestablishing. We spent some time there but now the sun was getting low and it was time to head back. A family came and went in a camioneta while we were there. We headed back across the open area past the building to rejoin the road for our return. At one of the buildings under construction I saw 3 4 inch nails left behind rusting Now often I wished I had one or more of these to hold up or rope as a washing line so I slipped them in my bar bag. One was to prove must useful some weeks later.

It was much easier downhill for the return and we were back after 30 minutes. I pushed on ahead of the ladies and had our meal underway by they time the arrived only a few minutes later. After having our meal of

rice and tuna at 8:30 it was getting dark as the sun was sinking behind our hills. It was getting cold by 9:30 as we headed towards bed for our second sardine night in the tent.

Hot Pools and an Unexpected Bonus

Park Pumalin to Termas Amarillo and Lago Yelcho

www.pppg.pictures/PumalinSthLagoYelcho.htm

This entry was started in somewhat incredulous circumstances looking out the door across the deck to an incredible view of the sun setting on Lago Yelcho. After a day of ups and downs we found ourselves looking for a spot to pitch the tent along the shores of Lago Yelcho. We had gone further than we wanted and didn't know what was coming. We passed a gate and down there was what looked like the possibility of some flattish ground near some buildings. We attracted a man's attention and asked if we could camp, the ladies were tired I explained. He said yes and went to get the key to the gate and we were let in. However he then shows us into the house and there are empty bunks with mattresses there and we can stay there. The problem is no water. We would have to go to the other house for water. OK, the ladies prefer water. So off we go past one place, the cocinarea, kitchen building, for when the men are working here, and then up a small rise to the other house. It has water and he asks if we would prefer to stay there - well yes of course. So the story is that he is the caretaker for this defunct salmon farm. When the salmon farm was running this is where the workers stayed. We discover that the water has only just broken at his house and will be fixed tomorrow, He is Jaime from Chiloe. This house we are in has stuff in the fridge and there are potatoes in the cupboard that have sprouts several feet long and the onions on top of the fridge have sprouts a foot long. One room looks occupied but we haven't heard that story yet. As he said it's Christmas, what incredible luck. We have invited him to eat with us. When the day began we could not have expected this...

It was a lot colder overnight in the tent than we expected - and the prediction is for some colder nights over Christmas - yesterday may have been the summer solstice but it doesn't feel like it's summer at night. We were up about 6:30 with the sun, it's a clear sky but the clouds coming from the south cover us before the sun is over the hills to the east. Through the cloud the sun warms us a bit and we have to decide whether to take advantage of a cloudy day to make the climb to Santa Lucia or go the short distance to the Termas (hot pools) and stay there a night in the tent.

We decided to go to the Termas but we did have a plan B of going on to Puerto Cardenas, the end of the sealed road south. The girl in the information kiosk in Chaiten had said it was no longer possible to camp overnight at the Termas but you never know how reliable some information can be. So a bit after 9 we rolled out of camp, so much faster downhill that going up. Even the last kilometer of gravelly road to the entrance didn't seem anywhere near as bad as yesterday even though it was hard to discern the grade. We then went back the short distance into the local store to stock up on supplies. Then to the Termas, the first 500m up the hill were pretty miserable but after 2 kilometers the grade eased off and we were there in 5 kilometers. In spite of the climb it was a very pretty forested road. A tatty sign confirmed that overnight camping was no longer allowed - toilet reasons - however there is a new block of toilets and I can only speculate that this problem will be resolved soon.

It was well after 11 by now, I had a quick bite to eat (is that first lunch by now) and unrolled the tent fly to dry as it was still wet earlier when it was rolled up. Then I went to the pool, one small one and then a larger family pool a bit cooler. By the time the others joined me it was time, according to my stomach, for 2nd lunch so I went off and cooked a small omelette and by the time everything was ready the others arrived from the pool. Back in the pools after eating there was a local family in the main pool, Gladys with her student children Bruno and Tammy, with which we managed some conversation but we mainly had the place to ourselves. We set ourselves a target departure time of 4 but in the end the morning clouds moved on and it was warming up. We had most stuff packed again and had had sufficient of the pools and with the warmth the horse flies came to life and had found us so it was 3:30 when we rolled out the gate. Back to El Amarillo was so much faster downhill.

Back on the pavement we were now heading south and we are blessed with a tail wind again. Some small gradients to climb but most of the way is level with long straights as we follow Rio Yelcho to its source at Lago Yelcho. The views ahead and looking back of snow covered mountains can't be described and photos

can't do them justice, the light and clouds inhibited good photos. In the end you just have to be here and wonder if those racing by in cars fully appreciated the scenery around them. Before Puerto Cardenas we had a climb with only a few easy bits for respite but eventually we get to the top and roll down into Puerto Cardenas. It is virtually nothing, no shops, a sign says Cabanas 300m ahead from the turn in the road.

We go down and the road turns to a narrow track and there are these wonderfully expensive looking cabins - a sign says temporarily closed. We ask a fellow doing some building and he confirms that they are closed until the 27th, 3 days away. The holiday season doesn't start here until a few days after Christmas. On the lake edge below the track to the cabins is the rotting remains of a ferry that used to ply the lake. It is a reminder that before the Carretera Austral these lakes were the highways in many places and this place really was a port. The lakes were substantial challenges to road builders with their steep glacial sides rising up to snow capped mountains.

There had been a sign back a little for cabins as we finished rolling down the hill but we resolved to amble on until we found a suitable wild camping site. Back on the road we cross the huge suspension bridge at the outlet of Lago Yelcho and the road turns to ripio, this we knew, it's wide but dusty as cars and trucks roll by. It's not that bad, recently graded of course but enough traffic has made the wheel lines on most of it. We are tiring and afternoon is turning to evening and so it is that after about 3 kilometers we see this likely spot where we are...

We make ourselves at home in our house and have a shower. One of the dogs is hanging around in search of company. When Jaime comes up to eat with us we find out that the Salmon farm has what I think were problems with permission to farm in the lake but in May it will be running again. There will be up to 27 people in the lower house and 4 in ours. Ours is the administrator's house, the occupied room has an ensuite and a double bed, there is another bathroom for the rooms we are using which each have 2 beds. Another small room has just room for a bed and a shower in the ensuite. It turns out Jaime will have a month in his home on Chiloe in February when his companiero who occupies this house will be here. Jamie is normally the chef and he turns up with makings of a salad, our efforts seem so pitiful to serve a chef. When everyone is here he has an assistant and someone to do the washing. He even asks if we want to stay another night, it is Christmas Eve and that is the big time in these Spanish countries, as Christmas day is to us. He has turkey, he will have some friends coming but with sadness we must continue, we have a deadline to reach Coyhaique.

So rather than going to bed with the sun we have electricity to charge things up and light to keep us busy and I can do some journal writing.

A Big Climb

Lago Yelcho to Santa Lucia

www.pppg.pictures/LagoYelchoStaLucia.htm

It's 4:30 by the time we are ensconced in a cabin in Santa Lucia having been across the road to the little shop to spend a small fortune on consumable liquids of various forms and flavors to boost us after today's ride. It is Christmas Eve after all. Not a long day today but we didn't get much flat before a big climb began. Along the road as we were climbing a woman hopped out of a car that had passed us and came back to us to tell us of her cabins - her - it's always the women not wanting to miss a chance on a customer - so indeed we are in her cabins just off the main street. Santa Lucia is big enough to have two streets parallel to the main street and some joining streets - and two shops. When the day started we knew it wasn't far to Santa Lucia but that there was a bigish climb to challenge us...

The day dawned with low cloud less than 100m over Lago Yelcho so we didn't wake particularly early and weren't in a great hurry to meet the 9:00 departure time that we had told Jaime. By 9:30 we are getting ready and the cloud is lifting. Maybe we should have been on the ball earlier after all. We went down to the lake shore before leaving and Jamie turned up. He asked us again if we wanted to stay another night as we chatted as we were making our way to the gate but our timetable calls us. It would have been nice to experience a Chilean Christmas. He unlocked the gate to let us out and we were on the road again.

Along the road we couldn't help but keep stopping and admiring the view, changing as it was with every corner. After about 3 kilometers it was time to leave Lago Yelcho. Here there is a bit of a flash fishing lodge but we hadn't thought it our kind of place last night although we have read of other cyclists camping here. We now start gently climbing up the river valley towards our pass for the day. The road wasn't all that bad along here, wide and while graded not so long so it was OK to pick a line and amble along.

After about 9 kilometers we came to Ventisquero (glacier) Yelcho. A fellow was there who would guide people up to the glacier and he told us that there was a good viewpoint 10 minutes walk up the track. So off we went. There are some numbers on big plaques on some trees and at number 5 was a reasonable view but it wasn't quite 10 minutes so we carried on and at 7 there was a good view. If there are better views without going all the way (1 hour) we didn't go on to find them. Back at the road we decided to have lunch before continuing. There were some picnic tables under the trees. There is a Scottish fellow there who is traveling by car and we talk exchanging experiences for a few minutes. It was a pleasant spot not far from the river so we took our time knowing we had a good climb in front of us.

On the road again and it was a couple of kilometers of flat running on a good road before our first short climb. There it was that the road deteriorated to being covered in loose round gravel. When we reached the top of that climb it improved again and was pretty good for the next 7 or so kilometers to the top - well packed gravel mostly smooth except that there are some really steep places. It was a climb of steeper bits and then gentler bits, for every bridge of a side stream there seemed a steep approach, the Chileans have made their new bridges to last, high above each river.

The day is warming up and the Tobanos - horse flies - are coming out. They don't like the cool days but they are out today. They bite and are a real nuisance. It's hard to brush them away when moving. The only one that I got had his teeth stuck in my cycling glove trying to bite me through it and paid the price as I squashed him. On one section we have stopped and a car goes by and then just past us it stops and the woman I told you of gets out and comes back. As well as telling us of her cabins she says it's only a little bit to go to the top - Ha - she's in a car. It actually takes another 3 kilometers but to be fair the grade eases off a bit and I can cycle in low gear slowly but the others walk the steeper bits. Finally the power lines following the road go one way ahead and the road goes right up the valley for a switchback and the top is near. We are grateful, this is one of the biggest single climbs of the trip.

At the top itself it looks like the road through the saddle has been lowered recently perhaps saving us one last push. Over the top we are treated to a spectacular view of the way ahead along the valley of the Rio Frio

that will take us south. But from the top the road itself has been recently upgraded and is wide and covered in loose gravel. Mostly we can follow the wheel lines but this side is actually steeper than the side we came up and there are far more corrugations than where we came up. It is all rolling downhill apart from a couple of short ups and the problem is keeping our speed down so as not to shake ourselves to pieces or fall off. In fact it's all down until a few hundred meters from Santa Lucia with the very last bit seeming the steepest.

Arriving at the northern start of town is the road off to Futalafeu and Argentina, many cyclists join or leave the Carretera Austral here. I'm glad to have done the Northern section down to here however and this route has its appeal but will have to be for another day. In town after a couple of blocks we see the signs for the cabins and find them but there a small sign gives the street address of the owner. We don't see any street names so that doesn't help us much. We ask around and are told we need to go to the casa grande (big house) - the opposite side from the cabins of the grassy block that passes for a town square here. So here we are. There is another cabin with a Chilean family with young children in it. Our cabin is a bit smaller than our previous ones and a bit more expensive. Frebis has the bed upstairs in what could be called a mezzanine level in the peak of the roof and we are downstairs. As I write this we haven't resolved the hot water problem in spite of a change of gas bottle.... Later the gas is fixed and all is well.

Alison and Frebis go shopping and come back with pork chops for our Christmas Eve meal, there's talk of bacon and eggs for breakfast tomorrow! So as you were all sitting down to Christmas dinner at home in New Zealand we are tucking into a Christmas eve dinner of rice, pork chops, and mixed vege (corn, beans, peas red pepper and NO CARROTS). No lamb and mint sauce for us, and we couldn't find any potatoes in the two shops in town. No Kiwi favorites of pavlova or trifle for dessert but we do have a liter of icecream of a flavor that resembles our New Zealand hokey pokey and a Chilean Christmas cake - not as fruity or spicy as ours but maybe with the icecream we can pretend it's Christmas pudding. Add in a can of fruit salad and it's almost like at home. A liter of very very smooth Chilean red wine will help the evening. And when it is eaten we will cruise town for the Christmas light display. Well the Casa Grande of the owners of our abode for the night have their front lawn festooned with lights and plug boxes in a way that would send an electrical inspector into palpitations so we will have a look when it gets dark.

And so it was that we went for a walk after dark. While the Casa Grande had the biggest show in town (it is the only 2 storey house in town) it was not the only one with lights, several other houses had some lights outside and several more had shows in their windows. Heading back along the street coming towards us was a cyclist with light on his helmet. He asked us about food and a place for his tent - we couldn't help, this town isn't big enough for a restaurant, or at least one open at this time. After parting we realize that we knew he was a cyclist but he didn't know that we were.

With Bacon and eggs for breakfast I don't think this all bodes well for an early start tomorrow for La Junta and we may end up camping along the way.

The Day I Walked 11 Kilometers of the Carretera Austral

Santa Lucia – Hummingbird camp

www.pppg.pictures/StaLuciaXmas.htm

Today's entry was written, or at least started, in the tent at a small clearing just off the road just downstream from the bridge at Puente Amancay, about 18.5 kilometers south from Santa Lucia. While I may have traveled more than that one way and another our progress hasn't been great. It all has to do with Alison forgetting to put her thermos on her bike before we left our cabin this morning. The day started with hopes for a larger distance but....

Christmas day! We awoke and started getting up about 7:00. I walked out our door and the Argentinian cyclist we met last night was packing his tent in the grassy plaza just opposite our cabins. He was traveling lightweight on a mountain bike and was lashing his pack on his rack with some rope on above 2 small panniers. He needed some water so I invited him to get some at our cabin. He had come from Argentina yesterday and only had 8 days. His thick Argentinian accent meant that we couldn't communicate that well but we wished each other well for our travels.

A decadent breakfast, bacon and eggs and with no butter it seemed excusable to fry our bread a little in the bacon fat - I haven't had fried bread in decades. That was followed by the remainder of our fruit salad and icecream. The day had started a bit cloudy and with a long haul in front of us a good breakfast was appreciated and cooler riding hoped for as we expect road works ahead. At least we start with a tailwind at our backs even if it is a bit chill.

Out of Santa Lucia we hit more new road, no currently active road works (well they are all on holiday for Christmas) but the surface of the recently built road varied greatly. We took the internal road in town before going out on the highway and consequently failed to see the sign that said 32 kilometers of road works ahead but whether we had seen it or not we still had to travel it. We hadn't gone far when there was a power pole in the middle of the road - testament to the recentness of the road reconstruction and realignment. The first 6 kilometers or so weren't too bad as it was gently down hill or level and wheel lines had been worn in the gravel. We noted a sign by the river saying camping and pointing off the road, had we known yesterday maybe we could have continued on to here.

We then struck a couple of kilometers of up and down a bits where the river cut to our side of the valley and here the reconstruction hadn't been completed so we were on the old road surface which wasn't so bad. There were several large new bridges under construction and some smaller culverts being upgraded. There were farms beside the road. At one the fences were made from short sections of tree trunks, maybe a meter in diameter and 1 ½ meters long upended. These were rotting away indicating that they had been cut many years ago. There were some places where land was being recleared from regenerating forest with smoldering fires, signs of progress for the farmers. About here there was a larger gravel processing plant and what looks like an asphalt making machine so maybe the reconstruction is a prelude to the asphalt. (Postscript: indeed a few weeks later this plant was working and asphaltting of the road had begun from here.)

Off the road under some trees near a farm house a tractor was parked and a fire burning. Next to the fire we could see a lamb carcass splayed out on the metal rack that they use here for roasting. It is Christmas day after all and no doubt a family will be dining well later – no such luck for us however.

We then had some ups and down and just as we reach the bridge over the Rio Frio a grader passed us driving our way down the road. On the other side of the bridge was one particularly nasty climb as we crossed to the other side of the valley. The loose gravel on the road seemed several inches thick and there seemed no good route but we were able to push up the side of the road easily ours weren't the first bike tires here. Another couple of kilometers and we came to a bridge and some works where a crew were working to clear a persistent slip on the side of the road across on the other side of the river - this is where the grader that passed us earlier was heading.

We were told it would be half an hour before we could pass. So we decided to have lunch - and that is when Alison realized that she didn't have her thermos on her bike. After some thought we decided one of us could hitch back and get it as she knew she had left it in the cabin however cars were few on this Christmas Day and most were full of families. We talked with some motorist's who were waiting to be allowed to go southbound including a Dutch couple in a campervan, they told of seeing cyclists on the road behind us. I prepared to bike back unloaded but then a shower of rain came over and that idea was put off. We discovered that down off the road was a good camping site. Then a few more cars came through and I was able to catch a ride with a family from Coyhaique.

So the kilometers fly by and first I see one cyclist that the Dutch couple had mentioned while we had been talking to while they waited to pass the works. Not far behind I saw a cyclist I thought to be Jin as well. The roasting lamb is now surrounded by a group of people, it must be nearly ready. The woman of the couple giving me the ride had some English so we managed a bit of conversation, they hope to move to Australia or Europe for the benefit of their young son who I was sitting beside.

I was at Santa Lucia a bit after 2:00. I checked in with the man at the big house who said to check the cabin that hadn't been cleaned so off I went. I got the thermos from the shelf that it had been left on and was back out on the road by 2:30. This being Christmas day and this time of day the town was deadly quiet, a few roosters crowing and dogs barking was about all the life that there was. I positioned myself on the road just out of town where I could see the road coming in up the hill so that I would have plenty of warning of any car heading my way. A motor cycle passed after about 10 minutes. I began to think about the options. Cars were few and those with space less for me even less, it would only take me about 3 hours to walk back. I resolved that if nothing came by 3:00 I would start walking. 3:00 came and I procrastinated a few more minutes but then started my trek. It was 40 minutes before a car passed my way but ignored me.

After about an hour I promised myself a break after 6 kilometers. The distance was easy to know as there were distance markers every 20 meters along the road for the works. I was at the bottom of a rise so resolved to stop at the top. There I saw a small road off to the side and thought I would take the chance to relieve myself as such chances were few. I began thinking how unfortunate it would be if I missed my chance of a ride while off the road for a minute and then heard a car coming. I managed to get to the road but the car was going the wrong way. Not long after a second car went my way but it just flew by also. Another 20 minutes a third car went by and just waved to me. I pass the lamb roast again but it and the people have gone now, I can only salivate over an imaginary Christmas day feast that I am not having. I carried on and promised myself some of my sprite at 12 kilometers being 2/3 of the return. I was at the 11 kilometer mark when I heard a car, I was at the top of a rise so it would be slowing and I thought it would give me a better chance - and so it was. After not initially seeming to stop it did and I ran to catch up. I don't think that me saying that I only wanted to go 7 kilometers made much sense, the driver was almost ununderstandable to me. But he already had 2 Israeli hitchhikers and we were able to communicate in English and with their better Spanish my situation was explained. And so it was that I avoided the worst hilly bit of my return and was back to our camp a bit after 5. Some food accompanied one of last night's leftover cans of beer that I had been carrying and that was all most welcome. I wouldn't normally carry beer on a bike and this was the only time I did and I savored drinking it with every sip.

While I was away Alison and Frebis had set up the tent and rearranged some old sheets of iron to make a respectable cover for all our panniers and gear so that we didn't have to squeeze it all into the tent. They had got water from the stream and set up our water filter system hanging from the parked grader. Then they had made a cup of tea. Frebis explored further down the track and found an old campsite with a double wire bed base. A couple of poles joined by another indicated that it would have been covered when in use at some time. Being midsummer many of the plants in the forest are flowering and she managed lots of photographs of pretty flowers. By the time that I returned they were quite rested. Being off the road they hadn't seen the cyclists go by while generally having a fine time.

Our meal was rice flavored with packet of Asparagus soup and a can of Salmon. The rain that had been

spotting all afternoon was getting more regular. About 7 one of the works crew turned up to do some more work on the road. This persistent slip need constant attention. He told us that he is here on the skeleton crew working over Christmas, it would be a long way to go home as he is from Arica several thousands of kilometers to the north. He told us it was going to rain for 2 days. Oh well no dust we reply. The workers don't stay long. I type some of this days journal and as light fades we make for an early night in the tent with light rain on the fly and the sound of the river below us.

There are humming birds feeding on the fuchsias surrounding our clearing so we have named this spot Hummingbird Camp.

“The Worst Road Between Lima and Ushuaia”

Rio Amancay Hummingbird camp to La Junta

www.pppg.pictures/RvrCampLaJunta.htm

“The 20 kilometers north of La Junta is the worst road between Lima and Ushuaia” - or so the bearded Swiss cyclist who caught up with us just after we hit that stretch told us - and he had come from Lima.

‘Twas a dark and stormy night..’, well the wind is howling and the woman that signed us into the cabin lit the fire when she showed us the cabin. The cabins we didn’t get were called Vientos del Sur - winds of the south. To be fair the wind only really picked up as we approached town so we don’t know if this wind today is a quirk of local geography or just bad weather passing here however it has dried our wet tent remarkably quickly. We have a few fixit jobs to do and we had a long day on a poor road surface so we paid for two nights here.

We went to bed last night with showers on the tent and there was light rain a few times in the night but by morning light the sky was trying to break a bit and the rain had passed. So we spent the usual two hours heating the oatmeal and breaking camp and were heading out to the road about 8:30. The rain had been a blessing in that indeed the dust had been dampened. Onto the road and after the bridge we had a few meters to climb on a short section of muddy road past the slip before starting a day that was generally down hill. I say generally because in total we had more climbing than yesterday. We could not however escape road works. We were traveling well above and away from the river most of the time. In some parts the new road was gravelly and others not so bad, there seemed no reason to it, just the source of the gravel used when they were working on a particular section.

We had hardly been on the road for a kilometer when we passed a place with a sign on the ground saying “coffee shop” but at this time of the day there was no life. Cyclists passing this way in past years had reported it as a nice place to stop. Now it looked more like a base for the construction crew.

After about 5 kilometers we actually seemed to run out of the road works and came to a few kilometers where the forest beside the road had been cut in preparation for widening works but they hadn’t begun yet. This old road surface was wonderful to ride on compared to the new stuff, it is what we thought that we would get more of on the Carretera Austral.

After another 5 kilometers of good road we come to the small hamlet of Villa Vanguardia. A small sawmill powered by a flash new tractor heralds our arrival at this small outpost. Across the bridge a short side road heads off at an angle to the main road. Along it a 7 similar houses that all look like they were built at the same time. They are big by Chilean standards. Paint is weathered and peeling off the wooden cladding and the corrugated iron roofs are all rusting. Saw milling is about the only thing I can think of that would justify creation of such a settlement but most of the timber is gone now. I cycle down the road and back, one place looks like it has a small restaurant but the whole place is silent with no sign of life. We head out back on the road.

After another couple of kilometers we came to the boundary between the regions of Los Lagos and Aysen. Here the Rio Palena joins the Rio Frio. In a cruel twist one sign indicated the end of the road works on the Los Lagos side but another just a few meters on indicated road works for 22 kilometers in Aysen - in fact the new works continued almost unabated all the way to La Junta, another 38 kilometers onwards. Perhaps the current works had been finished but the sections closer to La Junta had recently been upgraded with the usual loose gravel top. We made this a lunch stop here on a grassy area among old stumps accompanied by a herd of goats keeping their eye on us.

We then set off with one of the significant climbs of the day. To be fair our climbs today were each relatively short and this one was still on a piece of old road making it relatively pleasant. The reason it was on old road was that a big deviation was under construction that would cut out most of the climb, we gained in one way but not another, the new section must end up being steeper. There followed some downhill for a

while until we reached river level again but soon we began to move away from the river. The road seemed better in terms of surface for a while. We then reached a section of climbing that had not been reconstructed at all, a taste of what the road had been like. Generally very rideable surface but narrow. Just as we neared the top of this section we reached new road again but the surface was good. We passed a place where all the material dug out to build the wider road was being used to fill in a small valley – at least the farmer will end up with some flat land.

Things were looking good in terms of road conditions for a while. We were in a relatively large area of flat land due to a side river. The paddocks were full of luxuriant grass and a farmer was moving his electric fence in one as we passed. This was the first time we had seen break fencing for cows grazing here although it is common at home. Then we came to a section with deep loose chip on top of the road without much in the way of wheel lines to follow. Here the realignment was sufficiently recent that a power pole was awaiting relocation still left standing in the middle of the new road. We dropped down to cross a river and the rise out was impossible to ride all the way due to the deep gravel. We all ended up pushing up out of this, the edge of road was the best but not very rideable. I was at the top to see Alison and Frebis followed up the hill by another cyclist, also pushing. He was the bearded cyclist mentioned to us by the young German couple in the campervan yesterday when we were stopped at the roadworks. He had stayed the night at the camping place 5 kilometers south of Santa Lucia. He had started his trip in Lima and it was he who had met other northbound cyclists saying the section of road ahead of us was the worst on the whole trip. Now I thought I had seen him yesterday from the car so who did I see then? It was a week later that we found out the answer to that question.

While we were stopped talking we noticed that the hook mounting bar on one of Alison's front panniers was falling off due to failing rivets. This was no great shock as we knew they weren't the best after she had managed to catch a new pannier on a post and break the rivets popping the bar off one of the rear panniers back home. I had bolted it back on and had some spare bolts in case of this eventuality happening on another of the panniers. I had considered replacing all the rivets with bolts before the trip but hadn't done it. I lashed the pannier to the rack with some rope to save the remaining rivets after noting that the Swiss fellow had bungees holding his front panniers after the lower hooks had failed.

He is off and we dally a bit longer. The road is downhill a bit and straight and there are some wheel lines we can follow so it's not bad going. Less than half a kilometer on there are a couple of hitchhikers heading north at the entrance to a farm. We stop to talk to them. They got a ride this far to the middle of nowhere with the local farmer to his house here. We chat with them a bit longer sharing experiences before proceeding.

The road may be bad but since word had spread to the Swiss biker the wheel lines had improved the road for riding and going north would be worse than south as it would be consistently rising rather than the fall we have. After a while we reach the large orange suspension bridge over the Rio Palena. There are cabins on the other side but to stop there would be a bit soon for the day anyway. After the bridge we have one of our climbing sections, up and down a bit as the river cuts to this side of the valley. There are some large looking farms where there is enough flat land. Some of this road is still being worked on so in parts we have old road and parts new with the cursed loose chip gravel. By and large it is possible to ride the edge of the newly formed road where it is still smooth or find some wheel lines. It's hard for Frebis as she doesn't have front panniers and that makes her steering light.

A downhill followed and then we continued on at reasonable pace with short climbs and occasional steep bits. We had kept seeing a red twincab from one of the construction companies. A bridge was being replaced and we had to dip off the road through a substantive cutting to a temporary bridge and out the other side and on the other side as we approached a yard where the portaloos were all parked I heard a cat. The two men in it had stopped and were feeding a cat there - another of life's mysteries - why keep a cat at a construction yard?

All the while the farming land had been getting more open in places and at one stage there was a new two storey house. Money here I thought and as we passed there was a milking shed and small milk tanker in the

yard - there's money in milk the world over. We wonder where it would get trucked to from here. We have never seen fresh milk as we know it here, only LHT or powder. We come to some cattle saleyards beside the road, an indication that there is plenty of flat grazing land in this long valley.

Eventually in the distance we see the last rise ahead before La Junta - we are in loose gravel and up the steep hill the road looks worse than ever. I manage to crawl up in some rough wheel lines in the middle of the road at 3.5kph - no better than walking - but the others walk. The thing about the wheel lines is that they disappear on the curves and this rise was gently curving. It flattened out a bit and that is where there is a camping area a few kilometers north of La Junta but we are heading for the town itself so had no inclination to stop here. One last climb on excellently packed road and we get some views of the river below. Why the road surface can vary so much is another mystery. So then we roll down with La Junta clearly visible just ahead over the suspension bridge crossing the Río Rosselot. Just before La Junta and wind is getting really strong from the side - we've had a few bits of wind today but this is far worse than anything previously. We are not sure if the wind is growing or whether as we are now out of the narrow valley of the Rio Palena we are more exposed to it. Across the bridge and it is another kilometer or so to town.

It's cold and windy as we roll into town and start looking for some place to stay. There are some options, we see some cabins that seem a bit flash and there are others. We check out some rooms attached to one of the supermarkets but they are a bit pokey and upstairs and while they have cabins as well they only have wifi at the rooms. We end up back toward the flash cabins and are directed to another shop to find the owner. The cabins have wifi and they look good and I can pay with credit card to save our cash so the decision is made to stay for 2 nights. As we are taken to the cabin I notice two bikes leaning against the first of the four.

It's well after 5 as we unpacked and I get our wet tent fly up in the wind on our rope to dry, a few spots of rain make no difference to its drying. I knock on the door of the cabin with the bikes and it's Lawrence and Fiona, two English cyclists heading south also. They had hitched the last 15 kilometers of the gravel - I can see why - they have relatively narrow tires and that would make the going even harder than it was for us. They were here over Christmas and had shared a Christmas day dinner with the Swedish couple that we met back at the place we stayed in at Hualaihué.

Alison and Frebis are ecstatic that we actually have a washing machine in the cabin. Alison manages to be given the remainder of the packet of washing powder that Lawrence and Fiona have no use for. Somehow while I'm doing my jobs they find some beer at the shop and then a bottle of Pisco Sour. It all seems to get consumed rather quickly and I have to put up with two cackling women excited about their washing machine - myself, I'm not sure real cyclists bother to wash clothes? I set about fixing the pannier to discover that I don't seem to have the small screws for this job but manage to use some larger standard rack mounting screws that are several sizes bigger than I really need and some nuts that will never fail.

It's after 8 by the time we go out to look for a place to eat, while we could have cooked we arrived a bit late to organize something and getting that washing machine going was a top priority. The town is quiet and as we walk around we see plenty of accommodation options and more shops as we get to the other end of town. Alison gets directions to a place to eat, it has rooms as well. It looks dead as we walk up to it and we are just about to knock on the door when it opens in front of us. The man must have seen us through the curtains. There is a couple having a meal and there are a few tables. We can have beef chop with salad or chips, I ask for both and that's OK. We are offered seats on the couch in front of TV by the fire while we wait for our meal, it's all very comfortable. Our beef chop is what we would call a T bone steak and a bottle of red wine add to the alcohol consumption for the day. It was very nice if perhaps costing a little more than we would usually pay. It's getting dark as we get back to our cabin and head to bed.

A cloudy day so not a great day for scenery. So was that road so bad? Well for us it wasn't that different to some of our Lake District loop, I'm glad we had the downhill on it. It has possibly improved with use. The machines are all parked up in several yards along the way and I presume they will get back into action after the Christmas break (Postscript: other blogs and online journals show that indeed works restarted and sealing started and a year later it was asphalt from Santa Lucia to the regional boundary). It would be hard for most

to do this stretch from Santa Lucia in a day with the road in its present condition. There are places to stay and spots off the road to camp. Perhaps we were lucky to end up where we did with water and shelter and semi seclusion just off the road. That camp is just below (north of) the top of the climb 19 kilometers south of Santa Lucia, the road going down to it is off the bridge approach north side of the river - the bridge signs were on the ground, Pte Amancay

A Cloudy Cold day for a Rest.

La Junta Rest Day

www.pppg.pictures/LaJunta.htm

We haven't moved on today, well we did pay for two nights on arrival yesterday so that decision had already been made. The day started without the wind that continued into last night but the cloud is low and it's cold - the forecast isn't good ahead. Legs are tired after yesterday's ripio and there's still more washing for that machine. Our neighbors, Lawrence and Fiona, have moved on with an early start - tomorrow is forecast for rain. They want to try and get ahead of the rain and are even considering crossing into Argentina to avoid the rain predicted ahead on the Carretera Austral.

I spent most of the morning catching up on the journal while Alison and Frebis went out shopping and found Casa de Té, a place beside the carretera, for coffee. Before lunch we took a bit of a walk up a track on the other side of the road from town so that we could get a vista back across the town. Lunch was back at the restaurant where Alison and Frebis had their coffee earlier, it was surprisingly full. There was a French family who were touring around and kayaking on some of the lakes. Their young adult daughters, one of whom had spent a year in Santiago, had joined their parents and younger sibling for this trip. Today they were moving on but having a last lunch with their guide of the last few days.

In the afternoon we rested and I continued with my journal. In the evening we cooked chicken and salad. It was nice to cook a normal meal in a kitchen for a change. It was an unexciting day but after the gravel of yesterday we needed the rest.

La Junta is an interesting town, it's a mixture of old and new buildings. The town is undergoing some major street works with new concrete roads, one in particular seems a meter below the footpath (sidewalk) which is rather strange. There are plenty of places to eat if they are open and many accommodation options and lots of shops. In the middle of the Carretera Austral as it runs past La Junta is a large metal sign as a monument to its creation with the words "Carretera Austral General Augusto Pinichet". It is probably the only monument to Pinochet in Chile and to be fair it was his rule that created the Carretera to link bits of existing roads to join Patagonian Chile. We didn't see the mountains cloud free today, it was a good day to stay in. Our cabin was "compact" compared to some but new and tidy. It wasn't until the morning we left that I realized that the reason the shower in our cabin was a bit cold was that the dial on the gas had been turned down and that was all we could do to fault it.

From La Junta a road goes west 60 kilometers or so out to the sea at Raul Marin. There is a Termas (hot pool) on the way, I had thought we may have made that diversion but we don't have time now or the inclination in the weather. A road also goes east to the small town of Lago Verde and then the Argentinian border. We were told by a local that rivers make this route impassable but some cyclists have done it in late summer when the rivers are low. For those not in a hurry there are places to explore off the Carretera Austral here.

Into Rain

La Junta to Puyuhupai

www.pppg.pictures/LaJuntaPuyuhuapi.htm

Out the window as I sit on the bed writing this is a lovely view across fishing boats on the beach at the head of the fiord at Puyuhuapi. The problem is that the view doesn't much go beyond that - the rain is so heavy pounding on the roof. When we got here it wasn't this heavy but as we cruised around town looking for a place to stay it got heavier. On the main street we saw a restaurant with a cabin beside it so in we went and we couldn't then face going out again looking further in spite of the quirks of the place so here we are.

We left La Junta wondering what was in store for us as a sign said road works for the next 32 kilometers. In fact for the first 10 kilometers the road was good by recent standards, it was a while since it had been improved and the surface had bedded in and there was only a light amount of fine shingle on it. It had potholed and rutted a bit but generally wasn't bad. The road was gently up and down through cattle farming country in various degrees of clearance. At one place a couple of gauchos were herding some cattle on the road. The clouds were low so we had what was around us to observe and not the grand landscape we knew existed. There were a few spots of light rain on and off but nothing major. After about 10 kilometers however we did reach more recent road improvements and while it looked ominous at first it really wasn't much as wheel lines were well made by now and any loose shingle wasn't much. As a consolation we seemed to have spots of blue sky above us in breaks in the clouds.

After about 17 kilometers we came to where the road was narrowed by a continuous line of shingle a couple of feet high along the side of the road. What ominous works was this here for we wondered. A big red truck was coming our way so we stopped as usual to let it pass. It had "Rotel Tours" on the front and when it passed it was a truck with a bus like cabin high up on the back and towing an equally large trailer with hotel written on. We presumed that they must tow their own sleeping accommodation (you can easily search them on the Internet, they are a German company).

Our curiosity as to the line of gravel was answered at exactly the 20.00 kilometers peg (distances were from the Rosselot Bridge just north on La Junta) when suddenly we came upon new asphalt. I had heard something vague about asphalt and 20 kilometers from Puyuhuapi and this was it explained. The girl at the information center in La Junta had been sure there was no asphalt, I suppose it was so recent that we could forgive her. It was wonderful to be riding on asphalt again after days of gravel ripio. We then came to two old log bridges across the river beside the road. The second more solid one made of large logs for piles and beams. It's approach had been dug out out so vehicles could no longer cross it but some large planks had been set to bridge the gap. We got off the bikes and had a good look crossing to the other side. We were left to wonder what it's purpose was as it only seemed to lead to open grass land on the other side. Later in the year it featured in the season opening Top Gear Patagonia special.

Continuing we were so excited with joy as we rode the smooth surface but this was dashed just 3 kilometers later when the seal ended to return to the line of shingle on the side of the road. Clearly this shingle is to be the base for the new asphalt. Only a couple of kilometers later our valley split and we crossed the river we had been following to take the Rio Risopatrón branch and there we come upon the asphalt plant and then the works base for the area. It is deserted and clearly work will continue after the midsummer break.

We are now looking for a place to stop and soon we find a bit of an old entrance way off the road that's sheltered and level and just off the edge of the Rio Risopatrón. I boil the billy for some soup and bread to warm us. It's just after 12:00 as we are preparing to depart and the spots are starting to turn to rain so we don our rain jackets. On the road to our surprise we get asphalt again just 3.6 kilometers after it ended. Jolly good thing as we have some short but steep rises in this section. Then at 32 kilometers the asphalt and the works suddenly ends and we are at the entrance to the Queulat Park. Looking back I can see the steepest sections had been asphalted prior to the Christmas break and holiday season.

Here the road is unimproved, it's narrow and the surface is well compacted gravel with little on top and

by now the rain has dampened any dust and it's good riding except for the occasional very steep bit which is a bit rocky. The vegetation, especially the large Gunnera rhubarb like plants is growing up to the edge of the carriageway. This is what we sort of expected more of for the Carretera Austral, sadly a year later it too succumbed to road reconstruction.

We are soon traveling along above the side of Lago Risopatrón, this lasts for over 10 kilometers, it is a long narrow lake. The road is cut in the steep side of the glacial valley and goes up and down, the surface is clear of loose rocks so often we can use the down speed to take us up the ups but there are many too long for that. All this adds to quite a total climb for the day but in small sections like this it doesn't feel as bad as a single big climb. All the while the rain is getting heavier but not too bad, it has actually washed the dust off the roadside greenery and along here on the unimproved road it's quite pretty. The dust washing off the foliage indicates that it has been dry recently – we have consistently been told that December has been so unusually dry that farmers have been wanting rain.

We get almost constant views of the lake through the forest but nothing very clear. We pass the entrance to a camping area down by the lake and a park office on the other side of the road. I had once thought that we could camp here but in this rain there is no way we are going to stop. Eventually we leave the lake with a bit of a climb as the lake drains back to La Junta and not the short way down to Puyuhuapi ahead. Even though we have a drop to sea level ahead we have ups and downs to almost the very end.

There are many photos on the Internet of the panorama before us as we look down on Puyuhuapi, none of them resemble what we see - because the town is hazy though the rain and we can't see far down the fiord. Most of the photos we have seen are of a sunny vista but that is not to be today. As we roll down the hill towards town the rain is running down the ruts in the road with us. There is a branch in the road, it is quite obvious that we take the right branch and the left looks little used. It is actually a substantial road, wide enough for dual lane traffic, in fact it looks wider than the road we must take. Vegetation is encroaching from the sides, the road can't be that old. In fact later looking at satellite imagery from only two years ago doesn't show the road. It is a bypass for the town but there is a small gap, a gap that needs a bridge over the stream that runs down and through town. We can only guess that the bridge builders will get here soon when they have finished further up the road.

We enter town and see two young Israeli hitchhikers at the bus stop by the bridge across the stream and we talk a few minutes, there's not much traffic today and they are not having much luck. We see a sign for cabins on the side road towards the beach and go down but we find that we have to go to the big hostel at the other end of town to book in which doesn't appeal in the rain. So we go back the few tens of meters to the main road and head through town. We see plenty of signs for accommodation, the rain is getting harder and then we see a sign at a restaurant that says accommodation and a cabin that we can see beside it. It looks acceptable and by the time we get to see inside the rain is even harder. It smells a bit - maybe the dog there uses the front step, but it has a large veranda for our bikes and a wood stove, we are told they have wifi so we take it. It's all a bit rushed as the Señora is running lunch at the restaurant and the rain is now pouring down.

Inside we start unpacking and changing clothes, the Señora brings some wood and I wonder about lighting the fire. Our last cabin had fire starters but there are no matches or any small kindling here. My fire lighting paper in the tent bag is partially damp and I get nowhere. Eventually a flash on inspiration and I pour a little white spirits into a cup and pour it over the wood. It starts hopefully but doesn't take after a few minutes. So when it cooled sufficiently I try again with a little more white spirits and soon things are roaring away. It's 3 by the time we make the dash next door in the pouring rain for a late lunch. Afterwards we all take a nap. We are awoken by a knock on the door, a bedraggled Israeli hitchhiker is at the door, he can't get any life next door and wondered if he should ask here. He has come from the south so I tell him that there are plenty more accommodation signs up the street.

By about 7 the rain has eased off and we go out to find the shops for supplies. In the information center we again meet Lena the Swedish woman with the folding bike we met way back in Hualaihué and after talking

she invited us back to her hostel for a coffee. It is a place with 3 rooms and a common room with a good stove for warmth in the common room and that is welcome. It seems that after we met them they moved on and the next hostel was full so they continued until 10 at night to reach Pichicolo, the little village by sea before Hornopiren, there being no other choices on the road. They then had an early start to catch the ferry and that is why we never caught them again. They had Christmas with Fiona and Lawrence in the cabins at La Junta. We talk about plans to get away from the rain - we'll see what tomorrow brings. As the evening ends we can get glimpses of the snow on the lower levels of the peaks around us.

So let me list some of the quirks of this place. The door has no key, a piece of string goes from the latch inside out a small hole so you pull to enter. You can see the problem, a guest goes off with the key, the nearest key cutting place is hundreds of kilometers away and so is the chance to get a replacement lock. It has probably the biggest bath we have come across but it doesn't have one of those tap units that sends water to the bath or shower - only the shower so that's the only way to fill the bath in spite of the plug that is supplied. The tiles in the bathroom floor are loose. The bit with the fine holes on the shower rose is gone so the water sort of dribbles out. No doors apart from the one to outside shut properly - but that's not unusual - the wood that these places are made with is *Pinus Radiata* and it's a terrible wood to warp and bend when it dries.

The kitchen is well under equipped without large plates - large pots but nothing usefully small. And the place smells - like the cat was locked in a while back and peed here. We can't get the wifi to work but haven't bothered asking for more than the key. But it has its good points - two storey with bedrooms upstairs and more spacious downstairs than our last place with two very comfy leather chairs and a great couch that Frebis went to sleep on. A couple of chairs at the table and not stools like the last place - no washing machine of course.

As I mentioned before a great veranda under which we parked our bikes in the pouring rain. In the rain we saw the water harvesting system in action. Down this way we see lots of plastic tunnel houses where people grow their own vegetables. This place has several out the back of the restaurant and just off the end of our building. To get water into the tunnel houses attached to the end of the gutters are upside down soft drink bottles with the bottoms cut out to make them into funnels. Attached to the top of the bottle is a hose that leads off to the collection of tunnel houses. It rains so often here that doubtless the vegetables are regularly watered.

Finally the view across the bay from our bedroom window is fantastic - what a pity about the cloud and rain.

Staying Put in The Rain

Puyuhupai Rest Day

www.pppg.pictures/Puyuhuapi.htm

Today we are faced with a tricky decision. It stopped raining overnight and while it's still cloudy with an occasional light shower we have to decide whether to stay or move on. We were up at 6 and checked out the busses from La Junta as they passed through early this morning – they stop only a few meters from our door. We are thinking that with heavy rain predicted in 3 days time then we will try to get inland to Coyhaique as soon as we can. The problem is that the buses are small and getting our bikes and us on won't be easy and there are only 2 buses at 6 in the morning. There are regular buses from Cisnes 2 days ride away - and we have 2 days that are possibly without much rain. We have a big hill in the middle however then a big chunk of seal to finish to Cisnes.

I went for a short ride unloaded back up the hill to see if I could get a better view of the town but as I return it starts to shower a bit. Frebis decided that with the weather not looking great she will give up biking here and move to the hostel that our Swedish friend, Lena, is at. She has a deadline to be in Coyhaique to make her return flight so will bus south. We are undecided still but then decide with what we know of the weather forecast that we will plug on. As we go with Frebis to the hostel the rain is starting again. We get there and she books in and we are now undecided again but we look up the forecast and it's now for rain today and the rain is getting worse so 10 minutes later we make the decision to stay. So we unpack into the room. It's all a lot cosier than our last place. There is also an older Swiss woman there who we mutually recognize from the ferry from Hornopiren.

We are told that there isn't much water. It seems that when it rains a lot they have to cut off the inlet to the town water supply until the flow clears again. It rains a lot here and this happens a lot. Thankfully when the rain eases off later the water pressure comes back again.

In the afternoon Alison is now full of cake after going off to a café with Frebis and we got some bread and empanadas for tomorrow. Frebis always had the plan to ditch her bike. It is old though quite serviceable and was given to her so the only financial loss is some of the improvements she made to it for this trip. Against that is the hassle and cost of getting it back home and it's not worth it. She talks with the young man at the bike store on the main street. She later mentions it to the woman at our hostel. After some comment that the fellow at the bike store may be interested the woman tells us that he is her son. Such is the entrepreneurial spirit in small towns – it must run in families. Lena's companion, Guillermo, is Argentinian and has a much better grasp of both sides of the language gap than we do so he is appointed chief negotiator. In the end a deal is done and Frebis gets some money for the bike that she was prepared to ditch.

As the afternoon wore on the rain eased a bit from time to time. After 6 we went out heading back to the cake place at the west end of town for a meal as it had pasta on the menu. It wasn't until we were all seated that we discovered that they had no pasta left so up we got and headed back to a place overlooking the sea just down the road from the road up to our hostel. On the way we even had a shadow for a minute or so as the sun broke through creating a rainbow on the other side of the valley. Back at the new restaurant we got seated and were told we could only have fish or Salmon - and no chips - it seems that no delivery lorries had arrived so the town was running out of food. I guess it is between Christmas and New Year and everyone is having a break. Both the fish and Salmon were nice anyway. So back to our new room to pack and try for an early night before an early start in the morning.

A Long Bus Journey

Puyuhuapi to Coyhaique

www.pppg.pictures/PuyuhuapiCoyhaique.htm

Finally we are here in Coyhaique after a long bus journey – perhaps not terribly long in kilometers but long enough in time. It is somewhat of a disappointment to have bussed and skipped a section of the Carretera Austral but we have formulated a plan to come back this way on our northwards journey so it doesn't feel so bad. We have ended up in the hostel that Frebis had booked into, luckily they had room for us but there are not many other beds free here and they are in a dorm room. We are a bit tired after our early start this morning and glad of a nice place for the night.

The alarm woke us at 5:30 with the first light of dawn. It hadn't rained much overnight but there had been some downpours and now it was light rain to drizzle. We were out the door and down the two short blocks by 6. It was lightening up. I then set about getting the pedals off the bikes as we expected some dismantling would be necessary for the smaller bus. We weren't sure which bus to expect as there were two on the run yesterday and we only expected one today. In the end the one we didn't expect turned up and yes they had space for us. The one we did expect turned up a few minutes later as we were loading. A frantic removal of the front wheels followed and soon our stuff was all packed in the back and there were some seats. We hadn't booked as we were told yesterday that there wasn't a guarantee of space for the bikes but there was no other luggage in the back that just had room for 2 bikes partially dismantled. This bus seems mainly for locals from La Junta traveling to Coyhaique and not tourists. It's so hard to get reliable information in these places about such services but maybe their timetables are also a bit unusual due to the holiday season.

Moving off on the road by 6:20 most of the passengers had come from La Junta where they started a 5:00 so they had the curtains drawn on the bus and were trying to sleep. Alison was the only one who got a window seat in the back row. Not that it made a great difference, the windows were all steamed up and the visibility wasn't good with rain on and off. Following around the fiord it was clear that the streams we were passing were swollen with rain. We passed the entrance for the Hanging Glacier a bit disappointed not to be seeing it as it was to be one of the highlights of the trip but we are consoled that we would have had to wait some days for clearer weather to see anything.

Heading up the valley towards a 17 switchback climb we could see water running down near sheer rock faces this being a glacial valley. It made us realize how much more you can appreciate being on a bike - not that we would have appreciated biking in this rain. The road was not too bad, maybe reconstructed a couple years back when the bypass to be at Puyuhuapi was constructed, generally it has a solid but potholed base - no deep loose gravel. Climbing the cuesta we got some glimpses through the cloud of the mountains around us. Soon we dropped down and passed the Cisnes turnoff from where we then started to climb again - now on sealed road.

We passed through Villa Amengual, it is a very small place. Then we passed Lago Las Torres which I had noted as a possible campsite - it had covered camping shelters by the road. Without really noticing we crossed a low saddle and after a few kilometers came to Villa Mañihuales. There the bus stopped at a small café where everyone poured out for empanadas and other quick food and queued for the toilet. Of course the woman's queue was long until Alison in good Kiwi style got me to check the unused mens and then she used it - queue jumping as it were but then the other women followed her example. As we left the bus we thought we would catch was arriving at the same stop - I'm not sure of the difference but maybe ours had a bigger luggage space. We later learned that Fiona and Lawrence whom we had met in La Junta had only made it to here before the rain caught up with them.

Back on the bus the landscape was looking drier as we moved further from the coast. Then there is a junction where Ruta 7 turns to gravel again, that is the direct route to Coyhaique over a saddle but we followed the road which now turned to concrete towards Aisen. So down we went into progressively wetter country - and back into more rain. It wasn't long before we understood the reason. At the junction where we

turned back towards Coyhaique we stopped and about a third of the passengers got off - they would then catch a passing bus to Aisen - and we saw several flash buses going their way. However as we stopped we saw a yellow jacketed cyclist with red panniers in front of us. We couldn't see who it was as we passed but think it must be Jin again. The road then rises along the river valley until one big climb - glad we don't have to do that one after all - we will be coming the other way if we come back this way. At the top were three wind turbines and a great view over Coyhaique - we will have to climb that one however - there is no free lunch on the road. This concrete road has no shoulder and is very busy - we were glad not to be biking it.

Into Coyhaique the bus terminal was just a block or two off the main road. Our bikes and panniers were disgorged into a large pile in the middle of the yard and we there reassembled the bikes. We then headed up the street to the Hostal Patagonia where Frebis had already booked for a night. We decided that we will stay here at least two nights as heavy rain is predicted for tomorrow. Then they are booked out anyway and the weather looks good for the two of us to be back on the road again heading south on the southern half of the Carretera Austral.

Thomas, the man at our hostel recommended some places to eat - one the Casino de Bomberos (fireman's club) is good and popular - so popular that although almost empty when we arrived by the time we had eaten there was a queue at the door waiting for tables - just as well we were early for a change. They have Pichangas para llevar (to carry = takeaway/takeout) so that might be our evening meal, I've been wanting to try it since Puerto Montt. Our hostel doesn't have guest cooking facilities like some others but we do get breakfast supplied.

It hasn't been raining here, maybe a few spots and a cold wind but patches of blue sky and sun poking in as I write this - far better weather than Puyuhuapi where the woman at our hostel had told us many cyclists bus out due to the rain. That made us feel less guilty about taking the bus. Here so far we've gathered some information on getting back here from Argentina as we are thinking we could do the section we missed later when we hope this bad weather will have passed. We could then go back to Argentina via Futaleufu and then to El Bolson - but that's all a few weeks away and well see what happens.

So we went out for our evening meal to try a pizza and pasta place downtown in the pedestrian mall off the Plaza but by the time we got there it was so full we would have to wait an hour for a table for 3. Kate from the Hostel was there already alone on a small table for two so Frebis joined her and I went in search of the Casa de Bomberos for a take home Pichangas while Alison returned to the hostel. Now the center of town had a pentagonal plaza and that throws the street around all at angles. It's not a pentagonal plaza on a regular street grid system, the whole grid system is thrown in angles for some blocks around. So it took a false start for me to get there.

I had to wait 20 minutes as the cook was already doing 3 other orders of the same, it must be a popular dish. Being smart I stuffed the package wrapped in rather light brown paper up my jacket for the walk home. Problem was is that I didn't realize the contents came in a light gravy which I didn't realize was leaking a bit - they could have at least given it to me in a plastic bag. Anyway what we got was a big pile of chips and the other contents were wrapped in foil: pickled carrot, cauliflower, gherkin and small white onions. A boiled egg was quartered and there were thin sliced of two types of sausage, one fat and one thin and then some small chunks of steak cut up tomato. Alison who was skeptical about the whole brew managed to polish off her share. It would be great to get again and fuel for cyclists. I'm sure every version is a bit different like Cazuela.

Back at the hostel there was not much chance of a cyclist's early night as there were people to exchange stories with but with no riding tomorrow it didn't matter.

Coyhaique Rest Day

Plans plans and plans

www.pppg.pictures/Coyhaique.htm

The day dawns with sun in our window, the weather is a bit better than had been predicted and the forecast ahead is looking better so today, New Years Eve day, will be a bit of a rest day and preparations for departure tomorrow.

Our Hostel has here its quirks as well. Don't get me wrong the owners and helpers are very nice and helpful and it's really nice. We opted to splash out on a double room to ourselves rather than be in the dorm. It's relatively spacious although this is in part due to the double bed being against the wall and with the door on the other side there is no other option but there is length beyond the bed. It's a nice room but in keeping with most places the door has a bit of a problem - unless you stand in the right place to push down the floor the door it scrapes. All our rooms are upstairs and that means the whole downstairs is one big spacious common room and is very nice with a fireplace in the middle. We are opposite the bathroom, I say the bathroom because in spite of having 10 beds in the place there is only one albeit spacious bathroom with toilet, at least our last place had a second separate toilet. In the bathroom is a clever little sign indicating that toilet paper goes in the basket because if it goes in the toilet it will block the narrow pipes. Queuing hasn't been much of a problem yet in spite of there being 9 people here last night. I'd have to say the shower must be the best we have come across however for whatever reason we are instructed to turn off the gas pilot light when finished. I guess gas costs an awful lot to ship down here. That's fine until a new arrival misses that part of the very thorough induction tour and doesn't know how to light the shower. The gas burner is new and reliable and doesn't cut out like so many that we have had. Perhaps unusually for such hostels there are no cooking or fridge facilities for guests. We were told that it's OK to cook outside on our stove and eat inside - but there's no large outside area set up for this - I guess that this isn't the sort of place where outside "living" is part of the lifestyle. - the wind blows a lot. But they do supply a good breakfast as the breakfasts in this part of the world go - homemade wholemeal bread instead of the usual white pans with salami, ham and other condiments. There is even a free computer in the common room for those who don't have one. The common room is well lit with lots of glass but the solid wall is festooned with messages from visitors - even one recent cyclist, Jin (not the one we met a week or so ago), whose journal we have been following online and who passed through in November.

Camping in some out of the way place all by ourselves is great and having a cabaña to ourselves is also great but we are not antisocial. At a hostel you meet other travelers and exchange stories - early nights are not so easy. When traveling it's especially nice to meet others - and most Europeans speak English to a reasonable degree. Well most Europeans tend to be German who generally have good English or who are actually English. Yesterday I had a passable conversation in Spanish with the Italian couple here - Spanish being our best common language - it works as long as we keep to simple things. Everyone agrees that the local Spanish is so hard to follow - some locals know this and try when talking to us foreigners but others have no idea.

Bands of rain came and went during the day. Along with others we needed to do some shopping. Some of those staying here including Frebis went for walks on some of the tracks out and around the city. We started out for some shopping in the morning. The street we are on runs downhill to the shopping areas. There are two large supermarkets down four or so blocks. They are not the small shops that pass for supermarkets in small villages but real modern huge supermarkets with parking underneath and that occupy a block. Outside one a farmer has his truck with a sign on the back saying "Corderos" - lambs. It is new years eve and he is selling lambs that are no doubt for your Asado in the next day or two. These are not carcasses but real live lambs - you butcher them yourself. With a few days holiday coming up there is a queue running out onto the street to use the cash machine. We had been told that some machines had run out - money like everything has to come from a long way north. The supermarket we check has some bare shelves.

After the supermarkets Alison heads north to the shops around the Plaza where she eventually finds a

place for a haircut. I head south to the Hardware store, it is the only big one south of Puerto Montt. It has many checkouts, not the ticket/cashier/pick up system of other places we have struck - but to be fair such places probably exist in the bigger cities in parts we wouldn't normally get to. It has goods from building supplies to homewares, I am able to find the Bencina Blanca we need in the paint section.

We returned to the Cassa de Bomberos for lunch again today – this time we were early enough to be ahead of the main rush and we were some of the first in today. By the time we left the place was full and people were waiting for tables. Back at the hostel it's time for an afternoon sleep, yesterday was an early start and a late night. I manage some writing and bike fixing. Lying on our bed the ripening cherries are frustratingly just out of reach out our window - there are lots of cherry trees in town. I was told that the original settlers had a very poor diet of meat and cherries are an easy fruit to grow that can provide more dietary vitamins.

Coyhaique is a city of around 40,000 people and is the only major town on the Carretera Austral. It is the service center of a large farming area between the mountains and fiords to the west and the dryer pampas to the east. Access is easy but long via Argentina. Taking a bus north from here you will go out into Argentina and back into Chile between Bariloche and Orsono. It is possible to get to Puerto Montt by several buses via the route that we have followed and maybe when the road is all sealed in a few years and the ferries run regularly there will be a more direct service this way. All supplies come down from Puerto Montt. Traditionally ferries run down to Puerto Chacabuco the port near the town of Aysén and then the trucks drive the 60 or so kilometers to Coyhaique. We witnessed that more freight is now coming the way we did as the road is improved. The short sections of the old road we struck were certainly not suitable for large volumes of freight traffic. The improvements may be wonderful for the locals but they are rather sad for cyclists as they diminish the adventure of the route. We are told that with it being so far for supplies to come when something popular comes in everyone rushes in to stock up. The Christmas break hasn't helped as we found out back in Puyuhuapi. Shelves had emptied of some goods. Later in the afternoon news came in from others here that some trucks had come in and that some new stocks were in at the supermarkets. To carry tomorrow we were able to get some tomatoes in one supermarket only and we also got some nibbles for the evening ahead.

So here we are on New Years eve. It has been a bit cold and we had been wondering what to do tonight but the folk here at the hostel offered sausages and salads and everyone staying here has opted to stay and join in. There is us of course from New Zealand and Frebis from Canada. There's a French couple more our age. They are traveling by bus. They have some English but not that great so drift in and out of the rest of us around the table.

Then there is a young couple, she's Swedish and he's Portugese, they met here a few weeks ago when she was traveling with her parents. It must have been love at first sight as her parents have finished their holiday and gone home but she has stayed to backpack with him. They would like our room with the double bed – a dorm room is inhibiting their young love. They traveled north (busing) and then turned around and are going south again.

Kate is a Canadian studying for her PhD. in New York and who is planning to change course and go to med. school. You can't escape your genes, her mother's a doctor but Kate tried to do something else. She spent 6 months teaching English 5 years ago in Puerto Natales and has been back visiting the family she stayed with then. We discuss whether it is easier to learn Chilean Spanish in Chile without some prior knowledge of Spanish in general such is the local dialect. She is waiting for a plane north and then home. She also came as part of a group studying attitudes to the Pinochet years. She tells us that most people don't want to talk about those times. They are moving forward and looking back still stirs deeply held and divided opinions. Chile has a law that the previous job of the president must be held for him or here to go back to at the end of their term so Pinochet returned to be head of the army when he left his presidential office. So his influence and that of the generals continued into the 2000's. Some say that the Pinochet years didn't end until his arrest in England when he was there for medical treatment. There are still wounds in Chile from those times. Mothers search the Atacama dessert for the bones of their disappeared sons. There are many still alive that could tell what happed to the disappeared but refuse to say anything. I don't know if by speaking they

would reopen the wounds or whether they would give closure to those who grieve for their lost ones. We do see young Chileans for whom these bad times are only history and Chile is moving on.

There's Nina, an Austrian living in Munich, of course she has excellent English and joins in with the conversation. She a process engineer for Siemens who has an extended break. She thought that she was booked on a ferry from Puerto Chacabuco until she got there and was told that as she was the only passenger so it was now a freight only ferry so she has had to return to Coyhaique and buy an expensive plane ticket north. The regularity of ferries now on the route we came down has diminished the appeal of the longer ferry ride for passenger traffic. She is heading Ecuador way in the next few months. She has traveled a lot on her own and although not very big knows how to look after herself and we get the impression that it would be unwise to mess with her.

Then there's Michael, an Australian, well his mother is Chilean and his father a Kiwi but his parents met in a bar in Sydney. He fell off of his motor bike just a couple of hundred meters before the ripio turned to seal at the Cisnes turnoff when a car racing off the seal stayed in the middle of the road and he had to go into loose gravel. His knee is grazed and it will take a week to fix his bike he's been told. His mother never taught him Spanish because she thought it would in some way exclude his father so he doesn't seem any better than us at communicating with the locals. Information learned from his local Chilean relations he tells us that there are estimated to be something like 1.6 million street dogs in Chile. No one owns them but they must feed them. That explains the stands they use for their rubbish bags when they are put out on the street for collection. We have never seen a fat street dog so we suppose that their state of near starvation inhibits their breeding. We later met another Chilean horrified at the suggestion that they should be spayed or neutered. In big cities people even knit clothes for the dogs in the cold of winter. We have never met an aggressive street dog, the only real barkers have been behind fences - unnaturally locked up. I presume any aggressiveness in street dogs is quickly culled one way or another. We have seen the occasional carcass of a dead dog bloated on the roadside, no one seemingly taking responsibility for the corpse.

So everyone has stories to tell and share. Around midnight the family that run the place and their helpers come out and join us. Felice Nuevo Ano. The French were the first to celebrate the New Year back home with skype. An hour later we counted in Portugal on the iphone. Finally everyone was waiting for local New Year so that we could all go to bed and that was about as exciting as it got.

The Carretera Austral Part 2

Coyhaique South to O'Higgins and Beyond

The last section of the Carretera Austral we expect to be the most challenging. The weather is far from summery as we head further south. We expect some sealed road for a day or two but then back to gravel ripio again. Coyhaique is the biggest town on the Carretera Austral by far. We have a couple of small towns ahead, Cerro Castillo and Villa Rio Tranquilo. At Rio tranquil we plan a trip out to the Glacier Raphael. This trip has only been available from here for a year or so since the completion of a road out to the sea and while it is expensive it is cheaper than other ways of getting to the Glacier from further north. Further south there is Cochrane, a town of a few thousand people and then the fishing port of Caleta Tortel. It is a short diversion on a relatively new branch off the Carretera Austral but from the photos we have seen it is not to be missed. From there we have a ferry across Fiordo Mictchell and the the last 100 kilometer stretch to Villa O'Higgins. While the road ends at the lake we will take the boat across Lago O'Higgins including the Glacier side trip. Then we follow the well used route of cyclists and hikers ending in a horse track into Argentina at Lago Desierto. We expect this to be one of the highlights of the trip. We will end up at the small tourist town of el Chalten in Argentina and see just where we will head from there when we get there.

Now We Are Two Again

Coyhaique to Laguna Chiguay

www.pppg.pictures/CoyhaiqueChiguay.htm

“It’s going to snow tonight” the ranger told us as we were deciding on a tent site. We started to unpack a bit and then we wondered if we should try and push on to Villa Cerro Castillo. It would be 600 meters lower but we still had a pass to get over. Having started late and done 1200m of climbing already we decided that we would take a chance and stay, after all there were others here and a ranger and buildings about if it got really bad. After some tail winds and then headwinds and now we are actually where we set out for today in spite of a lateish start.

The day had started with rain in Coyhaique, that had been predicted, as was a clearance around midday so we were very leisurely in our packing and preparations. Today was the day we had to leave Frebis, perhaps a day earlier than planned but the long range weather forecast said it was time to move on in spite of the rain passing through. So it was 11 by the time we rolled out the door after some hugs tinged with sadness at our parting with a friend we hadn't seen for a few years but our legs were keen to be back on the road.

There was a bit of a slow climb out of town and showers were blowing over us on a blustery side wind. It was a 4 layer day for me, the whole trip has hardly warranted more than one at any time previously. I didn't know what a portent of things to come this was to be. After about 5 kilometers the showers were left behind but not so the wind. Not that bad but at times the local geography pushed it into our faces as we traveled a landscape of steep hills and deep steep valleys. This was a landscape formed by the fire of volcanism and sculpted by the ice of glaciation. It was quite incredible and impossible to photograph well even with a landscape shot. This ended after about 10 kilometers when we entered more rolling farming country quite reminiscent of places near home with ups and downs, sometimes these were short and we could roll down and up but more often we had to endure the climbing.

After about 15 kilometers we were thinking it was time for a stop for the empanada each that we were carrying but it was well past that before we pulled over on the side of the road in the lee of a bit of a hill out of the wind. Not the most elegant place to stop but in this open country there wasn't much choice. The long grass in the roadside dry ditch had to suffice as discreetness for a toilet. Back on the pedals we started a period of steady climbing headed towards a high ridge that we reached after about another 5 kilometers. The sun was out mostly but the wind was still cold and we were glad that now it was behind us. We could see behind us as we left the open valley that dark shower clouds were blowing in over the mountains from the west.

It was a surreal day in some ways. Here we were on a concrete road, quite a bit of traffic compared to what we had been used to and rolling through open unforested country. It was completely different to our first two weeks on the Carretera Austral. Our bus had transported us from rainforest to open farming country that at times could have been somewhere near home. Beside us on one farm was a paddock of white clover in full bloom emanating it's powerful scent even in the blustery wind. And of course we were only two again.

A tail wind helped us up to a high point after which we turned more south rolling down a long valley towards the crossing of Rio Huemules at the small pueblo of El Blanco. Outside the only accommodation and food place, a two storied building, a man was talking with a couple of hitchhikers. We stopped to ask about food. He didn't have almuerzo (set lunch) available today but could still do us some food. We decided that we should carry on however but not before talking a while. The hitchhikers were Brazilian and had some English, he had biked down and had some advice on the road ahead. The best was that there were hot showers where we were heading for tonight.

Leaving them we had to climb up to the terrace above the river from where we had a straight gently rising road ahead. With the wind behind us we moved at a reasonable but not fast pace until a small climb to where the road branched - ahead to the airport and right for the Carretera Austral south. One cyclist with an online journal missed this turn not so many months ago and we were not going to make that mistake. Given the

country that we had passed through we could see why the local airport was 50 kilometers out of town where the land flattened out well away from the mountains, almost to Argentina in fact, the runway ends almost at the border. On the road various airport shuttles had passed us so far today.

Past the turnoff we had a bit of a climb before rolling relatively level along the side of the hills above the wide flat valley below us. The views towards the east were out to Argentina and the wide open pampas. We had plenty of climbing ahead of us and there was no need for us to lose any height. About 6 kilometers after the turnoff a sign indicated steep road ahead and while it was a grind for a couple of kilometers it was also the beginning of our big long climb for the day. All our ups and downs had already contributed to half our climbing but ahead we had to gain 600 more meters. A short break on the side of the road fueled us up for what was ahead.

We had about 15 kilometers to go so the climbing wasn't continuous and we enjoyed some downs. On the asphalt it was just a matter of going down to the low gears to one that we could plod along in. After about another 7 kilometers the road then turned more westerly into a narrow valley to take us into the mountains. The road got no worse but we did now have headwinds, at times strong as they whistled around the curves of the valley. As we got higher nearing our destination the road turned from asphalt to concrete - something that lasted all the next day. Perhaps concrete lasts better under the snow. There were bamboo poles with painted marks at 1 and 2 meters high along the roadside barriers no doubt to let those clearing the road of winter snow know where the barriers on the side of the road are.

With 2 kilometers to go on our target distance we reached the beginning of Laguna Chiguay and the road leveled out and indeed a sign indicated that camping was 2 kilometers ahead - at the other end of the lake. I suppose putting the sign there would let people know they didn't have to wild camp here.

At the other end of the lake we turned off the road at the far end of the lake rolled down the narrow gravel track into the campground nestled among the trees. There we looked at the site options for one near the toilet block. The one with the best shelter was already occupied by cyclists, an older French couple as we later found out. As we are looking at setting up the ranger came along and told us he would collect our camp fee later and that there was wood for the water heater and it would take half an hour to warm up. We decided that we should light a fire in our fireplace with the wood he had put there however after the tent was all set up we decided to take a short walk to the lake first - it now being well after 6pm. We grabbed some lighter branches on the way back but I decided that there was no point in mucking around with lighting the fire the hard way so just poured on a little white spirits and with a match things were soon going well. I did the same to light the boiler down at the shower only 25 meters away and then set about making some rice and soup on our stove. After a little while I decided to save our fuel and put the rack over the fire that was now going well and we finished the cooking there. By now a local couple had occupied another site and at each of the places the occupants were doing their best to keep warm by a fire.

Talking to them we discovered that the older French couple were coming north and had bussed from El Chalten to Chile Chico direct, a long trip as the Lago Desierto ferry is not running (yet or again?). Knowing it's possible to do this single bus trip may help us decide to skip El Calafate and come straight back up this way. They told us of good camping at the small town of Cerro Castillo, our destination for tomorrow.

In our little amenities building, such that it is, there is a large poster from the Chilean Health Ministry advising how to avoid Hanta when camping. I have mentioned before how the word camping has translated in Spanish in various ways but this poster uses the English "camping". Hanta virus also known as Rocky Mountain Fever is transmitted in the droppings of rodents and is a very unpleasant virus to catch with no cure. We had read about the need to be careful of Hanta virus here in Chile but this the the most explicit public health warning we had come across. A few years ago there were a couple of deaths in from it in southern Chile. The poster is almost enough to frighten you off ever camping again however the precautions are basically simple: avoid mouse or rat droppings, keep all food well away from where rodents can get to it, use a tent with a floor. The last one in the list was to avoid forest fruits with a picture of nice ripe blackberries. Some weeks later back up north when the blackberries were nice and ripe this was one piece of advice that

we ignored when temptation got the better of us.

After we had eaten I braved the shower that was now hot. The boiler is a simple water jacket around a chimney. The shower itself was quite good, getting undressed in the cold wasn't so bad either but getting out and getting dry was challenging in the chill air. We were prepared for an early night but it was light until 10ish. It was well after 9 that we headed to bed all wrapped up for the cold night ahead with some light still. It wasn't worse than our nights in the Andean passes, we were just below 1000m here. Maybe we were more prepared psychologically and wrapped better, that's not to say we weren't cold or we enjoyed the night but it never snowed. We thought it must have got to zero but there was no frost due to the wind not dying off in the night.

Fantastic Scenery and Snow in the Air

Laguna Chiguay to Cerro Castillo

www.pppg.pictures/ChiguayCCastillo.htm

Cyclists, cyclists and more cyclists, we've never seen so many cyclists. Here we are in a cabaña on the main road in Cerro Castillo. It's been a cold day and we were told that the camping ground is really good but it was cold last night and the forecast for tonight is not much better so after cruising town we ended splashing out on a cabin for just the two of us. It was so cold this morning that we didn't get out of the tent until nearly 8...

We had wrapped up well in many layers before going to bed last night but we were still cold, so cold neither of us had wanted to get up and go to the toilet when we needed to. So it wasn't until just before 8 that I emerged from the tent first and lit our fire again. It saved our stove fuel even if I used some to get it going - no mucking around with paper and kindling. The wind had come up and it was the same temperature outside the tent as in - usually the tent is much warmer - but the tent was dry - usually in the cold the inside of the fly is wet with condensation but not this morning. We don't have a huge ride today so we made a relatively leisurely job of breakfast and packing. It was about 11 by the time we were all packed and on the road.

The French woman had told us we had 10 kilometers of climbing and I hadn't bothered to check my saved maps so it was with a little surprise that we rolled downhill for the first 7 kilometers. It was so cold that I had 5 layers on and two pairs of shorts - yes at least I was still in shorts. The sun was out most of the time if wishy washy at times but the wind was racing up the valley to meet us so we couldn't fully appreciate the downhill. Initially the valley side weren't all that steep and it had a bit of a flat floor, on the the side of the river was an old weathered farmhouse looking quite deserted. At some time someone had tried to farm here but it must have been a hard living.

After 7.5 kilometers we turned a corner and headed up another valley as part of today's climb. Some of the mountain scenery is just incredible and there were plenty of photo stops. Mostly it wasn't that steep and would have been pleasant except for the biting wind. Sometimes it was behind us and at other times it hit us in the face but thankfully those bits weren't too long. The valley narrowed and the road was squeezed in next to the river. Nearing the top it opened out again for views of the most incredible mountain of colored volcanic rock with steep peaks and gullies that words and pictures can't describe - but we kept stopping to take pictures anyway. Unfortunately it was a bit cloudy so we could never get good sunlight to bring out the best of the colors in the volcanic rocks. It is easy to see why this is a national park.

The final climb to the pass took ages but maybe that was more psychological as it was more like a 14 kilometers climb and not the 10 we had been told but I can't complain as I had my map to check if I had bothered. About half way we took a stop at a view point for some scenic volcanic mountain and ate our remaining empanada each. Passing clouds precluded the best photos. No matter what you think or want you have to do what you have to do following the road. So at 22 kilometers so for the day we get near the top and the wind is being channeled towards us. Gusts almost bring us to a stop at times. Then as we get to the top, it's a gentle saddle really, it seems that there are these bits of white stuff in the wind blowing horizontally towards us. There are more as we start going downhill. Others we met later agreed that it was snow - but it wasn't enough to settle or even survive hitting the road.

Heading downhill we couldn't even gain speed and at times we were almost stopped. We stopped and put our rain jackets on for extra wind protection - 6 layers now. The valley we had to follow down was a wind tunnel and it wasn't until we were a couple of kilometers down from the saddle that we got free of its effect. From there on it was relatively plain sailing. We stopped at the lookout over the famous curving section of the road up the Cuesta del Diablo for a rest and some photos.

Nearly at the bottom we met an Irish cyclist (later we found to be Gavin) coming up the other way from Puerto Ibanez. He had come that way because of the problems with the ferries at Lago O'Higgins and had cycled up Ruta 40 into the wind day after day. He has rear Altura panniers, the same brand as my front ones,

the first time I've seen them on the road. He has no front panniers and that has been a problem with light front steering.

We leave him and soon turn right at the junction at the bottom to continue another 7 kilometers downhill to Cerro Castillo. There we cruise around for over half an hour checking out places to stay. We pass on a hospedaje, the rooms aren't that big. We stop in at a restaurant but they don't have rooms and then we settle on this expensive cabin by the main road. That it turns out puts us in a central position to see all who go by.

A woman rides in and she is Katherine from Australia. She had talked with Gavin at the top of the curves and he had told her a couple of Australians were ahead so she was keen to catch up with them. New Zealand and Australian accents sound the same to an Irishman, it was of course us that he had met. As we talk a couple of French men go by they have come north from O'Higgins and were in a group that got across the lake on a cattle boat. They had walked Lago Desierto and it took them 10 hours and they are young and fit. They dismissively say that we wouldn't be up to it. Later a Dutch couple pass by, they would like something like our cabin but our adjoining one is full. Later I get a knock on the door from people looking for a place to stay - it's not obvious to go to the house next door - it seems we were lucky to get here early and get this place.

I get ahead - we went over the road with Katherine to the famous restaurant that is two old buses joined together. She has come from Colombia and tells us there's a couple of Kiwis on the road back a bit - her mother has been following their blog. There is a bit of silence for a moment as the mental wheels grind in our heads and we realize that it is us and our blog - we have jumped past her with our bus ride. We work out that we have been close on and off and she was one of the cyclists I saw south of Santa Lucia the day I hitched back, she had camped further south than us. She confirmed that on her thermometer it was zero at our camp last night. She had camped the night at the other end of the lake not realizing how close the campground was ahead.

So as we settle into our cabin our friendly host Eliana lets us use her computer to check email and I do a quick status update on the journal. It seems there is no wifi in town because there is no fiber optic cable yet but she has a 3g modem on her computer - they do all have cell phones here. We get our fire lit but I'm still writing this with 4 layers on inside, it's not so cold out of the wind but hardly tropical. The day was sunnier than it seemed and even though I put sunblock on I still seem to have caught some sun. Out our window is a great view of Cerro Castillo, the magnificent mountain after which this small town is named. Cloud comes and goes but I get a few photos of it almost clear of cloud as evening draws in. As evening arrived the sky cleared but the wind didn't abate much and is howling around us as we head to bed after a large can of fruit for supper due to our late lunch.

The Patagonian Headwind

Cerro Castillo to Río Ibáñez camp

www.pppg.pictures/CCastilloRioIbanez.htm

Today we are camped with the tent in a sheltered spot beside the Rio Ibáñez only 31 kilometers from Cerro Castillo. If it not been for a chance meeting with a group of northbound cyclists we would have passed this spot and there are apparently very few spots to camp on the road ahead for more distance than we were prepared to ride today so we consider it a good choice. Distance and hills were not the problem today but the wind. We had been struggling into a head wind that had steadily built up and then when on a sheltered spot on the road I happened to look back to Alison and there beside me was the start of a track angling back off the road. There four cyclists were finishing a cup of tea. This led us to decide that we would stay at this spot tonight not having made it as far as hoped when we started out this morning.

The day dawned with sun and blue sky but before we got up it started to cloud over, there was hardly any wind, something unimaginable the night before. Hopes of an early start were dashed when the bakery wasn't going have any bread ready until after 10:30. We had decided we would tag along with Kathrine who we met last night but she decided to take off when we were delayed. We waited in the panadería - just a room built off an ordinary house - for the pans to come out of the oven so we got them steaming hot.

Back up to the road the concrete ended at the edge of town with a stiff little climb on a very corrugated shingly road. The first order of the day was climbing, not always but we had to gain 250m to get around the steep bit in the river gorge. This was hard land, glacial rocky country with not so much vegetation but it is farmed more or less by cattle. Almost immediately after leaving we crossed over the narrow gorge that the Rio Ibáñez flows through, Cerro Castillo is located on what is essentially the terminal moraine of some ancient glacier blocking the valley. The river for some reason cut through solid rock very impressively rather than through the gravel of the moraine. Just on the other side a farmer had his cattle, horses and sheep in his yards for whatever reason. They learn young here – he had his son, maybe 5 at most sitting in the saddle with him as he wrangled the cattle in the yard. Interestingly there was an alpaca with the cattle, I have read that an alpaca in a herd of cattle can act a a leader that the cattle will follow.

As we climbed several long switchbacks it was clear that we had not beaten the wind after all and it continued to grow in our faces. We caught up with Katherine on a particularly good vista across to Cerro Castillo Mountain. Although cloudy the cloud was above the mountain and we had changing views of Cerro Castillo and the mountains around it as we moved along up the valley. We continued to climb on miserable ripio road. The steep corners were cut up as usual into loose washboard although in general the gradient wasn't too bad however the day's wind was growing all the time in our faces keeping us slow. After we had our first high point of the day we had a bit of a run down for a few kilometers that was also sheltered and then all too soon it was up again for a few more kilometers. All the time we were moving west and into wetter country and the forest was getting more verdant. After another bit of climb we decided to have a bit of a lunch stop at the top which was where Katherine passed us having dropped behind a while back. Starting again brought us to a view of Laguna Verde then down to Rio Ibáñez on a particularly gravelly descent ending with a bridge crossing the river into Laguna Verde.

We were now on a wide valley and had a long straight ahead of us and about halfway down there was a bus shelter seemingly in the middle of nowhere but there was a side road so maybe that was the reason for it. Here we caught up with Katherine again and we all took a rest out of the headwind in the shelter. We now traveled along the river valley, mostly flat as the whole valley seems some sort of flat marshy area. After that we moved towards the river that was in a clear channel and mostly on our side of the valley. That meant some short climbs around bits where the river cuts in. On one of these just after a point where there is a flying fox (zip wire) we found ourselves blown to a stop and had to walk. It may have only been 50 meters to clear the vicious bit but it was disheartening. In the distance we could see the valley ahead where we turned south to leave the Rio Ibáñez, so near and yet so far in this wind.

That's when we got to this sheltered spot on what was a bit of a gentle climb and I had got ahead and looked back to Alison and saw the four cyclists down off the road. Tim and Sharon with Joe and Lizzy from the UK started in Ushuaia. They were friends of Sara's who we had met in Puerto Montt and we had been on the eye out for each other and may have almost missed each other but for my chance stop. They were finishing a cup of tea stop. They did the "Walk of Doom" around Lago Desierto because the ferry wasn't running. They then waited about 5 days before getting a cattle boat across Lago O'Higgins. We talked and examined each other's bikes this caused me to notice a rack mount loose on my rear rack so I realized I needed to do a general tighten. They tell us climbing starts soon with not many camping opportunities.

It starts to shower a bit as they leave so we decide to stay put and set up the tents. Down off the road there is a nice spot sheltered by scrubby trees and bushes from the wind racing down the valley and with a bubbling creek with clear clean water only a few meters away. Water is always an important consideration in taking a camp spot. There is a ring of fire stones so we are not the first to have camped here. It was an easy decision to make.

Once set up eventually we make a hot drink. I introduce Katherine to our Kelly Kettle with which she immediately falls in love. She gets endless joy from dropping twigs down the chimney to keep it going. I go exploring and wander across the creek to where there is a corral and perhaps the remains of an old settler's house. Later we choose the easy option and cook instant mash and have an early night.

An Abandoned House for the Night

Rio Ibáñez Camp to Rio Murta

www.pppg.pictures/RioIbanezRioMurta.htm

We had been told of this abandoned house yesterday by the northbound cyclists we met and we had previously read of people using it. When Dan and Eva told us it was only 25 kilometers further that seemed a sensible place to stop for the night and that is where I've started to write today's diary - that strange warming yellow thing in the sky has made an occasional reappearance for us. When we started this morning we weren't quite sure how far we would get but here is as good as anywhere, perhaps better.

We woke at 7, rather late considering we were in the tent. It had been cold again overnight but according to Katherine's thermometer only down to about 8. The tent was mostly dry due to the wind apart from some residual drops from the showers in the night but they dried off when wiped. We rolled out about 9:30 without terrible enthusiasm due to the wind that hadn't died off. It wasn't as strong or as cold as yesterday but was still a 4 layer start for me. There were a few farms along the road although some houses looked deserted and abandoned. We made a stop at a bit of a lookout across the river. Here it was more like a wide estuary with shallow channels meandering across a wide sandy flood plain. Gaunt tree trunks were stood rotting slowly away. This was the aftermath of an eruption of Volcan Hudson some years ago with volcanic scoria washing down and filling the valley in front of us.

In an hour or so we had made the 8 or so kilometers to where we turned off up the valley to the south to Paso Corfe that would get us through to the Rio Muerta. At the turn were a couple of sheds and some firewood stacks and from behind the trees I hear the whimpering of a dog, poor thing is very friendly and desperate for some human attention. He has a mate that barks and looks less friendly but as I want to take a snap across the fence for my wood pile photo collection I pick up a stone "just in case". The first dog knows what stones are all about and shrinks away from me cowering tail between his legs and it takes a little for him to get his confidence again to come back to me.

Around the corner is a short flat bit of road before we start the big climb of the day. There is a side road and once climbing we see that down it a bit there is a brand new suspension bridge but to where? There are just more valleys and a few farms up that way. It's not a big hill really as we only have to climb a couple of hundred meters and the gradient is not too bad. We climb first up to a bit of a river terrace and then more gently along the hillside. It's now clear to see why we climbed immediately and not more gently up the valley as the river is well below is a narrow gorge. We climb along gently, up and down a bit for a few kilometers with radiata plantation pine forest either side - and some trees had even been low pruned (I know that's only of interest to forester types but it's not usual here, it gives clear knot free timber). Some trees are poor specimens as they are planted in volcanic scoria - there's hardly any nutrients for them to grow on and they will never amount to much.

The wind is chill but we find a bit of a sheltered spot for our first bite and drink on the road for the day. We had left Katherine behind a while back at the first climb but while we are stopped she catches up with us. Moving on again the river has caught up with us and the valley widens out. Down and up a bit we consistently climb gently for more kilometers. In parts here the large trees are dead from the blast from the eruption of Volcán Hudson across the valley from us in 1991. We come across the biggest wood yard I have ever seen here. Mostly we have seen wood cut into meter lengths and then stacked but this is wood from large trees and has been cut to fire length and split and stacked in many long rows. Each being about as high as a man could stack. I'm impressed - if only I had this much firewood waiting for me back home.

Further on in we are on a long straight and we see two cyclists in the distance coming our way. When we meet we stop and talk and share notes for 15 minutes or more with Dan & Eva. They started the "Walk of Doom" around Lago Desierto with those we met yesterday but took two days. Eva tells us it is now 25 kilometers to the abandoned house where they stayed last night. A couple more kilometers and we have crossed a large bridge and the side of the road is sheltered from the wind and the sun is pushing through the

clouds here so we stop for lunch. It's also time to take off a couple of layers, the least we have been wearing for days. We are getting pretty near the top of the "saddle" of Paso Cofré now, it's not much, on one side of the road the land drops away the way we are going and on the other a river comes out of a side valley and goes the way we came. At the top there are some cattle yards in the trees. We come across a couple of horsemen leading 4 other saddled horses along the road going our way. We wonder where they must live around here, it's a good distance since we have seen any sign of a house. We have to pass them carefully so as not to spook their horses. After a bit of a drop we go up again a little and it is obvious why as we skirt the steep edge of Laguna Cofré.

Not much more and we start the steep 6 kilometers descent to the Rio Murta. Not that it's all downhill, we cross a side river in a narrow gorge and have to crawl up the other side on bad steep ripio for a very short distance (translate to get off and push). I have let the others go ahead and on one corner a car stops and it is a Chilean family that we met having lunch back in Cerro Castillo several days ago when we were looking for a places to stay. We talk a little, they have been south and are returning north now.

When we reach the Rio Murta we almost immediately see an abandoned house with a sign saying not to enter - this tallies with what we have been told that there are two houses. Just around the corner is a gate to a large flat grassy area by the river, we surmise that this is the camping area that some people have used. We have still only done 37 kilometers for the day and need to go another 8 to the abandoned house. We were told the two houses were close but I suppose on the empty road in Patagonia 8 kilometers is close.

The road is now flat and generally down hill but with a few rises and falls. As we near our target distance we cut off away from the river and there is a small climb for tired legs. At 45 kilometers we ask ourselves how accurate was the distance we were told earlier but then but then a couple of hundred meters later after a small rise we see the house and the large slip across the road. I am impressed that a casual 25 kilometers turns out to be so accurate. Alison recognizes the slip from what she had been told in the girls part of the conversation yesterday but I hadn't heard that. She hadn't thought to convey this information to me as I had been musing how far we still had to go, apparently it hadn't registered as being important yesterday. In the gateway are some rocks forming an arrow as we were told so this must be the place. Just to the south is a small lagoon. A creek flows clear water through a culvert under the road just a few meters to the north of the gate.

We had got ahead of Katherine and have been wondering if she stopped elsewhere but we start to unpack anyway. I put one of our fluoro orange vests on a post at the entrance off the road to the house so that she doesn't miss us. After over half an hour she comes along. We decided to set up our tent without its fly in one room of the house for protection from insects. We have to choose the end of our room away from the open window and the missing floor boards.

We wonder the story of the place. It has a new roof of shiny corrugated iron, well relatively new, there is an old broken stove outside the door that may have been once inside under the chimney hole in the roof. Some windows still have glass in them but one looks recently broken, it the last few days even, later I pick up the broken glass. Some have had clear plastic sheet fixed over them but it has long crumbled away. It has two rooms, one has been lined a bit but not the other. The door is a sheet of particle board of more recent origin. Outside is a ring of rocks making a fire place of recent use and there is even a grill to put over it. Out the back is the collapsed remains of an older slab house that may have been the original dwelling. There are old rotten tree trunks dating from the time of original settlement on the land so it must have been a settler farm at some stage. It looks like the house was never completed. Perhaps it was abandoned after the eruption of nearby Volcán Hudson in 1991. These mysteries will remain, it is a roof over our heads for the night. Some cyclists have left their cards and others have written their names near the door, we recognize some of them.

It has been a day that was not as long as it could have been but it's a good place to stay and we were told there is not much along the road. Our supplies are running out of nice stuff and we hoped to make this trip in one night so we are down to reserve rations so it's some flavored rice for a meal. With our tent in the house without fly for a bit more warmth overnight as while it is a roof and walls the wind comes in the open windows and we don't expect it to provide much in the way of keeping us warm.

Riding Beside a Glacial Lake Doesn't Mean Level Road

Rio Muerta to Rio Tranquillo

www.pppg.pictures/RioMurtaRioTranquillo.htm

Today I can start writing my journal on while sitting on my bed in a hospedaje in Rio Tranquillo. This is a first for us on this trip, after a couple of nights in the tent we wanted something a bit more spacious. We plan to be here for a couple of days so having a room is best for all our stuff. Cabins are expensive here and we didn't feel we needed such luxury. After cruising town we stopped at this place and the only room that was still to be had has 2 beds - far better than a "matrimonial". Matrimonial rooms with a double bed tend to be smaller than one with two singles - not that the room is much wider than the beds are long but they seem comfortable. Hospedajes are usually the frequent of the younger set, we could be the parents of most of those here - a bunch of Israeli girls and a Danish couple however there is one older fellow here and like Katherine he is camping out the back. In fact this place is more like a hostel in that we can use cooking facilities. Never mind, it is out of the wind and is well lit with a couple of windows. After a couple of days on the road a shower was only surpassed in urgency by a good late lunch. - we hadn't eaten a lot all day knowing when we started that we would end up in a town with food.

The day dawned cloudy and cool with some blue sky above. The road was remarkably busy at night with trucks, well busy is a relative term I suppose, there weren't many really but 2 or 3 being greater than zero at night is busy in our opinion. We were up early - perhaps a little too early at 6:30 and there was no real enthusiasm to get going early. We may have been under a roof but the house offered little comfort from the cold. Not freezing but still not warm either and we stayed well dressed in our sleeping bags. Before leaving we added our names to a growing list on the wall by the door. It was about 8:45 when we rolled out the gate.

The first 10 kilometers following the Rio Murta were consistently downhill and the bits we climbed were small and gentle. Sometimes the Rio Muerta would come over to our side of the valley and the road would be carved beside it in to the rocky valley wall. As the valley opened out there was more farming with occasional houses. Some were new but at one there were clearly 3 generations of farmhouses sitting together. After 90 minutes on the road we crossed the Rio Murta and were hit with a small sharp climb - not much really but after our rolling down river it was a portent of the rest of the day to come. We took a short stop to fuel up and then continued. On this side of the river the road went up and down along the edge of the valley well away from the river at times. The Chilean army engineers that built this road were clearly not cyclists - draw a straight line on the map and build the road there rather than take a slightly longer but leveler route around the contours.

It took well less than another hour to reach the junction of the side road to Bahia Muerta, 20 kilometers for the day so far. We know that it's about 5 kilometers to the village but we have no reason to go there. At the junction there was a place with cabañas, rooms, camping and food. It may have been a good target to ride to yesterday if we had known of it's existence but our night in the abandoned house was doubtless more noteworthy.

A large billboard sign beside the road indicated that this road had been worked on a year or so ago. We had also been warned of this and the state of the road ahead. We had been traveling on a good compacted gravel road swept clean of loose gravel but now we entered well rutted washboard road that was to last with few breaks for the rest of the day. A few kilometers after beginning this stretch we rounded a corner to see hay making in progress on large flat paddocks at the head of the lake, one tractor pulling a bailer and another cutting the next batch of grass. It seemed incongruous to see these wide open paddocks of grass after passing through rocky half cleared glacial cattle land for so long.

Soon we reached Lago General Carrera proper and in places where the land was flat we were quite a way from it. Beside the road we came across a Chilean man mending a gate at his house with his young sons and two dogs, we conversed a little - some Chileans are better to understand than others and he did have a little English. He told us that it was only 19 kilometers to go. From then on it seemed a trudge, we did have

lots of up and down giving us quite a large total climb for the day. Some straight bits were more rutted than the curving which is unusual and keeping concentration on this stuff is tiring. At one point just as we started after a short stop Katherine's front rack mount broke that we repaired with a zip-tie. A couple of hundred meters further on we were down beside the lake so we decided to stop at a little beach for some lunch. It was warming up and the sun was coming through, this was a stranger that we had not seen for more days than we could be bothered to count. We started taking layers off and after lunch I was down to two layers, two less layers than for more days than I could easily remember.

A bit further on we start a long straight across a large delta from a side river and there is a farm house beside the road with an incredibly colorful entry path to it of many colored roses. Someone had made a little place of beauty in the uncompromising landscape. At the end of the straight we have to climb to a bridge and on it I decided to take off another layer. While I was doing this along came northbound Dimitri, a Russian cyclist who had come across Lago Desierto and who told us the boat was running 3 times a day now. I wonder how those only a few days ahead would take this if they knew. For the want of a few days delay they could have saved themselves the hard walk around the lake edge – but they do have a story to tell.

From this point on we hit some more up and downs that seemed to get worse. We came to one that seemed steep from a distance and it was no different when we got there. As we were climbing an army truck passed us crawling and then almost stopped changing down on the steepest bit. This steepness means that the road is all churned up and it's easy to lose steering when crawling up riding at walking pace so we ended up walking. It leveled before a further short steep climb that Katherine cycled and I now realized she had a 22T front sprocket, 2 less teeth than our 24T sprockets - next time.... Up and down we went on the road carved into the steep lakeside until the very last drop into Rio Tranquilo where at the beginning of town the cobbled road started.

We cruised around working out what might work out as the best accommodation. We went up to the south west end of town around behind the soccer field and down a narrow path to a place with camping and some rooms that we had been told about but decided that it wasn't for us. It looked nice enough but we wanted something a bit more central. We noticed plenty of cabins around but the ones that we asked at we deemed relatively expensive. Eventually we settled on this room in this hospedaje a couple of blocks from the waterfront. As well as room they have some cabins including some under construction inside which some people have erected their tents. It also seems they own some cabins on the next door section. Once settled we went out down the road for a good late lunch of bistec a lo pobre = steak eggs onions and chips at a small place opposite the Copec station.

This evening it certainly seems full and must be good value if it is full of Israeli backpackers. Most of them are cooking crowding out the kitchen in the evening. Katherine is also cooking. There is a wood stove and a gas stove in the kitchen. Rosa who runs the place is hovering around keeping an eye on things. When Katherine starts cooking some pasta on the gas stove Rosa tells her to cook it on the wood stove. I guess you can understand why, gas is expensive to ship down here and there is wood everywhere.

After our good lunch we don't need much for the evening but I go back down to the place we had lunch for a sandwich. Later we walked a couple of blocks to the Destino Patagonia place, it's just a house with a bit added as an office but well off the main drag. There we checked out the possibilities for a tour to the San Raphael Glacier. There may be a slot tomorrow if an unconfirmed couple do confirm otherwise it may be the next day. Later in the evening we got a call confirming we could go tomorrow.

Before going to bed for the night we say our goodbyes to Katherine as she is continuing on tomorrow. She has a tight deadline to keep to to get to Usuhuaia so we must part here.

Ventisquero Raphael

Rio Tranquilo Day 1

www.pppg.pictures/VentisqueroRaphael.htm

Alison likes glaciers. Today is the day we splashed out on a tour to the San Raphael Glacier. This is probably beyond the reach of many the touring cyclists we meet as it is so expensive but in planning this trip it was always part of our budget. We are staying in a cheap room but splashing out several weeks worth of expenses in one day. It was an eventful trip and we have no regrets.

Last evening we had been down to the place that organizes tours from here and were told that today was full - but with one couple unconfirmed, no bookings the next day and 2 possible the day after. They run with a minimum of 4. So when they rang back after nine to say we could go today because the unconfirmed couple weren't going we took the opportunity to go today in spite of a suspect weather forecast. We were told to be ready for a 7:00 pickup. Having arrived yesterday on Sunday we weren't really prepared and although breakfast is included with the room it wouldn't be available until after 9 so that meant a bit of an early start to cook our own oatmeal for first breakfast before we were picked up.

So it was a bit after 7 that a camioneta turned up for us - he had another pickup which was good as the cost of the ride was fixed and shared over those going so that immediately halved the cost of the trip to the beginning of the tour. A couple of blocks to the hostel for the other pick up and our driver couldn't raise anyone in the building so it was another block (100m) back home for our driver so that he could phone but he got no answer. Back again to the hostel he went in and eventually some life, the other couple weren't quite out of bed yet - local Chileans - need I say more. Eventually they came out and we were on the way 20 minutes late, our driver says that he will have to drive fast.

There is a picture of a bicycle on this road on Google earth and I have read the journal of a couple of cyclists who came this way a couple of years ago so I'll describe the road and trip out a bit for anyone thinking of going out this way. It is a dead end so it's there and back 77 kilometers each way unless you manage to cadge a ride but the scenery is spectacular. As we leave town following the Rio Tranquilo to Lago Tranquilo we have to climb. Within the first few kilometers there is a bit of corrugated ripio but in general the road is a good gravel base swept clean of loose stuff. About 5 kilometers out of town there is a cemetery beside the road and a enough flat land for a farmer to be making hay at this time of year otherwise we are in the bottom of a steep sided glacial valley. Here it is quite dry and the hillsides are grassy littered with the rotting trunks of the fallen trees. Cattle farming continues more or less until Lago Tranquilo at about 20 kilometers, the road is good but in the camioneta I don't think I appreciate the climbing until we return later in the day and see how downhill it is. It is cloudy so we can't see the mountain tops until we return in the evening but they are spectacular.

After Lago Tranquilo we reach the high point and start to fall towards Lago Bayo at about 40 kilometers. There is a hostel run by some Germans around here just beside the road. All the while we are heading west towards wetter country as the forest becomes increasingly luxuriant until when we reach the sea we are in rainforest again. Before that there are some spectacular peaks with high ice fields as we are on the northern side of the northern Patagonian Ice field. At about 45 kilometers we pass the terminal moraine for Glacier Exploradores - a destination in itself for many tourists. It was only 5 or 6 years ago that the road finally reached it to here. From the front seat of the truck I get a glimpse of the glacier but that's all. The Rio Exploradores running out of it is muddy and milky from all the glacial powdered rock in the water. We now follow the river through forest down to the triple confluence of Ríos San Juan, Teresa and Exploradores.

The road only reached here a couple of years ago making these tours to the San Raphael Glacier possible from Rio Tranquilo but we are still not at our destination. Here we have the recently completed new foundations and abutments for a suspension bridge but the steel works are not here yet. It is raining now and we have to don our rain jackets when we get out of the truck. To get to the other side of the river we have to cross in a small outboard powered boat that can take only four at a time. We are given life jackets to put on

for the short trip across the swift river. On the other side there is a van waiting for us and another for a group going on a similar tour with another company. A large wire across the river and a makeshift raft attached to it are the likely way the vans got across but you wouldn't get me on it.

We now follow an old new road. There are old pictures of this road on the Internet and it looks like it was built in Pinochet's times but had remained going nowhere unused by wheeled vehicles until recently when the road by which we came reached here from the other direction. The surface is good but the forest seedlings have been encroaching on the road since it was built. I have to say one of the first things it needs when the bridge is completed is a grader! There are couple of places that at some time earthmoving equipment has been brought in to clear a slip where a section of trees has slipped off the hillside and where a rockfall has been bypassed. With about a kilometer to go the road is close to the river and is effectively a stopbank to the river. It is testament to the size of the flood flows here that the river normally well below had over topped the road and washed it out in several places. It is passable but up and down a bit. On arrival at the "port" the road just ends 50 meters short of the substantial wharf and slipway no doubt built when the road was constructed. When the bridge is complete then a parking area and the like will need to be constructed to fill out this are so all in all it's not just the bridge that needs to be completed to complete this final section here to Bahía Exploradores.

There is a building on high piles, nearly 2 meters off the ground as testament to the floods that can come down the river. Here we are taken into this building housing our boat crews and given the chance to use the toilet and we are kitted out with our life jackets for the day. Our small boat and another slightly bigger for the other group are tied beside the river bank, no jetty or platform, (well there is but it is for bigger boats) we just step off the earthen bank and are on board.

We cast off and off we go with the swift current. For the first few kilometers we follow down the tidal section of the Rio Exploradores on the current through its delta and into the estuary. The estuary remains cloudy with the glacial water. The boat seems to take an unnecessarily long route around the edge of the bay but the occasional tree poking up in the middle of the muddy water indicates the area must still be shallow here. It's a bit of a head wind and a bit choppy and it's still raining. It's well away from here before we finally reach clear water. We have the choice of squeezing into the cabin or standing outside to appreciate the scenery. Our guide pulls out a picnic box and offers coffee and muffins. The hot drink is most welcome in the chilling cold. We are glad we haven't relied on this for "breakfast".

A promontory, probably some bit of terminal moraine of an ancient glacier forces our boat across to the other side of our small fiord before we enter a main fiord. The the main fiord comes from the north and joins this one and we now travel to the south into a winds and waves. We pass several Salmon farms, quite large with floating buildings housing the workers. It all gets quite choppy for our small boat that slaps down into the troughs from the tops of the waves and we are slowed right down at times. It's a combination of wind and tidal flow out of the fiords that is making a very choppy sea and our captain has to ease off the speed for a while. Past the junction of another northerly fiord that runs far north to Puerto Chacabuco things settle down well and the running gets progressively smoother.

Paso de Quesahén is the first of several places where moraine pushed out by glacial advances has almost blocked Fiordo Elefantes. The water is relatively shallow and we must choose our route past a navigation light on some rocks as the outgoing tide builds a chop on the water as is swirls over the shallows. On a bit more and we get a view off to the east to Glaciar Gualas in a valley off to the side. We have to cross from one side of the fiord to the other in the gaps, at each the outgoing tide is creating quite a tidal rip but otherwise the sea has become quite smooth and the going is good.

The weather has remained miserable but our guide is confident that it will be acceptable at the glacier and we continue - there was always the possibility of a turnaround - it's so isolated out here that you have to get here to know what the weather is doing. Eventually we reach the river leading to the glacial laguna. Perhaps not really a river as it is still very tidal but the predominant flow is out of the lagoon from the glacial meltwater. We see our first small pieces of ice but it is not until we enter Laguna San Rafael proper that we see the

glacier and all the icebergs in the lagoon.

First we traverse the lagoon passing many brilliant blue icebergs, not huge but spectacular as the melt slowly grounded in the shallow lagoon. We cross to a wharf where we get off for lunch. Down the track a short distance there is a new toilet block, our only chance today apart from the side of the boat. Then we reach the foundations of an old hotel built in the 1930's but which burnt down 20 years ago. We were to have had lunch here. The other small boat that left with us was a bit bigger and faster and the passengers and crew have already taken their lunch off their boat down a short track down to the beach where you can see the glacier. However the rain is starting and the other group are returning with their lunch. We walk down the narrow track to the rocky beach where we may have eaten but then we also return to our boat where we squeeze into the cabin to eat while the rain passes. We are each given our individual lunches prepacked in plastic containers. One is insulated and has kept a salmon dish a bit warm and that is accompanied with salad and a bread roll. Salmon of course is easy to come by down here from all the Salmon farms about. We then head back out onto the lagoon to go up to the glacier.

We spent over an hour amongst the icebergs near the glacier just drifting mostly, looking and watching and trying to take a picture. You just had to be there, I tried taking photos but it was hard to do a landscape picture off the rocking boat. We watched as ice came crashing off and the roar and waves reached us. There were several other large boats there down from Puerto Chacabuco and people in smaller semi inflatable boats are going far closer than we do - too close for me. One of the traditions is to drink whiskey out of a vessel carved from glacial ice so our guide pulls a suitable chunk from the sea and with his pocketknife carves a hole. Out comes the whiskey and we all have a bit - and more later and later again - there are only six of us to share the bottle and it's cold so a wee dram is much appreciated. The rain came and went a bit but did clear from a long shower just before we left. It was a bit frustrating to leave just as the sun came out at its best for the time we were there - the consolation was that as we sailed away across the lagoon it clouded over again. In spite of the weather we were glad to have come here.

While we have come all the way down a long fiord to get here the south side of the Laguna San Raphael is separated from the next bit of sea, Golfo do Penas, not by mountains but a low swampy plain of glacial out wash material from Ventisquero San Quintín, the Istmo de Ofqui. In 1935 a canal was started through this section but the builders didn't get far before giving up. They only had a to build a few kilometers to connect to a river going out the other way. The advantage of such a canal would be that it would be possible to then navigate from Puerto Montt in the north all the way through the Fiords to Puerto Natales in Chilean Terra del Fuego without having to venture out into the open Pacific Ocean. Ships plying this route need to be capable of sailing in the open southern ocean but smaller ships can navigate the more sheltered fiords.

We remember this bit of open ocean from 23 years ago when we sailed south from Puerto Montt to Puerto Natales over 2 days and 3 nights. We headed out into the open ocean with it's westerly swells coming and rolling the ship about in the evening. We had just been fed a delicious spaghetti bolognese and for most of us tourists it ended up being thrown up over the rail to feed the fish below. It was cruel irony that the next night in calm waters we had blood sausage that only the locals ate. The idea of a canal has not completely died but with branches of the Carretera Austral reaching out to the sea further south now I'm sure it would make sense to go south by road as far as possible and then use ferries through the fiords around the southern Patagonian icefields. Somehow however the thought of a canal would be revenge on the seas for taking that spaghetti bolognese from us.

The trip back was a bit drizzly at first and we stayed in the cramped but warm cabin but then it cleared and we could see more of the mountains that we missed on the way down. The sea was much smoother now and we continued onwards playing cat and mouse with the other small boat that has been with us for the day. A few more tots of whiskey are sampled as the bottle is for us today. The hot water in the thermos runs out so our crew gets out a small gas burner to heat up more water for much appreciated hot drinks.

Soon enough we were winding our way back up the estuary and into the river when with less than a kilometer to go our motor suddenly stopped. All that thumping into the waves on the way south had used

more fuel than we should have it would seem. No one seemed to panic but the crew checked the fuel and we had none. This didn't seem to worry them and the other boat had been called by radio as soon as we stopped and was coming back as we drifted downstream in the flowing river. A rope was thrown across and tied between the two boats and then we were towed back to port in a few minutes - it all seemed like this had happened before and was not unusual.

We were quickly off loaded onto the river bank and dry land. Back in our van up to the river crossing it wasn't raining now. At the crossing a woman was selling fresh currants. There are a couple of houses here. It never ceases to amaze me where people have cleared a little land for a house and graze cattle. While the road up from the sea may be thirty something years old until this new road from Rio Tranquillo reached the other side of the river last year it must have been an incredibly isolated existence requiring self sufficiency. Now tourists will pass their front door giving a chance to make a little money. Postscript: Construction of the suspension bridge is scheduled for late 2015.

Our ride was waiting for us on the other side and the ferrying of passengers four at a time was repeated. Soon we are on the way home. The cloud had lifted and rain gone but so were the multitude of small waterfalls cascading off the near sheer sides of the valley walls. We could see the mountains better but the light wasn't good for photos.

I'd love to do this route by bike with all the time to stop and look but an unloaded bike with someone to bring me back. So far there is nothing down the road apart from a hostel at 45 kilometers, camping spots could be found but not good ones easily. With the completion of the bridge there will no doubt come more traffic and more of everything. There are a few farm houses all the way to the estuary - some look long abandoned however.

Back into town we head first to the office to pay - with everything we hadn't had a chance to pay earlier and anyway I'm not sure what we would have had to pay if we had turned around due to bad weather. It's only a couple of blocks so we walk back to the hostel. Back in our room it had been a long day and we had been thinking of cooking but decide not to after such a long day. We went down to the main street for a Churrasco - a sort of giant plate sized burger - I paid extra for the "completo" - with lettuce. The hostel filled up with a van load of Argentinian young people - it seems a regular thing by the way the driver knows our host. They are cooking so we are glad not to have bothered. It wasn't dark until after 10:00 but we were off to sleep in spite of any noise from the crowd.

Lazy Day

Rio Tranquilo Day 2

www.pppg.pictures/RioTranquilloCampingLeones.htm

We took a while to get out of bed this morning, the first time in a week that we could afford such luxury. Knowing rain was forecast for another day we had no desire to move on. For me the morning was spent writing the journal and odd jobs like making sure all our batteries were charged. Alison went walking and found all the shops in town. The problem down here is that things run out especially at this time of year and until the trucks arrive from up north there is no resupply so she went around to find what we wanted from different shops. We got some washing done by a woman across the corner from the hostel as there are no facilities here at the hostel. There is a washing machine in the bathroom but it is for the sheets here and not available even for hire to guests.

We asked about changing rooms this morning, we had realized that the room across the hall was a double bed with ensuite bathroom – no more queuing for a single shower we thought. Rosa was happy for us to move, perhaps it is easier to fill a room with two beds than a double. When we had arrived two girls had been sharing the double. Our new room has much more room to spread out our gear. There is even a small pot belly stove for heating. We wonder if the family actually use this room outside the high season but cram themselves into a couple of small rooms in the summer season to make as much money as they can. You can understand if they did with a short summer season down here to make their yearly profits.

Lunch was down the road where we ate last night and after lunch we went over to the main road along the foreshore. A bus had just come in and stopped for a few minutes and we saw the young couple from our hostel in Coyhaique. This was the first bus south that they could get on due to the influx of local tourists. They were heading to a cherry festival in Chile Chico on the south side of the lake. Then across the road we saw the Swiss family that we met in San Martin weeks ago arrive on their bikes. After some catchups it was back to our room. We passed the afternoon in much the same way as the morning. Although for me writing our journal is satisfying it takes time. Alison went to the bakery for some bread and came back with cake – along with the bread. From what we could buy we settled on cooking spaghetti with tomato sauce along with the mild spiced chorizo sausage and a cask (500ml) of local wine.

Another lazy day

Rio Tranquillo Day 3

Raining again. We were happy to stay put and spent some of the morning on the Internet but then in the middle of making some banking transaction the current Internet quota ran out. When Rosa who runs the place returned she said it wouldn't be until 6 that it was going again, *i.e.* that she was going to pay for more quota. Like Cerro Castillo there is no fiber in town but there is 3G cell service so there is a 3G dongle attached to the wireless router. Unless the family wants to use the Internet the quota is only topped up daily in the evening irrespective of the number of guests. The three Spanish girls camping were a bit miffed as they were in the middle of planning where to go next. Rosa said there was free Internet at the Copec petrol station down the road.

I went out for a walk down to the foreshore to get a bit of an idea about conditions for a boat tour to the marble caves but the boats weren't running due to wind and rain and even if they had been I'm not sure we would want to go. I was passed on the street by the Swiss Family heading off on their southward journey undaunted by the weather. Now we've seen plenty of street dogs about in Chile so far and as far as we know lot's don't have owners and there are a few here. There are also chickens wandering around the streets here and while there is a woman around the corner from the hostel that sells eggs we don't know if the wanderers have homes or are just feral. Do they get fed or just scratch around and who feeds the dogs, they all look pretty skinny? Well I saw one answer this morning when a dog had one of the wandering chicken freshly dead in it's mouth.

Later when we went down for lunch at our usual place across the road from the petrol station and there I took out the laptop and I could get enough signal while at our table but Alison couldn't connect on her Nexus tablet so I finished my banking there. We had the same as yesterday - Alison soup and steak eggs and chips for me. We managed a passable conversation with some locals in the restaurant - well when I say locals - they were from Santiago - It was easier communicating with them reminding us that it's not just us that is the side of the language problem, it's the local accent here. They had come south and had good weather at Puyuhuapi and the hanging Glacier so we look forward to the same on our return in a few weeks. Having finished lunch we walked outside to see a couple of young cyclists - it turned out that they were from Santiago so that didn't help us with information from the south.

Two of the Spanish girls were huddled in the lee of a shop out of the worst of the rain next to the gas station getting some Internet. I guess you can understand a bit that 3G Internet costs a lot and each daily charge up was about \$NZ8 but we figured we stayed here because there was Internet. Everywhere has its quirks and until optical fiber hits town it will be like this - they have only had cell phones here for 3 years or so.

The weather seemed to be lifting as it wasn't raining but as we walked the couple of hundred meters back to the hostel the rain came on heavier and continued into the afternoon. With no letup making us glad we were still here and hadn't hit the road like the Swiss family that I saw leaving earlier. It rained so much the town water supply had to be turned off as the creek supplying it became flooded and dirty. We take the precaution of filtering our water in the wild but in these small towns maybe it just comes from a local river anyway and maybe we should. There's not much hope of a shower tonight, we have some water in our bottles to cook our remaining spaghetti with. If nothing else the wind has died away with the coming of the rain. According to the forecast the big lump of cloud we see on the satellite imagery will have passed by tomorrow morning and we can be on our way.

Big Hills Ahead

Rio Tranquilo to Glacier Leones Cabins and Camping

www.pppg.pictures/CampingLeonesCampingElParque.htm

Tonight I'm looking out the glass doors of our cabin with a bit of a view of Lago General Carrera through the trees, it's a nice place to start my daily journal. Our faithful companion for the day, a dog that followed us from Rio Tranquilo, is sitting patiently outside the door. We probably wouldn't have stopped here except that Katherine had emailed us telling us of the likely spots along the way including this. This one suited us as it turned out it came along when we were ready to stop for the day and there is a little story I didn't tell you from a few days back.

We were having lunch on our hop over the saddle between Rio Ibanez and Rio Murta when a pickup stopped just past us. Not one of the ubiquitous new twin cabs we see a lot of but a large old American pickup truck. This fellow (Colombian as it turned out) got out and came over to us, he had a splitting headache and did we have anything that could help. Alison gave him a couple of Neurofen from our medical kit. Apparently they had worked well and he was very happy. He told us he was working at this place for the summer so when we rolled in he recognized us. Due to predicted cold tonight it didn't take Alison more than a split second to choose a cabin for the night over our tent - it has 3 bedrooms and if anyone else turns up we have to share - just like a hostel. We are feeling confident that no one else will turn up. Anyway he had a word with the owner and got us a discount that has helped sweeten the deal. When we left Rio Tranquilo after some lunch we really didn't know how far we would make it today or that we would be in such relative luxury.

The day started windy as usual but dry and sunny on the lake. We had arranged to go down in search of a boat with 3 young fellows in the hostel to take a tour of the marble caves. A German and a Dutch had been traveling together for weeks since Buenos Aires but they had picked up a local Chilean a few days back. So we set off not really knowing when the boats for the caves tours started each day. By the time we got there plenty of boats had gone out. Their deal is that the minimum price is the six person price so you go with a group or hang around waiting to get tagged up or just pay the minimum. So five of us were happy to pay the price for six.

There are about 4 caravans or little kiosks on the waterfront and somehow someone called over to someone else who made a call on her phone and we were sent to walk the 500 meters down to the wharf. Pablo was looking out for us and he took us to his boat. We donned life jackets and were off in his boat. Now I should say it was still cold so we had 6 layers on including rain jacket. Off across the bay and around the point we went for a 1 ½ hour trip. These caves may not be the 8th wonder of the world but they are impressive and once you are here then they aren't that expensive to do. The boats are small so that they can enter the narrow caves. So we spent time in and around a range of these caves, you really have to look at the pictures. So with something like 104 photos popped off we headed back far glad to have made the little excursion.

It was then after 11 by the time that I was loading the bikes and Alison buying provisions for the next two days camping. It was nearly 12 by the time we were ready to roll so we decided it would be sensible to have something to eat before hitting the road. We went to our usual place for a sandwich and I could connect to the Internet across the road (Copec station), the hostel Internet being out of quota again. A sandwich here is a large round flat bread about the size of a lunch plate and several inches thick into which a hot filling goes. It's substantial white bread, not light fluffy stuff so it makes a good feed. I had meat (cooked steak bits) and cheese and Alison had meat and vege - tomato and frozen green beans. It's tough getting fresh vege down here a long way down a winding road. That did fill us up but it was about 12:30 by the time we headed out on the bikes.

Within 50 meters the cobbles end and we have a short climb, not more than 100 meters long and not all that steep but it's always nice to spin the legs up before hitting the climbing of the day. Two of the Spanish girls from our hostel are trying to hitchhike from there to Chile Chico and are passing the time by throwing a

stick for one of the street dogs who always look for company. The dog is more interested in us however and starts to follow us - 'Go home' we say in both Spanish and English and try the throwing stone action, but still he follows us. Oh well, maybe this dog just wants to travel back down the Carretera and wants company. We have read stories of a dog or dogs following cyclists on this road.

We then have a couple of kilometers of gentle climbing and a bit of leveling and down before beginning the single biggest climb of the day, 250m over about 6 kilometers. Quite a gentle grade by some recent bits so it's not too hard. Out of the wind that comes down the Rio Tranquilo valley we start dropping layers, the sun even seeps through some clouds. But we have plenty of climbing today of the up and down variety. In general the road is good for cycling, reconstructed a few years ago it has a solid base swept clean but has plenty of potholes to wind around. It is far more pleasant to ride than the road north of Rio Tranquilo that we arrived on a few days ago. At one stage we come across a herd of cows being driven towards us by a couple of Gauchos, our dog was frightened of them and hid behind us. As the cows passed I start to move again but that spooked the horse one of the gauchos is riding a little so I stopped - I guess they are used to cars but not bikes.

We are seldom close to the lake and if we are close in distance we are above it in height. For one section the road takes us towards a small saddle cutting away from the lake but we have the compensation of a much smaller lake several kilometers long to ride beside. It's dry bony glacial country, the forest has been burnt off and there are some small farms doing their best on this scrubby country but the briar rose seems to be winning the battle in many places.

After about 20 kilometers of up and down along the lakeside we are approaching the River Leones valley. This is channeling the wind down off the Northern Patagonian ice sheet and out towards us whereas it was previously behind us. A couple more kilometers and we have to head up the valley on a series of gently rising straights for about 7 kilometers. The wind is in our faces, cold and strong but we just have to plod along. We change direction a bit about half way and are more sheltered and with the wind at our sides we get a bit of a relief. We stop at a gateway at what looks like an unoccupied farm for a quick bite to eat and a toilet stop in the bushes.

At about 28.5 kilometers for the day we cross the River Leones and it's incredibly blustery as a side wind. I ride across the bridge (just) but Alison more sensibly having seen me chooses to walk across. Our reward is now at hand as we head down the valley on a gentle slope with the wind behind. Sadly the road changes to a base of larger round river gravel that hasn't been well swept clean - probably recently graded. Nevertheless we make nearly 20kph on the best bits for the next 6 kilometers or so, our dog has no problem keeping up with us at this pace bounding along. As we turn out of the valley to the lake shore we lose a lot of the wind and a bit before 40 kilometers we see a sign "Zona de Carpas" - tent area. Well it's too soon to stop but it also looks like zona de viento - windy spot - not too bad but not that well sheltered and no tents there today. We plod on and a few kilometers later we stop in a sheltered spot near a bridge for a rest and bite. We have made reasonable progress but with the wind having kept our speed down the day is getting late. We decide we will try for the camping at around 50 kilometers we have been told about. It's all pretty flat along the lake here but soon we hit the ups and downs again. We pass over the bridge over the outlet from the lake and there is some sort of lodge place on the other side. It would probably be beyond our price range but even if we thought that we might have stayed there it looked shut with a truck parked sideways across a locked gate.

A bit after 48 kilometers for the day we come to a sign for this place, Glacier Leones camp. There is a well used dirt track down but we are well above the lake and it's steep in places so this had better be good, we aren't likely to come back out today. So we get here and get unpacked into our cabin. Diego brings us some wood and sets the fire, instructs us on using the gas water heater - he has to come back with the metal chimney pipe - this is Chile. He tells us that the Swiss family ended up here last night. It's after 6 by the time we start some rice and walk down to the lake where a couple of lads from a family in another cabin are out in kayaks.

Back we light our fire - it may be warmer than we have had recently but it's not tropical. We then enjoy a shower that doesn't cut out like so many of these gas heaters-well not as much as the last place and where you can stay as long as you like as there's no one else wanting the bathroom.

So here we are, our faithful companion who followed us all day at the door. We seem to be going down in the world from a Canadian to an Australian to a dog. Mind you there may be those that think going from a stropky Aussie Sheila to a faithful dedicated unquestioning dog is going up in the world - but not I.

We had lots of climbing today, around 1000 meters, we are pleased to have got so far with our late start. With no one around we can have an early night for a good start tomorrow.

Running Out of Options

Glacier Leones camping to El Parque Camping

www.pppg.pictures/CampingElParqueCochrane.htm

Today's diary is started at a picnic table at El Parque camping 11 kilometers south of Puerto Bertrand. We haven't made it as far as we hoped for when we set out this morning but when the road deteriorated after lunch we had to make a decision to stop early at the last camping ground before Cochrane. The alternative was to possibly end up camping in some dry unattractive place at the side of the road because we were too tired to continue. So we pulled the plug early to enjoy a pleasant afternoon hopefully knowing from the forecast that the weather will be even better tomorrow to finish this leg. When we woke this morning we had ideas that we might even make it to Cochrane today but we really didn't get away that early...

In a nice cabin in a nice bed it was after 7:30 by the time we got up. We did remarkably well to be ready to roll around 9. We had thought our faithful companion had forsaken us but Diego had come over with some towels he had forgotten to give us last night and the dog and the local puppy were with him. He invited us over for coffee and bread before we left. Packing today was a new problem – it is sunny - where to pack all those clothes that we had been wearing for nearly two weeks now that we were starting off on a one layer morning. All packed and ready to roll over we went and he had real Colombian coffee so we stayed and chatted and ate and it was nearly 10 by the time we were heading off.

It was half a kilometer back to the road and a couple of really steep sections had us pushing for 20 meters or so. On the road it was still climbing albeit a gentle grade. We had only gone a couple of kilometers before we met another cyclist coming the other way. It was Guy from Belgium who Katherine had met in Cochrane. He too had come across Lago Desierto by boat, good news to hear yet again that the boat was running. On a little bit more and we were overlooking Lago Negro. There's what looks like a lodge below the road by the side of the small lake – it looks far too flash for the like of us. Soon we were at the intersection of the road east off to Chile Chico around the south of Lago General Carrera. However for us we were leaving the lake over a saddle towards Lago Bertrand so we had to continue climbing and some bits were steepish but the surface was still good. Then came the reward of the run down to Lago Bertrand - for the first time. We followed its shore for a couple of kilometers, there was enough flat land on the lake edge for a few farm houses but then we had our next climb. We had yet another steepish climb for a couple of kilometers and then it leveled out in the valley with a couple of long straights but even though they looked almost level our legs told a different story. Near the end of one straight we crossed a bit of a river where colored flags signaled the camping place that we had been told about by Katherine who had stayed there. Maybe an earlier start yesterday would have got us here.

We had been on the road a couple of hours when we finally began the drop into Puerto Bertrand on the first bit of forested road we had been on for several days, it was rather pleasant for a change. There we then turned off on the high road into "town", or the part of it on a sloping terrace 40 meters above the lake. We saw a couple of residenciales in the top bit where we could have stayed if we had made it there last night. We stopped at one and asked about food but it would take too long to cook. We were thinking that we could loop back on the low road but didn't see the top of the road to loop on so returned out the way we had come to the main road and then went in the bottom road. Along by the lake we realized the way we should have come down had we only gone a little further up top. There were also flashier looking places down by the lake that offered rooms.

We found another sparsely stocked shop for some juice just as it was shutting and then had lunch sitting on a weathered wooden seats overlooking the wharf. We still had our dog for company and she attracted the attention of a couple of dogs – we realized that she was a bitch and not a dog by their amorous approaches but she was having none of it reproaching them with a gruff bark and hiding under our seat. It was getting towards 1:00 as we were preparing to leave with the thought that we could still make Cochrane when one of the local guides comes over and chats to us. He told us there was camping 11 kilometers on and then nothing but dry country. We knew this but were planning to plug on anyway. He asked if we were on a schedule and

suggested we could take the rest of the day off - not doubt he would sell us a rafting trip of course but that was never mentioned.

Off we go and after the cobbles finish the road is a bit loose on top - it's quite clear a grader has been here in recent days if not this morning. Katherine had warned us about the road surface ahead but as we continued it got worse. A short distance from Lago Bertrand the Rio Baker starts as the outlet to the lake. Here it is dropping and we could hear the roar of the river below but the road goes up and down even with this downhill gradient following the river. After about another kilometer we consider our options. It's going to be hard to make good time on this rocky surface. Rocks 4-5 inches in size on the road make it impossible to make up time on the downhill after the climbs and it's hard work. We actually have quite a total climb of nearly 2000m for the whole day if we are to complete this leg today. Tomorrow the weather is predicted to be even better. So if we plug on it will be hard to make Cochrane before 6 or even 7 and for what, it would be a hard slog and then if we gave up and camp where we have to it makes pushing on pointless. So we decide to make for the camp ahead 11 kilometers south of Puerto Bertrand our target for the day. With an early end to the day I can do some bike maintenance and even work on my journal.

Along the river there are a number of flash fishing lodges beyond our regular budget anyway. A place saying cafeteria is tempting, we stop and check but it is closed. Nearing our destination a couple of fisherman have just come up from the river. Just after that we have a short steep climb and as usual the loose gravel is worse and it's unrideable so we walk a bit. It's after that we realize that we have lost our not so faithful companion. She must have stopped at the fishermen and been fed as all good Chileans are kind to these dogs. It's almost disappointing but we wonder what she would have done around our tent tonight.

We see the camp sign ahead for "Camping el Parque" up a slight rise but we then leave the road to go down into it. We look around and are eventually found by the man running the place. Conversation is difficult as he had the usual thick accent we have trouble following. Something about no fire, his sign says Fogones (fire places) but there are none. He tells us he spent time in Argentina during the Pinochet years to avoid having to go into the army but has come back to run this place.

The showers are new and there's a new block that could be a café soon still under construction. The area is quiet well treed even if the trees aren't large but there a large number and variety of interesting bushy epiphytes growing in the trees. We eventually settle on a site by a picnic table with a tap nearby and put up the tent. We are just of the edge of an area leveled as a soccer pitch - clearly there is a hope of larger numbers at some time but we are the only ones here today. We have been consistently hearing that the locals aren't on holiday so much this year - perhaps it's the weather not being so good.

We then head down the short track to the river for a look. There is a 50mm plastics pipe with it's end in the river and a pump - we conclude that this is the source for the water for the camp. Back at the tent with some the rest of the afternoon to spare I set about some bike maintenance jobs. Having seen the probable source of the water we should have set up our water filter but don't bother feeling falsely reassured that if water comes from a tap it should be OK. Three kittens I saw in the new building soon find us and hang around our tent for the afternoon. Alison heads off to the shower and comes back reporting that they are the best showers that we have had in Chile. I go off for my shower also before the day gets too late and agree. The water comes good and hot and is fully adjustable - there is even hot water in the hand basin which is unusual in cheaper places.

After a quiet afternoon we cook our meal and into the tent for an early night as light fades. We are the only ones here. It's a nice spot that deserves more people.

Stomach Problems on a Hot Sunny Day

Rio Baker camp to Cochrane

www.pppg.pictures/Cochrane.htm

“Sun, sun, sun, here it comes” or so the song says - well we had it today and got roasted a bit by the sun but we don’t expect it to stay. Alison had a bit of a tummy problem on the road today so we have chosen a hostel - well the sign says hostel but it’s just rooms above a restaurant, more of what we would think of as a cheap hotel. After rolling into town and finding a supermarket selling empanadas we looked at a couple of places and ended up back here - it has Wifi that others didn’t. So I’m sitting on the bed writing this with the kitchen smell wafting up – I’m not sure if that is good as is the realization that our room is above the TV in the restaurant. It’s a far cry from the wooded camping spot from where we started the day.

We were awake just after 7, it had got cold overnight but not desperately so like some nights we have had. The sun was on the mountains on the other side of the valley but it was not until well after 8 that it reached us down in the valley. To dry the tent and fly out a bit from the condensation I moved them over into the sun on the side of the football pitch and draped them over some bushes. It was hard getting a dry grassy bit to roll them up on even when dry as the dew was still damp in the grass.

So we were out on the road a bit after 9. Straight out the gate it was a bit of a climb that is tough to warm up on. It was a one layer start to the day but there was still a bit of a nip in the air but not for long. We did have easy going for the first couple of kilometers until the confluence of the Baker and Nef rivers. The Baker is deep glacial blue but the Nef is dirty with glacial powder so the result is also a bit dirty. The rivers join in a spectacular rapid that is easily seen for the road. Apparently this view will be lost if the proposed hydro dams go ahead. We could have taken a walk down to the river but were keen to get on our way before the days heat grew under the clear blue sky.

The road seemed better than yesterday in terms of the size of loose rocks which was a plus but it was still freshly graded of course. Then our climbs began, it would be fair to say we had little flat running today, it was either up or down. After the junction of the rivers the road is quite good, for about four kilometers we are on a good road but mapping shows that the old road twists and turns far above us so we are thankful for this new section of road.

The river was gorgey all day so it was up above the narrow bits and then down. We thought we might be ahead of the days traffic but no, and any effect of recent rain on the dust was long gone. We miss our furry friend, she was good at hearing cars coming before we did which was useful when we are on the wrong side of the road before corners and hills as we often are. At one bit of a saddle I walked up the hill between the road and the river to get a good view. After about 10 kilometers we had rolled down to near the river - which of course meant that we were about to go up again. We could see from a few kilometers back that here in the river bed was a large gravel pit and at the low point was its entry. There was also a sign saying blasting ahead between 11 and 3. It wasn’t until that evening in the hostel that there was an Argentinian cyclist and who was behind us who had been diverted down across the river and up a 500m climb (the views were great apparently) so we consider ourselves lucky to have not been diverted.

So we started the crawl up, as usual we would cross the road from side to side to get the best running of the loose gravel. It had actually been reconstructed here and was actually pretty good running. Some crews were still working on the road edges. Below us in parts was a narrow road, it was hard to tell if it was the old road or a deviation that had been made around major new construction. The new road is certainly straighter and more consistent in grade than the old. There were gravel trucks coming and going and at one stage just a bit before a top two trucks were coming up from behind and two came around the corner in front and there we were. We pulled off and stopped until the dust settled. Any thought that this was a bit of a top was dispelled when we came to a section of serious road reconstruction. The new part was being blasted out of the rock to take off some nasty narrow corners and up and down. One particularly steep bit had us pushing while the new cutting was under construction below us. But that brought us to a newly rebuilt gently sloping

road, the best surface in days. It lasted about 8 kilometers with only a couple of small climbs and was as good as seal to run down on most of the way. We were following a loaded gravel truck so couldn't really run away as he had to go down slowly.

Then we reached the bridge at Rio Chacabuco as a low point and the bridge was the end of the works and where the gravel trucks were going. We were let through but needed to push up the other side. This was now old road and it was about halfway up that we stopped for some lunch. It was 12 by the time we moved on and had a 2 kilometer stiff climb to be above the river below. For some reason (probably the blasting) cars were now being turned back at the bridge so no one was coming from behind us except those that were turned back. It was nice to have an almost deserted road to ourselves.

Near the top of our climb there was a turnoff to a road where there is the new park associated with Parque Pumalin that we had been told about several weeks ago by the young woman back in Caleta Gonzalo - not for us this time however. This road up Valle Chacabuco eventually leads to Passo Roballos to Argentina. There is also one of those signs "Obras Que Unen Chilenos" - works that unite Chileans - it actually says that this section of road ahead was rebuilt only a couple of years ago and while that may be true it certainly isn't to a width matching the section that we have just come off. A sign said 18 kilometers to go to Cochrane - not far you might think but it was to prove to be a slow journey.

We were now high above the river and rising and falling when Alison's tummy problems hit and she was off to find a spot in the bushes or the deep gutter beside the road for the first time. Thankfully with no traffic she didn't have to worry about privacy too much because there was little cover on the straight stretch of road cut on the open hillside high above the Rio Baker below. We also saw a couple of guanacos (wild relation of Llamas) on the road ahead. When we finally got there it was a group of about 12 grazing just above the road. We pottered along up and down for another 10 kilometers with numerous stops for Alison. It was a mistake not to filter our water yesterday afternoon it would seem.

We eventually came to a side road down to a ferry across the river and the alternate route to that we had come. Then we had one last major climb before dropping down to follow the Rio Cochrane for a few kilometers in the bottom of a gently sloping valley before town. One last sting was a pig of a short climb of maybe 400 meters on the worst gravel surface of the day. Then we rolled on downhill into town and started cruising. We found a medium sized supermarket with the best filled empanadas al horno (baked, not fried) we had found on the trip so far. We carried on to the far end of town and looked at a couple of other places with rooms before ending up here at the Hostel Esmeralda that we had spotted back near where we came into town. Because of Alison's dodgy stomach we opted for a room with bathroom so our room is a bit cramped but the bathroom has plenty of space so some of our stuff is in there. Maybe the rooms at the other places were bigger but the ones we looked at didn't have wifi.

We settled into our room by about 4 and I did some journal editing. Outside I set the rope up for the tent fly to dry completely and went across the road to buy an icecream. The owner of the place we are staying at came back about 6 and I got him to light the gas so that we could have a shower. Our room with bathroom had it's own hot water heater. By half past seven we were thinking that we should do some shopping if we planned to leave tomorrow morning. Downstairs we were told that the big supermarket down by the Plaza (that we had missed in our cruising earlier) shuts at 8 and wouldn't be open on Sunday. Also it had a hardware section and Bencina Blanca for the stove. So off we rushed on bikes.

Walking the aisles we met the young couple from our hostel in Coyhaique yet again but we couldn't talk long as the shop was clearly shutting up. They were staying at the camping place just off the square but it was very crowded so we were even more glad to have our room. The Bencina Blanca wasn't in the hardware section but section of all sorts and cost nearly 6 times as much as the hardware store in Coyhaique. I figured that there was no choice being camping days ahead and we were down to not much more than our fuel bottle and it would be unlikely to be cheaper at Tortel or O'Higgins. The supermarket stuff we could pick up in a basket and go to the checkout as we might expect anywhere but this had to be by ticket and collect after payment but we pay the ticket with everything else at the checkout - all very confusing. The place was closing

as we left and headed back to our room.

By 9 it was time to go down stairs for a meal and I had my usual Lomo al Pobre (the name changes a bit but it's still steak eggs and chips), Alison steak with mushroom sauce. At least living above a restaurant has some advantages and we didn't have to go far. Back to our room it was still hot. We had our window open for breeze. Our room is upstairs and here the roofs are plywood on the rafters that are exposed underneath and then the corrugated iron on top so the afternoon sun and a hot day had made our room very warm. It's ten by the time it's getting dark here at this time of year so we had our windows open and we got a few insect bites as a result - something we haven't been used to. Bed time and it's Saturday night, the town may have a population of not much more than 3000 but those young ones are out and about seem to be opposite our room outside the shop there so it isn't easy to get to sleep with them making noise and barking dogs. Sleeping is not helped by the heat, we have been clothed in our sleeping bags or in many blankets most nights but it's so warm tonight that we only need a sheet.

A Picnic by the Lake and a Bike Disaster

Cochrane day off

www.pppg.pictures/Cochrane.htm

Morning comes early as the roosters start just after 5:30 and the sun is rising. Early morning noise is not helped by a calf and a lamb next door mooing and baaing all the time. We may be in a town but it's still a country town. We can only assume the animals are soon to be the makings of an Asado. We had our window open last night because of the heat – not something that we are accustomed to just now – and all manner of insects seem to have come to the party. We both have a number of insect bites. I guess it's somewhat ironic for us to get these bites in town when we have been outside most of the time.

It's not until nine that we finally go down for our breakfast to find it has been left out the night before for us and the other Argentinian cyclist. The jug is there for us to boil ourselves. The town stays silent until nearly 10 except for the bus parked opposite us warming up at some stage. We have decided to stay another night, Alison is getting over her tummy of yesterday and I'm a little bit queasy also. There's no one about to tell we are staying another night until later. We did pay last night because didn't expect to be around for today and we were assuming an early start before the owners were up.

A few kilometers east of town there is the western end of Lago Cochrane where there is a reserve and camping and so we plan a picnic lunch there. The town of Cochrane is by the river a few kilometers after it flows out of the eastern end of Lago Cochrane. The long lake runs east from it's steep confines at this end all the way through to lower hills of the Argentinian pampas. After the frontier about half way it is called Lago Pueyrredón in Argentina. There is a bit of a horse track connecting the estancias on the southern side but it is not an official border crossing. The north side in Chile is part of a large National Park and hiking paths leave from where we are heading.

Before we head off to investigate this end of the lake our first stop is the small supermarket we found yesterday for some empanadas and other picnic material. Leaving town we pass a huge new housing development, certainly over 50 mostly identical houses. Someone must expect population growth here – something to do with the planned hydro dams on the Rio Baker we might suspect. Then we pass the football pitch where there is a game in progress. There is a small crowd of spectators in the stand and we wonder from how far away the opposition team must have come to play the locals. We watch through the fence from the road for a few minutes before continuing.

The road to the lake is only a couple of kilometers and it must be some of the worst corrugated ripio that we have struck. Probably because it's only used by small vehicles it had short wavelength ripio and on the unloaded bikes we bounced around. I'm not sure it would be worth the misery to get there on a loaded bike for the camping. Just at the entrance to the park there was a turnoff to some camping down where the lake becomes a river.

We went into the park where at the park camping area there were 4 large covered picnic areas, each with a table and large fireplace and room for a tent. The lake shore is steep and rocky and doubtless the steepness continues under the water. We have our lunch at a small spot by the water and enjoy the view out over the lake. I cannot but help notice all the wilding pinus radiata trees on both sides of the lake and know that in the wrong place that these can be an invasive weed and I wonder how they will take over the land in years to come. We then walk a short way down the track that goes much further into the park before turning back. We take some time to check out the camping area. Up the hill a bit was a nice new toilet and shower block with hot water showers - well we didn't test it but the gas and everything was there. There is a small jetty on the edge of the lake and a small park visitor center with some displays and friendly young lady behind the counter to help, I'm not sure that she gets many visitors.

We set out for our return on the bumpy road. The soccer match is still in progress, we haven't been all that long. Just before town some young lads are swimming in the river– it must be jolly cold. It's swift and not terribly deep so they jump in and float downstream a bit. We take a different route on the north side of the

river that divides the town where we see the large regional school.

Back to our room after our jaunt Alison's seat post looked to be on a bit of an odd angle, I tried to get it out and it broke. This seems a major disaster, we can't continue like this. So we wonder what we can do for a replacement. Maybe we can get one in the morning (Monday) or maybe we are stuck here a few days. Later I bike around town to where the various buses leave for Coyhaique wondering if we will have to bus back there for a new seatpost, there is nothing we know of a bike shop here except maybe a place that hires bikes.

Later we decided to go to a place over the road and a couple of doors down for a meal. With no other guests and the owner not about we are not sure that we could get a meal here anyway. This other place has rooms as well and we have read recommendations for it however while the set meal we chose was fine, basic and wholesome – we have to remember we are a long way from where the ingredients come from – we did think it a bit overpriced. Other tables were full of customers and most looked like they were either players or supporters from the football game we saw earlier in the day. In this small town of maybe 4000 people there is not a lot of choice on a Sunday.

Later we go to bed pondering the options, perhaps it will be a 3 day delay.

Luck Smiles Upon Us and We Ride Again

Cochrane to Rio Nadis

www.pppg.pictures/CochraneRioNadis.htm

Today we are camping in the Rio Nadis valley, we are half a kilometer or so away from the Rio Nadis across a swampy lagoon but we have a nice sheltered grassy spot just off the road. We are a bit screened from the road by small shrubby trees. It wouldn't keep some people happy who like to be well hidden but I figure that we are in Chile and being seen by one is seen by all and that's some protection if we were to be worried about people seeing us. By the looks of some of the branches cut on the briar rose outside our tent we are not the first ones in this spot. There is a ring of stones marking an old fire place under a nearby tree. Coming south we came off our big hill of the day, the Cuesta el Barrancoso a couple of kilometers back. We were looking for a stream for water and we saw a spectacular gash in the near vertical valley wall with water tumbling down it, no doubt from snow melt above, so we stopped. There looked to be plenty of flat grassy spots so we decided this one has the softest ground and best sheltered from the wind. It was 5:30 and we are just short of halfway to the Caleta Tortel turnoff so it seemed that we might as well stop here as we don't know what is coming in terms of possible camping spots. We were pleased it was as early as it was when we stopped after a morning of ups and downs in the search for a new seat post for Alison. Nothing we had read indicated a bike shop in Cochrane and we feel like we need a relaxed end to the day after the frenetic start that got us a new seatpost and on the road before midday and we have made a good distance in the end.

We didn't realize what the time was this morning until nearly 8, for some reason Monday morning was so much quieter than Sunday. About 9 I headed down to Café Tomango to find out about bicycle repair, "Come back about 10" I was told by the young girl there who said the person who knew about such things would be there then. So a bit after 10 I went down again. So the woman who has now arrived rang the fellow but he was in Santiago. So she then rang her son who would be there in 20 minutes, it seems that he is responsible for the bikes they hire there. So we had a drink, I had chocolate and Alison had REAL coffee not the ubiquitous Nescafé found almost universally in Chile. When the son arrived he said he would sell me a seatpost off one of the bikes and buy a new one but first we should check out the hardware store a few blocks away on the main avenue.

We hadn't known that there was a hardware store, in all our cycling around this small town we hadn't been past it. So off I went and finding the hardware store with new bikes for sale out the front. Nothing special about them, normal consumer MTB's. Explaining in my poor Spanish and showing the broken seatpost to the young girl behind the counter I try to communicate our problem. She asks if I want one the same but I say that would be impossible, any one will do. She then pulls out a standard looking metal seatpost from under the counter - I'm almost speechless but express my pleasure. I guess Cochrane is a growing little town and there are plenty of bikes about so expect someone to carry spares even if they aren't a bike shop - after all they do sell bikes as well as general hardware. I guess we are used to having things on display in a shop and don't expect to have to ask for what may be stashed under the counter.

So I phone Alison who is walking back from the café with the good news. It's not much after 10:30 by the time I have assembled her seat again and we start to tidy up our gear and load up the bikes. Alison is all ready to roll again. It's just before 11:30 as we are ready to leave. With Alison heading off to the bakery first, I then realize that the sleeve on my rear derailleur shifter is missing. It had been loose and I glued it on back at home before leaving but had been meaning to tape it again. I quickly look where the bike was parked to no avail but do remember the bike slipped over at the hardware store. So I catch up with Alison at the bakery and we head on to the hardware store just 2 blocks away and which is thankfully on our way out of town. About 15 meters away I see something like what I'm looking for on the concrete outside the store and sure enough there it is. Whew, I put some tape on it before we finally leave town. The moral: don't defer those little jobs.

So in the end I guess we are very grateful the seatpost broke where it did, maybe the Sunday ride helped but at least it wasn't in the middle of nowhere and we only had a late start and not delayed days as we had

feared. And the cost: 6,800 pesos, less than NZ\$20, I could hardly believe what I was hearing and I expected to pay an arm and a leg - it was from a hardware store and not a specialized bike store! Maybe it isn't the best quality but it will do.

It's a short few meters of uphill on the concrete road to the edge of town. In all these far away places the roads are concrete or cobble, getting asphalt and the equipment to lay it so far from anywhere else would be too hard. Then we have to drop down to cross the Rio Cochrane before starting a gentle climb. The sky is brooding - the Señora at the hostel said it looked like rain and there had been a few spots earlier but in reality the nearest we get to rain all day is some spray being blown up at us from a tumbling waterfall.

That it clouded over from earlier in the morning was good in that it is cooler for us and we have a total climb of over 1000 meters ahead of us but we never get very high, it's up and down mostly - but of course more up to start with. Just out of town a water truck is coming towards us watering road to keep the dust down but the water seems to have mostly evaporated just a few hundred meters after we pass him. We have a bit of climb on a not too bad a gradient for a few kilometers before we drop down a little to Lago Esmeralda after which our lodging of the last two nights were no doubt named. The next few kilometers we go up and down a bit along the road carved into the steep side of its edge. The road is a good solid surface but potholed and corrugated in parts but generally good to ride on, no serious loose surface shingle and pretty clean most of the way. This is more like what we had expected from the Carretera Austral and not all the construction we have had. The worst corrugations are only short sections and seem on flat bits rather than climbs for which we are grateful. But it is a day of keeping our eyes on the road to choose the best line all the time.

A bit after Lago Esmeralda we cross Rio El Salto at a point where the river forks into two separate channels with waterfalls maybe 100 meters apart at Puentes Mellizos. The river tumbles down the steep valley side to the floor below. We stop and have a bite to eat and look at the waterfall but it isn't very warm here. There are the foundations of older bridges here but this section of the Carretera Austral is hardly more than 15 years old so there must have been some local road here earlier.

The road stays mostly high above the valley floor below as we go up and down, There are long straight sections mostly on gentle slopes in a now familiar pattern. We get slowly changing views of the spectacular snow capped mountain off to the west, clouds come and go over their tops. We are mostly in scrubby farmland from which the original forest has been cleared. We pass a small demonstration plot of Radiata Pine that has been low pruned, even down here they will need a new timber source soon. There is a small farm house by the road, hardly more than a cottage but with bright flowers out the front. We have to climb above several lakes, there is side road down there and some houses, farms or holiday homes, it's hard to tell. We are now on the climb towards our big pass for the day.

After 39 kilometers we come to Cuesta el Barrancoso, our final saddle for the day. The crossing is almost nothing from our direction as we have been consistently climbing but after the top we are high above a steep sided glacial valley. We now have our big downhill for the day ahead of us, in 5 kilometers we lose 300m in altitude with a few short climbs. We are down at the Rio Nadis turnoff and while there is a place to stay down the side road we would have to come back and that doesn't appeal to our current frame of mind. Perhaps if we had made an earlier start we would have considered this option. We are now in a wide valley floor with the river on the other side and some reed edged lagoons on our side.

So we get to our stream in a few more kilometers and this is where we are holed up for the night. Maybe we could have gone further but there is no need in our schedule so we leisurely set up camp and set some rice to cook, adding a tin of Tuco - minced (ground) beef in tomato sauce. It's still warm enough for us to walk back up the road to the stream where we are getting our water for a bit of a wash to remove the days dust. The water is icy cold so it's more of a wipe than a wash. I am able to write a bit of our journal but without power and wifi it's an early night in the tent.

Of the scenery today, well after we got away from Lago Esmeralda and into the wide valley of the Baker we had lighter skies, we couldn't decide if it was cloudy or not. To the west we had the same slowly changing

view of the distant mountains covered in an ice field, sometimes in sun, sometimes not, and the same for the foreground, not a good day for technically good photos. After we dropped into the Rio Nadis we are quite close to a spectacular set of ice field covered mountains, the late day light was from the wrong direction for good photos.

How Far We Will Ride For a Hot Shower

Rio Nadis to Caleta Tortel

www.pppg.pictures/RioNadisTortel.htm

What a hot shower can be as an incentive to keep us pushing the pedals. Tonight we are in Caleta Tortel. We have passed through a few places with their name prefixed with caleta, it translates as a cove or inlet. We hadn't expected to be here today, well I didn't but Alison had legs today driven on by the thought of a bed and a warm shower at the end of a drizzly day. So we had pushed on beyond our intended target that had been the junction of the Carretera and the branch road to Tortel. In fact there wasn't much in the way of chances to camp there anyway and our final reward was a thick piece of very tasty slow cooked brisket steak with chips. For company in our rooms we have a Juan Carlos from Valparaiso a cyclist going north, and Jose from Majorca who is busing around, so evening conversation means today's story is not written as promptly as usual.

It was a quiet night in the tent, for some reason there was traffic past us around 9 with cars and trucks going north and south at the same time but we heard nothing more until some motorcyclists passed us after 8 in the morning. We started with a relatively leisurely pack up this morning. It was not too cold overnight and with our usual 2 hours for departure we were ready to leave just before 10.

Not far on over a little rise in the road were a couple of houses side by side. The older abandoned one with roof and walls clad in shingles starting to collapse with a single sheet of corrugated iron supplementing the failing shingles on the roof. It looks just a shed these days. The adjacent house now the occupied dwelling as indicated by some washing hanging out. Clearly the old place indicates occupation long before the Carretera Austral was here but even now it must be a hard life trying to make a living farming cattle here.

The next 9 kilometers were on river flats up a gently rising valley, the sun was out a bit but we were riding along a pleasant tree lined road much of the time. There were more farms along the way, some established and some being carved from the forest. Some of it was large original forest and not the smaller regenerating forest we are through most often. We rode near the river for a short while, it would have been nice to camp along here. There was a site where some trees had been milled and some new fence posts awaiting wires. Past one place a dog came out to follow us and were were reminded of our canine companion a week or so ago but he lost interest after a couple of hundred meters. We then crossed the Rio Nadis and headed up a side valley that would eventually lead us to the Rio Baker which we left some days ago.

After the Rio Nadis we were in the open around the edge of an unnamed laguna for a couple of kilometers. Along here a convoy of Chilean Army trucks passed us heading south. Our valley makes a good channel for the wind and at times it is quite strong and there is a hint of showers, we don't know whether to dress for rain or sun. We then start the climbing up out of our valley for 6 kilometers. As usual the engineers who laid out this road preferred straight lines to contours, they clearly weren't cyclists, so we go up and down as we rise, sometimes in quite stiff climbs and in the open. We are looking for a sheltered stop and at 17 kilometers the spotting drizzle has turned to a light shower and we see a tree hanging over the road in a spot sheltered from the wind so we stop for first lunch. By the time we have finished the rain is gone and we wonder if we should dress for sun again.

Moving on we have all but finished our climb and within another gentle kilometer we are in an open area of farming, almost flat that marks the saddle crossing between our two valleys. Here the wind is quite cold for a couple of kilometers until we drop down into the shelter of the valley of the Rio Barrancoso for a descent of 4 kilometers. Although not at the bottom of the valley we continue along up and down, sometimes in mature forest and sometimes in the open. We see a sign for camping at about 25 kilometers but can't see where it leads.

Out in the open again at 30 kilometers we see another farm offering camping and it's there that we meet 4 Brazilian cyclists going the other way, they tell us that it's 50 kilometers to Tortel. From there it's a bit down but in open swampy country until we reach a bus shelter at a side road where we stop for a drink and a bite

to eat sheltering from the chilling head wind.

Moving on we drop off this open exposed swampy plain to more sheltered riding as we wind down and around the clear Rio el Paso for a few kilometers. We are beside or not far from the river for several kilometers when we come across two Spanish riders having a good cook up for their lunch beside the road. They are sheltering from the drizzle under some trees on the edge of the drop to the river a few meters below. They ask what shops are ahead. We have to disappoint them by telling them nothing until Cochrane some 80 kilometers on. They don't seem well prepared for the stretches of nothing food wise in this area but they could probably make it to one of the camping places today.

Before long we have to climb another little saddle as we move away from the river for a while. In front of us is a couple of kilometers across another wide open swampy stretch. While the road is mostly good for some reason these stretches of road that are effectively causeways seem to be the roughest. The forest, such that is was, has been burnt leaving charred stumps poking out of the bog amongst dead and struggling regrowth of small trees trying to reclaim the land. Amazingly there is a small farm house here on one of the slightly higher spots. At the end there is a large new concrete bridge and it's been cold and the drizzle is a bit more annoying. We stop for second lunch - there is an excellent sheltered spot in the trees on the north side of the bridge. There is a ring of fire stones and this spot has clearly been used for camping in the past.

Back on the road we are now through more old forest making enjoyable riding and soon we are back alongside the Rio El Paso again for a kilometer or so before it runs into the Rio Baker. Not much further and after about 50 kilometers for the day we are alongside Rio Baker again. It is much murkier than when we last were beside it several days ago. Many glaciers from the Northern Patagonian Ice Sheet have fed into it with their milky blue water since we last saw it.

In the next few kilometers we go up and down along the river and the drizzle becomes heavier. I have only my light rain jacket on and resolve that I will need to change it soon. Alison is of the opinion that she can make the extra distance to Tortel, after all she has heard it is level after the turnoff so that's what we decide to do. Nearing the turnoff we meet a couple of Norwegians coming the other way. One had stared up Ruta 40 but gave up after struggling into the wind and had changed his plans to come this way. The turnoff is up a longer climb and while I planned to change to my heavier jacket in fact the rain eases so I don't bother. However we now get the chill wind as we are more in the open.

After the first couple of kilometers from the turnoff the road deteriorates partly due to steep sections (not the promised level) but then it's not so bad. We meet a Frenchman coming from Tortel. He is the last of the cyclists that we meet today, clearly the boat had run across Lago O'Higgins a few days ago. We now seem to get a series of long straights as the road is again a causeway across swamps and we are plodding into the cold wind. It may be level but plodding into this wind is worse than climbing hills.

With 10 kilometers to go we both need sustenance and respite from the wind so we stop and boil the billy for some soup. Good spots are hard to find and when we come across a new bus shelter under construction we choose it for a bit of shelter from the wind that has actually died a bit. We can't fathom any reason for this bus shelter next to a swamp with no houses or side roads around but we won't complain. There is a bit of a lean-to style hut with rough bunks and cooking gear beside it that looks used so we wonder if the builders of these bus shelters are living here – but they are not here today.

With the end only 10 kilometers away we plod on into the wind, flat it may be now but we relish bits by the river which tend to be sheltered from the wind. At 79 kilometers for the day we are pushing along on a road cut into the near sheer mountainside and with the river on the other side of us when the last stretch comes into sight, a 50m climb over 1 kilometer to get us to Caleta Tortel.

Caleta Tortel is over a small saddle from the Rio Baker, the road only came recently in 1999 and it was accessible only by sea for most of its existence. Over this saddle we ride with a small drop to a large parking area where the road ends and the boardwalks begin.

We know there is one place with accommodation here at the top but all the rest are down the wooden

stairs and so we are relieved that there is a room available for us. Most people want to stay somewhere down amongst the boardwalks and that's understandable but at this time of the evening we are tired and don't relish the thought of having to cart our bikes and gear down the steps. Our accommodation is almost a separate building attached to the owner's house, restaurant and shop. It has 3 bedrooms, 2 with 2 sets of bunks and our room with a double bed. There is a common room with a wood stove for heating and even an electric jug although it must be filled from the bathroom. This all makes the place more like a hostel in a way.

The Señora then asked us if we want to eat and we pre order our meal for 8. Unpacking and showers are most welcome before then. Having eaten we decide to take a walk around and down in the failing light to do a bit of shopping as often many places aren't open before we want to leave in the morning. There is a supermarket at the bottom of the stairs, we are told that if the lights are on it's open but you have to ring the bell to get in. We continue on around the boardwalk to the main plaza before returning in the darkening evening, for some reason the "street" lights aren't on outside the plaza. On the way back we go back in to the supermarket for some bread but are directed to another hospedaje/restaurant a couple of houses up the stairs.

Back at our rooms we talk with our roommates for a while. It's not until 11 we get to bed looking forward to a bit of a lie in in the morning having decided we have time to look around and make the 40 kilometers to Puerto Yungay sometime tomorrow.

Up and Up

Caleta Tortel to Rio Bravo

www.pppg.pictures/TortelRioBravo.htm

Today's entry comes from the shelter at Rio Bravo on the south side of the ferry crossing across Fiordo Mitchell from Puerto Yungay. We got here an hour earlier than expected thanks to a ferry load of Brazilian 4WD people doing a tour from Iguazu down to Ushuaia. When we got here it was 6pm and this was our target destination for the day. It is a very nice new shelter with two toilets although one is locked. There is a light bulb and some wiring but the solar panels on the roof don't seem to have charged things up for them to work. For company we are sharing our abode with Andre, a Brazilian. Andre is walking the Carretera Austral southwards with a trolley arrangement carrying everything in a large solid suitcase. He has a relation in Auckland so knows of New Zealand, apparently his mother is going to visit soon. It's drizzling so we have actually set up the tent inside the shelter (without fly) to keep ourselves a bit tidy. With a relatively short distance of 40 kilometers today we were able to leave Caleta Tortel relatively late in the morning.

We were woken annoying early this morning by a barking dog, not far off but just outside (2 meters) our window in the neighbors shed. Seldom have I wished ill will on an animal but this was one time that I did but perhaps my frustration should have been directed at the person who tied the dog there in the shed and not the dog itself. With a late night we wanted a bit of a sleep in which we really didn't get. We had a timetable for the day in that we knew we could leave about 11 and make the 6pm sailing of the ferry to end up here. We knew we couldn't get bread until around 10:30, that's when the day starts around here. We had our breakfast from bread bought last night and then with the sun up a bit we set out to explore Tortel in daylight.

We were lucky that the sun was out a bit as in the end it went behind clouds when we were leaving. There are many walkways that we could explore if we had decided on a rest day here but based on the only weather forecast we know from a few days back we knew it seemed a good idea to move on. We only really walked the main coastal walkway not much more than we had done last night. The main walkway hugs the coast for a kilometer or so from below where the road comes in to the center of the town and then a bit beyond.

As we were starting out on our walking there was a cyclist looking type coming our way on the walkway carrying a couple of Ortleib panniers. He was a Chilean from Santiago. He has started out of a 29er but somewhere about Cochrane he had broken a couple of spokes. He had not been able to get replacements so had abandoned biking and was finishing his trip by bus. I'm sure that there is a moral to this little story about being prepared for the Carretera Austral. 29ers may be great on Ripio with the big wheels but I'm not sure how many are sturdy enough for a trip like this. A couple of spare spokes come as standard with a Long Haul Trucker but we never needed to use them.

Many stairs run up from the main coastal walkway and there are a few joining walkways higher up. Pictures tell the story better than words. We did however find a second supermarket west of the main plaza where we got some extra supplies. We headed back up to the top where we had been told there was a panaderia but we were too soon for the bread to be out of the oven. It was 10:30 when we were packing our bags onto the bikes and we bought some bread from the Señora at our lodgings where she had a small shop selling out of a window of her house - which was also her restaurant where we ate last night.

It was a small climb away from the large parking area at the end of the road before running down that hill that tired us last night. At first we are by the river or never far from it. After about 6 kilometers there is a small formed track about 100 meters long leading through the trees down to the river. We spotted it yesterday but were in no mood to investigate but today I turn down for a look. It is possible to launch a boat here and that is probably its main purpose there being no similar opportunities that we see. There are a few farms on the other side of the river with a boat being the only access. There are some flat grassy spots that would suffice as tent sites but with the recent rain anything that isn't actually gravel is rather wet. It would be a pleasant enough spot to camp although it might be hard to get out of the wind. After a quick look I bike back up to Alison at the

road and we continue.

A slight tail wind and some sun helped us on the run back up to the junction for our turnoff in an hour and 45 minutes riding time. We did a stop for first lunch - not that we ever got around to second lunch until much later at Puerto Yungay as it turned out. It was far more pleasant than yesterday. We met our only other cyclists for the day on this stretch, 3 young Chileanos. It's good to see that locals bike this way as well as we foreigners.

The short but steep climb up to the junction with the Carretera Austral was just an entrée into the next 6 kilometers. The climb up from the junction had several steep switchbacks over 2 kilometers in order to gain a couple of hundred meters of height in order to get above a steep narrow gorge before the grade finally eased a bit. We then continued along well up above the river in the gorge far below the road. The road had been blasted into the steep rock along here and there was a monument to those Chilean army engineers who died in the construction of this road. After another couple of kilometers we crossed the river we are following and things got a bit easier, well some second gear riding seemed easier anyway.

It was a couple of kilometers more and we were riding along beside the first of two lakes so it was a bit up and down but not too bad. That ended with a short steep climb to the second small lake. It was nice to be riding in the mature untouched forest here. Next we had some down but of course that wasn't it for our climbing and we had another steep climb to our high point of the day of a bit over 400 meters. Then we finally had a good downhill run along the Rio Vagabundo valley. Here it seems the the original forest had been burned off at some time exposing the rocky hillsides. The valley that we were in now was steep and glaciated so yet another up challenged our tired legs. The weather had been getting colder and cloudier and at this top there were some spots of rain so we donned jackets for the downhill - downhill speed increases the chill factor and you are not working hard to generate heat. Then we started a long downhill to Puerto Yungay. I'm not sure which way would be best to do this section, we had a steep climb but coming the other way the grade would have been easier but it would have been twice as long.

A couple of kilometers out of Puerto Yungay we were passed by a cavalcade of 8 or so 4wd's but we were almost as fast as they were in the end on the last few kilometers downhill. We did have some oncoming traffic now, the first for the day and we arrived to see the 4WD's all lining up to load onto the ferry that had just come in and unloaded. We negotiated our way past them to the small café at the end of the carpark and made our way in, we had heard that it sold empanadas. The owner was just arriving, she only opens when the ferry traffic is actually there. By now the 4WD's had been told the ferry wasn't leaving straight away so they all parked up and poured into the café after us. They were crowding in and trying to order around us but we had ordered and got the last 3 empanadas, we deserved them more than they did and they were delicious.

Having finished our empanadas and some cake we walked outside and a shower of rain was passing so we covered the bikes and put our parkas on. Coming up to five everyone had finished at the café when the word went out to load onto the ferry. It seems the ferry people had decided to go early, an extra sailing, their problem was that they now had a full ferry and if anyone else turned up for the 6:00 sailing they wouldn't be able to fit on. I cannot help but think that this decision could have been made earlier but they gave a chance for the café to make some money off everyone. So off we went and those already at the other side had an unexpectedly early departure. The flip side was that those turning up expecting the 7:00 departure had to wait until 8:00.

The trip across and along the fiord took about three quarters of an hour. The fiord is steep with bare sides carved by glaciation, it was clear that forest had been burnt off exposing the rock below. It wasn't until almost at the end that we could see the Rio Bravo ramp around a small promontory at the edge of what could almost be a small bay. The only flat land for parking and the shelter had been created with rock from road construction. It needn't be much and it isn't, there is however a water tank on a high stand fed by pipe from a nearby stream. A pipe runs from it down to the ramp where the boat can get the water and so can we.

So at Rio Bravo in the Refugio we and our room mate for the night set about making ourselves at home. We set up the tent inside as there was space and then set about tonight's meal - some thinly sliced chorizo

sausage fried into tonight's rice, quite tasty it was. Sometime after 6 a large Chilean army dump truck turned up from the south. Then indeed the ferry did turn up again at 7 with a hugely long truck on board carrying huge round corrugated steel pipes to be used as road culverts. The army truck and the other truck leave together. We wonder why the army truck had to come here to meet the other and it is not for 2 more days that we find out the reason. After the last ferry had gone we got right at home and I set up our rope across the front of the shelter to dry the tent fly, still damp from 2 nights ago. The drizzle had now set in a bit more so we wait to see what tomorrow brings but we are dry tonight.

The road was pretty good today from the turn off to Yungay, good smooth compacted surface and good as seal at times but with potholes to keep an eye on. The day progressively darkened so it wasn't a good day for photographs on the road but we did take plenty in the sun at Tortel. Much of the section through from the Rio Baker was very scenic amongst virgin forest but after the top it was bare glacial country as was the ferry trip along Fiordo Mitchell.

So Near and Yet so Far

Staying Put (almost) on a Rio Bravo Rain Day

www.pppg.pictures/RioBravo.htm

During the early hours of the morning the drizzle turned to occasional rain and then more persistent rain. We decided that we were in no hurry to get up and a rain day here would be better than trying to carry on. We have 100 kilometers to go to Villa O'Higgins but as we have to tell people who ask us how far we bike each day it's not the distance that counts, it's the climbing and the road surface. The road has been good but we are tired from yesterday's steep climb and the long ride the previous day. We have been climbing a bit over 1000 meters a day recently. It's better if there is also an overall drop like there was a couple of days ago to Tortel but we have a net gain of a couple of hundred meters to O'Higgins and a total of around 2000m of climbing. It would be tough for us to do that in 2 days after 3 days on the road so we were expecting to spread this section over 3 days. A rest day could give us what it takes to finish the hop in 2 days especially if we know the last day has a warm bed and food at the end. If we have to ride in a bit of wet then one night in the tent is preferable to two.

Here we had a nice dry room with a view across the fiord through our picture window, and a private bathroom. Well private that is until people turned up to use it while waiting for a ferry. It was just before 9 that we bothered to get ourselves up. We thought that we would have plenty of time before people started turning up for the 11am ferry but we were wrong. The oatmeal was just done when the first car pulled up soon followed by two more so we had company to eat with and pack up and tidy up our room. While still in bed we had decided that a trip on the 11am ferry and back to buy empanadas at the café on the other side would be a good idea. At times the drizzle and rain lifted and we almost thought that we might get on the road today but the rain kept returning dashing any such hopes. I went for a short ride, not even half a kilometer up the road in one dry spell to stretch my legs but that was about the most strenuous thing any of us did today.

Our little shelter is on a small area of flat reclaimed from the sea with rock from the construction of the road that runs for a couple of kilometers from here to the beginnings of the flat land of the estuary at the head of the fiord. Behind us a little bay with what might pass as a small rocky beach. It's not the sort of beach that would have much appeal at the best of times, the water is rather murky not being well flushed by the tides this far deep into the tangled system of fiords. It is well covered by drift wood, not just the small stuff but there are even large tree trunks. Whether washed down from the Rio Bravo valley or off the sides of the fiord it's testament to the attempts to clear the harsh landscape for a bit of cattle grazing.

Among the first cars of the morning to arrive going north was a young American hitchhiker. He had tried to pass into Argentina via Paso Rio Mayer but was turned back at Argentinian immigration. It seems he couldn't prove his reciprocity fee had been paid (something only AU, US and CA passport holders pay) as he couldn't find his receipt. Pointing out that he must have paid it to get into Argentina earlier proved by the stamps in his passport didn't help. I wonder if the immigration people in Argentina didn't want to let him in because he would have a hundred kilometers of arid deserted road to walk before getting to Ruta 40. He didn't seem to know what or how little was on that road or for that matter how far to Ruta 40. He said that from Chile he followed the wheel tracks but too far and you have to cross the fence where there is a junction in the fence which he must have come back to get to the swing bridge. On the Argentinian side it wasn't too hard to follow the route down river and pick up the track. Part of me would like to try this crossing so I'm interested in what he has to say but it won't be on this trip.

Paso Rio Mayer can only be passed on foot or bicycle over a farmers swing bridge intended for his sheep. A few years ago the bridge partially collapsed but has been rebuilt. At times of low river level serious 4WD groups or larger vehicles can ford the river with luck. The local Chileans would like to see a new road built through here. With the completion of the Carretera Austral they already have a 40 kilometer branch road to their border post that was finished in 2003 which is almost at the actual border. The problem is that the rivers that need to be bridged are on the Argentinian side. Had the border been a couple of kilometers to the east into Argentina then no doubt the Chileans would probably have built the bridge needed by now but in the

meantime the future of vehicle access across this pass remains at the mercy of Argentina and its faltering economy.

There is even a clip on Youtube from Chilean TV in 2013 showing a group of locals and officials at the Chilean Border post looking at bridge plans and discussing the project and its benefits to tourism. Paso Roballos over 250 Kilometers to the north in the next connection in Argentina so a route here would turn this dead end into an attractive tourist circuit. Chile even offered to loan Argentina the bridges. The problem for Argentina is that it would need to construct maybe 10 kilometers of road where there is already a track from its border post to the border and construct several bridges and then upgrade considerably and maintain the next 100 or so kilometers of road to the junction with Ruta 40. Given the Argentinian economy they have no plans to do this. We have met a cyclist who passed this way and with some others made this 100 kilometers out to Ruta 40 in about 4 hours with a good Patagonian tail wind. They only went this way because the boats were not crossing Lago O'Higgins at the time in December 2013. For now knowing the boats are running on the Lago O'Higgins route again we won't need to go this way.

There was a full load waiting to get on the ferry by 11:00 and it arrived full from the other side. Included with all the northbound cars were a couple of Brazilians towing pop up trailers. They clearly were not experienced at backing their trailers and the last one took an age backing onto the boat, back and forth. The poor chap had everyone watching and telling him what to do. The more he tried the more flustered he got. Finally he is on and we were a bit late leaving, not that it mattered to us. On the other side we were quickly off the boat to get some empanadas but today they were cheese and not the meat ones we had enjoyed yesterday. Boat turnaround was quick and a couple of late arriving cars had to be left behind as it was over full - an extra sailing tuned up at our end later with them and some others. Again there were lots of Brazilians touring as a group. They were most interested to hear Andre's story, as he said most Brazilians are lazy preferring to sit around so someone prepared to walk the Carretera Austral was fascinating to them.

Andre is one of those darker skinned Brazilians of mixed ancestry but these touring ones seem mostly lighter of European ancestry. Brazil has a long history of immigrations from many parts over its 500 years. Andre is a professor of art history, he has three months vacation and is reading Jack London at the moment. He is interested in epic voyages and this is his attempt at an epic voyage. He started at the beginning of November from Puerto Montt. He has traveled to many places and he and his wife ran a café ten years ago. You can take a Brazilian out of Brazil but you take him away from his coffee and he has a little coffee pot to brew his Brazilian coffee. Alison is most pleased to get a cup of real coffee each morning thanks to his generosity. Chile is notorious with coffee drinkers for the scarcity of real coffee with Nescafé being what you get all the time.

Back "home" we boiled up some chicken noodle soup and heated some bread from the other day for lunch realizing that we wouldn't be moving on for today. The afternoon rolls by, I do some bike maintenance. I use some of my battery power to write my journal. At times the rain eases off and it looks like things are lightening up. Some time after 5 traffic starts turning up for the 7pm ferry. Included are 3 army trucks. I told you that a couple of days back we were passed by half a dozen army trucks going south when we were just past the Rio Nadis. A couple of the army men come in and start talking to us. Andre has better Spanish than us so most of the conversation is with him but we contribute a bit.

Part of what Andre says is that he has had to carry so much food from Cochrane because there is nothing on the road. Just before the ferry arrives one of the Army fellows goes out to his truck and brings back an army combat ration pack and gives it to Andre and shows how the sealed combat packets can be heated with the special pads by just adding water. He is most grateful. Time to start loading and we all say goodbye in that Chilean way like old friends in a way we reserved Kiwi's don't do by shaking hands and hugging. Then a couple of minutes later one of them comes back with a ration pack for us, they must have been sorry for us seeing me start to cook our plain rice. We are most grateful but do note the weight. So our rice with the usual Tuco is supplemented with a portion of Army Beans and Chorizo. The rest is packed for another day. Earlier we were given a chocolate bar and a muesli bar by a young woman in a family in a car going across on the

ferry, Chileans can be so friendly.

Towards 8 when we are finished eating we see some sun on the hills in the distance and soon blue sky and more sun and we see the mountains across the fiord a bit. It may not last but it's a good sign for tomorrow as we again erect our tent inside and settle in for the night.

A Crazy way to Finish the Carretera Austral

Rio Bravo - Villa O'Higgins

www.pppg.pictures/RioBravoOhiggins.htm

Here we are in Villa O'Higgins. We didn't set out to get here today but we are here with the help of a tail wind, some downhill road - well some of the way, and some Chilean Army Combat Pack rations to boost us along. We made the ton - 100 kilometers, we never set out to travel the Carretera this way and we hadn't until now, but we ended with a splash and surprised ourselves that we could. There was an awful lot of hill climbing today, probably 2000m or even 3000m depending on which mapping site that you believe. After a later than planned start due to the morning rain we thought we would be camping but those ice fields didn't seem very far above us making us think that it would be a cold night in the tent. Alison made the comment at some stage - on an easy bit - that boosted by Andre's real coffee this morning she could make it all the way today. So we decided to make a push all the way knowing that there was no pressure to do anything the next day. Well we could catch the Saturday boat across Lago O'Higgins but with such a late arrival the early start required it didn't seem achievable so we will spend a couple of days here before the Monday boat. Yesterday's rain day had rested us but when it rained again overnight and in the morning it seemed that we would, like most cyclists, be camping along the road when we set out finally this morning

We awoke this morning a bit earlier but the sound of rain overnight has us skeptical about when we would leave or how far we would get. We were still in bed at 8:00 when the first car for the 11am ferry arrived, crazy we thought, a couple with 2 young children, perhaps it was the children that go them up early. When I spoke with the man there was something about trucks and perhaps there would be an early sailing, there was no such luck however. So as we were roused we made breakfast, packed our tent and everything away anyway. It was still raining a bit at 9:00 but things started lightening up a bit and the rain went. We were all loaded and decided we could leave about ten but then a light rain shower came over and we were skeptical but after a last chance use of the toilet we put our jackets on and said our goodbyes to Andre and we hit the road.

The first couple of kilometers were a little up and down as we made our way along the road carved into the edge of the steep sided fiord. Soon we reached "land" and flatter going, we had reached the estuary and flat land where cattle were grazing and there the showers had eased off for us.

Our first 20 kilometers raced by in an hour and a half, averaging 14.7kph, somewhat of record for us. The road was good smooth compacted sand and gravel, in some ways smoother than asphalt or chip seal. We did have to watch for potholes however so it wasn't a ride around Hagley Park (the Christchurch park next to our home). This is what we had envisioned the Carretera Austral would be like, not all the roadworks we suffered at the beginning. There were some farms along the way as we climbed gently along the Rio Bravo valley. There was even a bit of a road leading to a group of buildings on the other side of the valley in one place. We could only assume that when the river was lower that it is possible to ford it but after the rain the level seemed far too high and the current swift. Often we were in old original forest or established regenerating forest. Here even the regenerating forest was a mix of trees unlike most we have been through which is almost pure *Nothofagus* (relative of NZ beech). There is one common tree very similar to our NZ Totara. After a while we did leave the river flats and have a few extra ups and downs as the river cut in but not much.

One of the advantages of passing up a valley like this after rain is that the forest looks so green and lush and there are so many waterfalls tumbling down the mountain sides. You can't photograph properly this, you just have to be here to see and hear them all around - you wouldn't hear them traveling in a car. Well up the valley we come to a small farm beside the road. Some of the buildings look older than the 15 years since the road was built down this way and we wonder what an effort it must have been to try and live and farm here before the road.

Along the way we met traffic heading down to the 11am ferry sailing. The Brazilians that came across with us a couple of days ago now heading back as well as several large trucks, I now understood the Chilean

man's reason for hoping for an early sailing. There were clearly too many vehicles for a single sailing and I suspect as only one truck could go on the ferry each sailing in the center lane there would be disappointment - it would have been interesting to see with those hot blooded Brazilians all keen to get on.

Only a few cars passed us heading south having arrived on the first ferry and when we thought we were in the clear Alison decided a toilet stop just off the road would be opportune. The roadside was wet and boggy so she couldn't get away into any cover for discretion. She had only just got her pants down when we could hear a car coming up the road. Oops, anyway it was a couple, they stopped to talk, he was Scottish and she Irish but they now lived in Scotland. They seemed desperate to talk to someone in English. Now we meet a few English speakers on the road but traveling in a rental car as they were I can imagine that fellow English speakers would be hard to find. They had met in New Zealand 25 years ago but decided on Patagonia over New Zealand for this trip. On the ferry they had met a girl whose uncle runs the hospedaje in Candelario Mansilla and were planning to stay there as they hiked on to el Chalten. I didn't dare ask how much a one way rental to Villa O'Higgins cost them, it is the end of a very long road to nowhere.

After 21 kilometers we started our first climb, a small entrée of the next 17 kilometers. Here, and for many kilometers to come, the forest has been burnt off at some time in the past exposing the glacier carved rocky terrain below. I have read that back in the early part of the 20th century Chile had a policy that if settlers could clear land and farm it then they could claim it. This clearance allows us to see many waterfalls tumbling down the steep sided valleys, these would not be so spectacular if we weren't here just after rain.

The first climb lasts a couple of kilometers before dipping down and then going up again as we start our way out of this river valley. We stop at a high point for some lunch, we have been going for nearly exactly two hours by now. The clouds are lifting more on distant snow capped mountains. Time to move on we have a bit of downhill but almost immediately we see a condor swooping ahead. He is not much higher than us and swoops by hardly 15 meters above our heads. We have seen occasional distant condors but never this close.

We had to get started up a narrow valley but now we drop down a little to cross a side river. I'm taking a photograph, stopped in middle of the road, when we get tooted at by a truck coming down behind us, it is an Army truck followed by another longer truck with a huge shipping container on the back. I had thought any traffic from the ferry would be long gone by now. They pass around a corner out of view and we don't see them go up the incline ahead. Then when we round the curve we see why. The first, an army truck, has gone ahead and is now connected to the articulated truck with a hefty chain and is helping pull it up the steep incline ahead grindingly slowly. You can see why, the road switches back and they both have to grind slowly around the switchbacks so the long heavily loaded truck needs help. This explains why the army truck turned up the other night at Rio Bravo a bit before the ferry arrived with the truck loaded with culvert pipes and they then left together.

As we ourselves grind up a series switchbacks we are pleased we don't need to get off and push. What a difference a good surface makes on a steep grade and as is common on many of these short switchbacks the gradient eases between curves allowing us to catch some breath but we do stop several times to enjoy the view. At the top when resting we see condors circling high above us, four in total.

Now we start a long run down on a road carved into the edge of a steep glacial valley. We have to drop down to the Rio Bravo again, we have been high above while it cut its steep gorge. Here it is in a wide open plain and there are fences along the road and signs of farming but it's a wonder any cattle could find anything to eat in the swampy scrubby forest - perhaps that's why Chilean beef always seems a bit tough. Here in the middle of nowhere is a scotch broom bush beside the road in full flower. A single seed carried in dirt on some road maintenance machine will soon create thousands multiplying then invasive weed into this natural landscape.

We stop for another bite to eat, Alison comments that she could go all the way today powered on Andre's real coffee to start her this morning, I say that maybe we will. Then begins another 3.5 kilometer climb as we have to get around another gorge in the river. Thankfully the gradient is not too bad most of the way and even though we are mostly in low gear it's not too taxing - or are we just getting fitter? The wind is a

bit chill when we reach the top and start the next downhill but the sky is continuing to break a bit. Now high above the river below we drop slowly for several kilometers. At the bottom there is a enough flat land for a small house and some farm buildings – it continues to amaze us that anyone would try to farm here. The sun is trying to get through and I go down to one layer for the climbs ahead. We have a kilometer of up followed by a small bit of down before our last kilometer of real climbing on the Carretera Austral (for now). At the final top it's 3:30, 5 ½ hours on the road and four of riding today so far.

Off this final climb we have finally left the Rio Bravo valley and there is a short downhill for less than a kilometer to a small lake below. This is good because rather than lose all our height at once we lose it gradually over the next 25 kilometers making this stretch easier going. We roll slowly dropping down a long wide flat bottom glacial valley of the Rio Vargas. To our left in the valley is a series of swampy edged shallow lakes, sometimes it's more just a swamp dropping slowly downhill, sometimes it's separate lakes joined by short rivers.

To our right is a range of mountains rising steeply beside us to a series of ice field covered tops not very far above us. Off these the meltwater forms a lot of small creeks, each tumbling in a series of noisy waterfalls down the bony glacial carved mountainside to the road. On the other side of the valley is a range of bare glacial carved mountains. With the wind behind us and generally downhill we make good time but we need sustenance.

At 58 kilometers for the day we are looking for a good place to stop but there isn't much. We see a spot cut into the side of the road that is leveled and sheltered from our tail wind. It's the best we have seen in quite some distance. We stop and get out the two remaining army ration pack meals and put them in the bag with the heating pad and add water. Five minutes later we have warm chicken with vege and chicken with rice and chorizo. It is good fuel for us to continue on with.

Not much further on we see sunny skies in the distance, the question is whether we can get there before the sun goes for the day. Our downhill run had to come to an end. At nearly 70 kilometers we came to a leveler area and land good enough to farm, well graze rather than cultivate, with several large farmhouses. One set of buildings is semi-demolished with the roof gone and it looks like it was a base for the army engineers that built the road. We see a very old wood slab hut rotting away indicating that people had occupied this area before the Carretera Austral was here. There is even the buildings of a substantial looking estancia not far off the road where there is a larger area of flatter fertile land.

Then we came to the first of several climbs before we were finished. We had reached Lago Vargas and as usual for lakes we had to get around the steep edges. It was tough on our tiring legs We soon came to some signs indicating road works but it was just trimming of the thicket of seedling trees growing on the sides of the road. Alison thought she had struck gold when we saw a blue portaloo for the workers but it turned out to be padlocked.

On we went and after some more ups and downs we arrived at Lago Cisnes that we followed around for nearly 20 kilometers. Again steep lake edges meant up and down but thankfully most of the grades were not too bad for our tired legs and with the good road surface we could use speed on the down to help on the shorter ups. At 80 kilometers we were a bit high above the lake and got our first view of Villa O'Higgins in the distance, as the crow flies 6 kilometers but nearly 20 of riding. Frustratingly close but we could also see our road looping back and around on the other side of the lake where we must go.

Down across a bridge to the lake there are some fishermen trying their luck. We then traveled on a causeway several kilometers long across the foot of the lake until reaching the hills on the other side where we traversed along climbing slightly. At 90 kilometers we had to climb a little more to cross a small saddle and drop down beside the Rio Mayer riding upstream in nice forest for a kilometer or more before finally crossing it on a suspension bridge. To the left was the way to Paso Rio Mayer but for us was right for the last 10 kilometers downstream to Villa O'Higgins. Not that downstream meant without hills as we wound around near the river and then moving away from it. We came to a camping place that Alison knew was a kilometer out of town We are almost there but within a few meters we went over a small crest and town was below us,

far less than the kilometer we had expected.

Coming into town we decided to turn off the main road into what looked like the main street but then saw the sign for El Mosco Hostal ahead. It is a favorite hostel of many bikers and then it was only a hundred meters or more. My computer showed we had just reached 100 kilometers, it was about 8:15 but down here at this time there's still a couple of hours of light. We rolled into El Mosco and saw the bikes of the Swiss family we first met in San Martin all those weeks ago. Also there were the Scottish couple that we had met on the road, they were amazed to see us, well we were pretty pleased with ourselves to have made 100 kilometers on our last day also. We talked a bit and found out that there was no wifi and the room was quite expensive so we decided to try and find Hostal Patagonia that Andre had recommended to us. Before leaving I did go just over the road to Robinson Crusoe to check when the next boat across Lago O'Higgins was and it was tomorrow or Monday so a couple of days here didn't seem a bad thing as long as the weather holds. So we headed off in the direction of the supermarket and buy juice, beer and wine and biscuits, essentials to end the Carretera on - disappointingly no icecreams that I had been hanging out for.

We are told the hostel is on the plaza, the next block. There's a picture advertising it on the ferry so I know the building I'm looking for - well I'm sure in the picture it had a blue roof but it's gray when we get there but there are not many large 2 storey buildings here so it's easy to spot. We take a room, there are plenty to choose from and we put an order in for Cena (dinner) - Steak egg and chips - cyclist fuel. There is no wifi here either, it's explained that there is a problem and someone is coming to fix it. It seems there is free municipal wifi here so no place needs to offer it individually - but there is the library on the other corner of the Plaza where we can go tomorrow and use Internet. After a shower and a meal it's pretty late and it's off to bed.

So we got to the end of the Carretera Austral today, I'm not sure when though. The road ends when we get to the ferry in 6 kilometers more but 9 kilometers after we started today we passed an intersection and new road markers told us we were now on the X91 (Chilean road numbering system). We still saw the occasional little works distance marker indicating a Carretera Austral distance however and have seen other maps with it. The sign said road under construction the other way from the intersection to the Rio Palena and that was now the Carretera Austral. That's where some of the dams are planned. But I have also come across plans, or maybe just ideas, that with a few (7) more ferries and some serious road building Chile could connect itself through the fiords on the western side of the Southern Patagonian Ice Sheet down to Puerto Natales in maybe as long as 50 years. Now that would be a serious ride for all the crazy guys on bikes out there in the future. I'm probably too old to see it completed but it doesn't seem impossible. Way down in Tierra del Fuego a road is being carved through similar mountainous country to make an easier connection from Punta Arenas to Puerto Williams, the world's southernmost town, so wait and see.

When we started out from Puerto Montt we were soon passed by a couple on lightly loaded mountain bikes, later we found out that they were father and son. I wondered what the point of pushing on like that was - and still do - so it's a mixture of pride and sadness that we made such a big haul on our last day. Pride that we could do it and sadness that we may have seen more if we had taken more time - but the thought of a night in the tent with snow fields just above us still justifies our effort and pride outweighs any regrets. We have had experiences beyond just a bicycle ride and in the meantime we are not finished with the Carretera Austral, we still plan to head north to fill in the gap from Coyhaique to Puyuhapi.

The day wasn't great for photographs again. We may have missed views of more icy mountains as they were covered by cloud but we saw plenty anyway. I experimented a bit overexposing to bring up the dark forest but that overexposes the snow and sky - there is no perfect solution. There is a function on my Fuji X10 camera that can help but I don't have the time on the road to spend using it, it's point and shoot and see what you get later.

Waiting for the Weather

Villa O'Higgins - Rest Day

www.pppg.pictures/Ohiggins.htm

We wake a bit stiff after our long haul yesterday, kind of glad we didn't have to be up to leave at 7 to make the 8am departure of the boat, the weather looks good for a crossing but we will have to take our chances for Monday. At breakfast there are some others staying in another one of the cabins here: Vicente and Gabi his wife and their friend, Reubena, they are fisherman from Concepcion. They tell us that there is a free festival here this afternoon and there will be roast lamb. We have decided that we will change from our room to one of the cabins here, it is the same price as a room at El Mosco and we will be able to cook and do some washing so we ask and yes one is available. By the time we get around to moving the fire is lit for us. It may be partly cloudy but the wind is cold, I'm jolly glad we pushed on yesterday, it would have been a cold night in the tent.

We do a bit of washing and I work on the journal before going over to the library. I use a computer there because for some reason I can't connect to their wifi with the code we are given but Alison can on her tablet. I've had various issues with connections with my windows 8 computer and regret not upgrading to 8.1 but the upgrade was available just a few days before we left so I never had time. Back at the hostel I'm told off by the Señora about doing our washing, they have a washing machine I'm told - and no doubt they would charge a lot for the few things we washed.

One of the reasons we changed to a cabin was so that we could cook, the savings on food outweighing the extra cost. Of course we can cook something to our taste so we head out to the shops to see what we can find. Now down here we are over 1000 kilometers from Puerto Montt so stuff is expensive and not always in stock. All we can find are onions, a few peppers and the skungiest wizened cabbages that you have ever seen, no tomatoes or lettuce. They are unpacking a recent shipment of more durable items, perhaps from one of those trucks that passed us yesterday. No wonder so many houses have a plastic tunnel house to grow some greens. We settle on an onion and pepper to cook with our two remaining chorizo sausages in a risotto sort of mix for lunch.

After lunch we walk up to the lookout over town before getting on the bikes and heading to the rodeo/festival south of town. The lookout is only a couple of blocks away so it's hardly a strenuous walk. The view across the town to the mountains beyond reminds us of the remoteness of this place.

We are not sure exactly where the rodeo is but most folk are walking towards the south end of town as it's not far so we follow the crowd. Arriving we see the asado is far off cooked - and are later told it will be ready at 6 so we decided to return to our cabin to catch up on some sleep. As we leave we first head out the gate the wrong way for a couple of hundred meters to get a good view of Ventisquero (Glacier) Mosco up the valley to the east. The border to Argentina here runs along the ridge top of these icefields and down through the river a couple of hundred meters away from us. We can even see the Argentinian flag flying up there. It is an official border crossing into Argentina but without a boat it only goes into impassable mountains.

It was a bit after 6 by the time we got back to the rodeo and there still a bit of calf wrangling going on in the ring. A calf is chased around the ring while a bunch of men with lassos try to catch it - quite ineffectually. When it is finally caught the bull calf becomes a steer with the help of a sharp knife and its testicles are carried off somewhere by a young lad. It is announced that the asado will be ready soon and people start to mill around a larger table. There are pans (the round breads), potatoes and sopaipillas (small fried breads). Those in the know have plates and knives. You have to be in to win among those around and some men are carving and handing out meat so we hold out our open breads and get some meat put in them. It pays to know the system, the locals have plates and bowls and sharp knives to get their share. It's a good job that the calf comes off the fire first as it goes pretty quickly and then the first 3 lambs go in a flash also but the fourth lamb is left by the fire where people hack away at it in short order also. In the end pretty much all goes except the inside meat of the rear legs of the calf that was a bit rare being a bit far from the fire.

Vicente invites us to join them to eat on the grass just outside the gate where they have a couple of bottles of wine and he offers us a glass. One of the bottles of wine is Camenere often described as Chile's signature wine variety. It's a pleasant drinking red wine of which we have already had a few glasses previously on this trip. It is a deeply colored red wine that requires a long summer to grow and Chile has suitable areas for it, apparently it died out in Europe. Earlier they had been showing their stash of wine and whiskey in the back of their truck, a twincab with a fiberglass canopy over the tray, they clearly weren't going without such essentials on their holiday.

Vicente has a bit of English, he has a brother in Australia so we get by with some conversation. He says Chileans like Patagonia but most never get here but they have been coming down every year for the last 10. They have a tent in Futelafu for some weeks where they are Trout fishing but have come this extra bit south for a few days. He tells us that there are a couple of famous local TV presenters here and some cameras doing a piece on the event. Gabi takes a glass of wine over to the older one. Vicente explains why this event is called a media luna - half moon, the rodeo ring is divided by an arc in the middle making it a half moon unlike the full ring we are used to.

Vicente is no spring chicken but has a mountain bike on top of his car, he will bike to the road's end tomorrow. If we understand correctly he used to be a national cycling coach. He gets Gabi to take a photo of him with us beside our bikes to show his daughter in the States. He didn't like Pinochet but acknowledges that it was his drive that built the Carretera Austral. He laments the coming of the asphalt, it will bring more people and destroy the Chilean Patagonia he loves. We can understand, one of the appeals of the trip for us was the undeveloped nature of the road. We talk about how placid and friendly all the dogs are here, like Chileans he says, they are friendly and hospitable. On that we cannot disagree.

As things are drawing to a close there is an auction for a cake and the two TV teams seem to bid against each other to a ridiculous price to the enjoyment of the crowd. Then as people drift away we are told by the younger of the two presenters (in English), as he passes us, that someone is going to try and ride a horse that can't be ridden. Everyone left is heading across the road to the local football pitch so we follow. After an age of trying and getting the horse ready it is let loose with some brave cowboy on it's back. It's bucking bronco stuff for less than a minute but they get some TV footage and the rider is interviewed on camera by the personality.

It's well after 9 by the time we get back to our cabin. Down at the rodeo we met Megan and another cyclist who we saw ride into town from the north earlier today. It seems Megan's mother has been following our online journal, when we hear of people following us it is an incentive to keep up the time effort required to keep writing it. Megan told us that the stores were restocked today and so we go across the square and, yes, all those things we couldn't have at lunch time were now out in the shelves so we get a tomato. It is hard to explain the excitement that one fresh tomato can bring when we have seen so little in the way of fresh vegetables of late. The rest can wait until tomorrow.

O'Higgins Rest Day Number Two

There was no reason to get up early today, it was a bit cold. Now every cabin or place to stay has its quirks and one of this place is that the door catch is a bit dicky so the door blew open a little in the wind overnight, thank goodness it wasn't colder. The lock was a bit stuck and it wasn't until today I applied my handyman skills and jiggled it to make it work. It was suggested that I light the fire before someone else would get out of bed, good job she had bought some fire lighters, they don't use kindling around here, often just a squirt of Bencina Blanca (white spirits) before the match. For Sunday breakfast we had some eggs and I fried up the tomato we bought last night and then fried our breads that were a few days old in the oil and then did a bit of an omelette. All in sequence as another feature of this cabin is that it has only one pot to cook with in spite of having a 2 burner stove.

We discovered that the library is open today, its opening notice doesn't list Sundays, open perhaps because the local wifi is down, there are 4 computers and the local kids are there playing games a lot of the time along with a few bikers. Yesterday's boat disgorged 15 or so cyclists from the south so a Frenchman there told us. We have met and talked with a few.

Out shopping we bought some potatoes, spicy sausages along with an onion, capsicum and tomato made lunch. We noted the cabbages that were so wizened yesterday had shrunk with the removal of the dried out leaves and now looked acceptable albeit a bit smaller than they were yesterday. We did a walk around town in the afternoon and went into the camping area opposite el Mosco where there were bikes and talked to an older French couple who had seen Andre on the road, the first of all those southbound we have talked to who had seen him. At five we went to book our tickets for tomorrow only to find out that the boat wasn't running tomorrow due to the wind and they will decide tomorrow at 6 whether it will run on Tuesday. This is all par for the course down here as wind on the lake determines if it is safe or sensible to run.

Passing el Mosco on the return we see some cyclists packing their bikes into cardboard boxes. They are flying out tomorrow. I suppose if your only goal is to reach OHiggins at the end of the Carretera Austral then it makes some sense to fly back north. The buses are not big enough to guarantee room for bikes and it's a long bus ride north. That said it wasn't a very big plane that took them north the next day.

On the way back we went to one of the many shops we have now discovered and bought some fresh and canned fruit and saw some cake, a cake base with apple and custard on top so we bought that to finish off our meal tonight. The sun came through late in the evening but it was a cold blustery wind all day.

No action to photograph today, the most exiting subject being our food

Villa O'Higgins Day 3

Again there was no reason to be up early today. The day started windy and cold, predicted maximum of 7. The library was to open at 8:30 so I got over there early and got logged onto wifi for a while but it stopped and I carried on uploading some journals on one of the computers there from my memory stick. Photo uploading was slow but I was getting there. We decided that we should cook tonight so we cruised the shops as they opened after 10. I discovered that one had frozen chicken double breast portions so we decided that tonight we would have roast chicken with potatoes, pumpkin, carrots and maybe beans or peas. The shopping was done and the frozen chicken put on over our slow fire to thaw for later.

Heading back into the library around midday as I walked in the door I heard some cyclists talking and one needed a cassette removal tool. I said I had one. So I lent it to Brad and Jill who had had to hitch the last few kilometers into town yesterday as his rear wheel had seized up. Later when I caught up with Brad he had found that a fellow at Robinson Crusoe (who run the boat across the lake) had all the proper tools needed for cassette removal. Somehow he had lost most of the balls in his rear ball bearings but now had his hub reassembled with some bigger ones that would at least get him to El Chalten. He also bore the news that it would be unlikely that the boat would run tomorrow - something we had guessed from the weather and in a way we were hoping for as Wednesday's forecast looks better.

In the afternoon the wind eased but we had intermittent showers and bits of sun. It seems that the local Internet was up but slow but it went again. I got some more photos uploaded at the library. We went back to check if the boat was running but we were too early and the girl there didn't know but walking back we heard some locals talking on the street: the captain was sure it wouldn't go tomorrow - from experience. When Alison went back later while I was watching our meal cook she was told to come back at 10:00 the next morning and pay, so sure they are that we will go on Wednesday.

We have eaten our roast chicken and vege and are having a quiet evening when I look out the window and see Andre, the Brazilian walker, pass by taking his trolley out the back to the shed where our bikes are parked. He is cold and wet as the last hour or two of his trip it has been raining but he pushed on to make it today with a 40 kilometer day. We agree to meet in the restaurant after he has had a shower to warm up. Alison heads out to buy a bottle of wine to help him celebrate. So we end up having a wine and talking while he is eating and in come a couple of German cyclists who he met on the road not so far out of town. They share a wine also, they came from Rio Bravo in a day like us, they are in their early 30's and are amazed that oldies like us could do what they have done - it sounds like we had a more favorable wind however. They are hungry and everything seems to have closed so I tell them that I spotted a fast food sign just around the corner, a street south of the square on our block. We are then off to bed.

A Tour of Villa O'Higgins – Day 4

The day started cold and with some rain. There was fresh snow dusting the mountains around us overnight, we were still snug in our cabin. I headed off to the library just after 8:30 again to get in early and load some photos to the journal before all the kids and other foreigners turned up. Some time after 10 we went off and bought our boat tickets. The day slowly improved with the rain going but it has been cold. I've had my longs on for 3 days now but I guess we have been inactive but I haven't worn them much at all before this.

So the captain knows the weather will be OK tomorrow and it looks to be coming better. Late in the afternoon I ambled out and I ran into one of the two young Germans we met with Andre last night coming back from the fast food shop with some chips, it was open last night and they had got some then also. My stomach was rumbling and we had arranged to eat at 8 at the restaurant so I went around to the shop and bought some chips also, not the cheapest or biggest portion but nothing is here so far down the Carretera, but they were very tasty.

With so many days here and no wifi I thought I'd take you on a bit of a tour of O'Higgins. In some ways it's typical of Chile and some it's not. While the first settlers arrived here around 1902 via the Lago Desiertio route from Argentina on which we go south. The town wasn't officially founded until much later in 1966. Until 1999 when the last branch of the Carretera Austral reached here access was via Argentina although there is a horse track that winds north through the mountains to Cochrane.

The town is between the airport and the mountains, the Carretera Austral is the western boundary and then the runway, somewhat longer than the town, is on the other side of the road. For a small town there has been lots of public money spent here. We are staying beside the Plaza in the south end of town, the old end. The plaza has recently been upgraded to be very flash and there is a new statue of a woman on a horse holding a baby followed by a dog to represent the early settlers to the area. On the western side of the Plaza is the large regional school and some other public buildings. The library is on the eastern side and is an architecturally designed building rather than the functional boxes of the rest of the place. On the northern side are some small old wooden buildings, an old church and a small museum with an old flat decked wagon out the front that has old artifacts and displays telling the history of the area. One newer building clad in the older style with wooden shingles is festooned with banners opposing the dam project on the Rio Pascua – this is where the road branched to just south of Rio Bravo. There is one new house under construction on the plaza opposite the library. The old house on the lot is being demolished as slowly as the new place seems to be being built. The new place has a feature of some rather burred logs supporting its front veranda.

Town ends on the southern side of the block we are on. Then there is the area where the army and Carabineros are based. They need some grassy areas for their horses. There are some large orange shipping containers parked there that look like the one that was on the truck that passed us on the steep hill on our day biking here. A block east is a bit of a park with some small building and play equipment. From the back of the park a path leads up to a substantial lookout over the town and valley to the mountains in the west. Opposite the park parked by a house is a modern trailer based portable bandsaw wood mill. A reminder of the importance of being self-sufficient in building materials down here.

Walking around the biggest danger is the chickens wandering the streets. Whether a mother hen with young chickens or the family flock it is hard to tell if they belong somewhere or just roam town like the street dogs further north. As I walked around I passed a saddled horse tethered to a tree. It was outside an uncompleted building, framework and a roof. This is not uncommon and there is always construction in these small towns. It seems that people start a house with the money they have and build it as they can. This leaves many unfinished buildings around, not just here but a feature of the Chile we have seen. The typical way to build is start with the outside foundation piles and get the outside framing up. Then the roof goes on and then the walls and the rest gets filled in. It rains a lot and when you build slowly it makes sense to get the roof up as soon as possible and then build under it. Some newer buildings have a concrete slab floor like our cabin here. In later years extensions are added, small and not usually architecturally consistent with the rest of the house.

Chileans are not afraid of colors and yellow and blues are common especially on the older style shingle cladding. Many newer buildings, especially tourist and government buildings make a feature of the rustic untrimmed log slabs weather board style for cladding, usually varnished when new and then left to weather. At the north end of the old part of town just at the foot of the hill a couple of small buildings are under construction in the rustic slab wood style. To add to that pioneer feel they each have an old wooden wagon wheel built into the wall next to the front entrance. Too small for normal houses we can only wonder what their purpose is.

The north end of town is generally newer because it has the housing projects. I don't know if it is because of the new houses that at the south end of town there seem abandoned and run down places. The town isn't that old. The houses are small, typical Chilean size. The area of the housing project hasn't had its streets paved yet unlike the south end. There are rows of bright yellow houses. I can't imagine such a bright development at home where people fear standing out from uninspiring gray. To be fair some of the earlier groups of houses are less colorful. There is even a modern developed playground amongst these newer houses with plastic slides like you find the world over.

Walking around the older places there are copious piles of firewood to remind us that it's an essential fuel here as we are burning plenty in our little cabin and it's midsummer. Back through the old end of town there is an interesting variety of old wooden houses and building in various states of decay. There is even a boat sitting on the side of the road, we wonder when it last saw the lake or when it will see it again. We have read of stories of some boat offering passage across the lake in the past as an alternate to the main ferry but there is nothing recent so maybe this is why.

It is clear that the government has been prepared to spend some money here. There is a bus station on the main road past town - it's a few years old now, it was probably built when the road arrived but looks like it has never been used, the gate is locked and grass and weeds are growing. There is only a bus twice a week to Cochrane and it just parks up around the corner from where we are staying. I guess that's where most of the places to stay are but it's only a few minutes walk anywhere.

I'm not sure what people do here, a bit of tourism, farming and government jobs, the school is relatively large. Around almost every corner is a small shop - called supermarkets because they carry everything but not very super by our standards. We noticed in the cities like Puerto Montt and Coyhaique that real supermarkets have killed the small shops - just like the rest of the world.

There is a Chilean flag flying proudly up on the hill behind town. Well you can also see Argentina from here the other side of the Rio Mosco. When we were at the rodeo we were hardly a stones throw from Argentina. The vagaries of the division along the Andes means that the border goes down the middle of the arm of Lago O'Higgins that we will leave on. To make that work the border follows the ridge line in the mountains east of here and drops down the small river just out of town. Google earth shows a few houses there so I suppose people live there. Our Spanish is not up to asking if they ever pop into town. It's a long way by boat to any other part of Argentina and then even further by road to anything resembling civilization.

A Boat Trip and Glacier O'Higgins

Ohiggins to Candelario Mansilla

www.pppg.pictures/LagoOhiggins.htm

Tonight's journal comes from our tent at a site overlooking Lago O'Higgins at Candelario Mansilla. We have been watching the sun set on Lago San Martin and the mountains to the east. They are of course one in the same lake but there are several lakes shared by Chile and Argentina down here and they never agreed on a shared name so they name their halves differently. We are almost on the border so our outlook is to the east and Argentina. You can see why it's Argentina, the land is different, not just drier but no longer the glacial mountains, it is the beginning of the Argentinian pampas that goes out to the Atlantic Ocean. When we got here after disembarking from the boat at about 5 we were aiming for the hospedaje offered by the farm here but another young couple were there before us and the bed is small, more suited to young love than an old married couple. We later learned that the farmers nephew was beside us on the boat and we had talked to him. He was making his first visit here so that probably took another room off the availability list. So here we are in their camping area with 4 other couples. Brad and Jill, the young English couple that I lent my cassette removal tool to the other day, a French and a two Swiss couples. We are ready to tuck into bed with the sun for a change as it has been a long day since we started out this morning.

The alarm went off at 6:30, it took us a few minutes to get up and with our panniers all packed and ready to go it must have been our quickest departure of the trip. We were ready to go about 7:15 and I realized that I didn't have the computer on my bike. I couldn't find it in the room or where the bikes were parked. The only thing that we could think of was that we had left it on the windowsill in the room where we stayed the first night. Problem was that the main building was locked and no one lives there so we couldn't get in to check. I got my hand in to the latch on an outer back door (not the first one) but the second door was locked.

So it was well after 7:15 when we were on the road for the 8 kilometers to the ferry. It was cold, 6 layers on top but at least it wasn't raining. Down towards the lake and across the flat to the bridge over the Rio Mayer to the other side of the valley then along the road carved into the steep side of the lake side. There were some small rises but pretty level really. Tire tracks indicated that we were not the first of the day and when we got to the boat there must have been 8 or ten bikes on it already. In all by the time we were loaded there were 19 bikes crossing in all.

The boat was full, there must be about 50 seats or more and they were all full, I'm not sure if there were a few standing or not. It's not like we had seen lots of tourists around in OHiggins so where did they all come from? Perhaps they were all hiding from the cold like us. The engine started and smoky diesel fumes wafted about and through the cabin. The door was opened for fresh air but it was cold so that was a double edged sword. Soon enough we were on our way and the air cleared. Down the lake we headed southwards. Mountains with snow and ice fields not far above us, tops covered in cloud but that was gradually lifting. I suppose that because the border goes down the middle of the lake arm we kept close to the Chilean side most of the way. There was one small estancia on the lake shore but all along the forest had been burnt in the past for farming, burnt logs sometimes high above us. Now with the forest returning it seemed such a waste. There were even small patches of very recent burning, an attempt to claw back the forest's regrowth.

After a couple of hours we headed out of the lake arm to cross to our first stop at Candelario Mansilla. This is where we dropped those not doing the glacier tour and picked up anyone joining for the tour. It seemed chaos and that no one knew what the plan was, particularly the crew. The bikes of those leaving needed to be unloaded but someone decided that all bikes should be unloaded. According to a young Canadian girl working on the boat this was the first time it was done this way. Then the panniers had to be sorted. They had all been put down a hatch on the front deck of the boat with no thought was to which would need to come out first. So they all had to come up until those who needed theirs had them. In the chaos some just went to the wharf that didn't need to and those staying aboard had to watch that ours stayed on board. In the end we were about to leave when one cyclist riding on who was on the wharf held up a pannier left there asking what to do with it. It was mine and I considered myself lucky to be there still on the fore deck to claim

it back onto the boat as the crew were telling us to move from the fore deck back to the cabin. I guess it would have still been there when we got back, the only people about were the Carabineros after all. Perhaps the staff on Robinson Crusoe aren't used to handling large numbers but we were disappointed in the lack of professionalism but I guess that this is Patagonian Chile and maybe this was an unusually large contingent of cyclists.

Back on the water we now headed west up the lake to the glacier, here we were now in the wind that we had been sheltered from in the first couple of hours. The boat was up and down in the waves and when we crossed into the south arm to get to the glacier we were rolling about in the side swell. The boat itself has quite a wind profile so was on a consistent lean at times. The Captain took us directly across the arm to get what shelter there was on the other side as quickly as possible and from where we continued along under more mountains from where we passed several small glaciers coming down from the mountains. The cloud was lifting a bit and we could see our destination ahead.

We spent an hour at the face of the glacier. It was very wide as it spilled out of its valley so it is not as high as Ventisquero San Rafael. In various parts there were close layers of something dark that we presumed to be volcanic ash from some past eruption. We did see a couple of calvings. I considered myself lucky to be watching the right spot for the first one when an ice cube about the size of a car started falling from high up the face. Not much I thought but on the way down it took more and then an avalanche causing a huge chunk to fall off. This generated quite a wave. On the boat today was a film crew - cameraman, sound man and presenter. They were out in the boat's small zodiac at the time and quickly turned tail to run from the wave as did our captain who turned us around and put the steam on.

It was whiskey on glacier ice again today - not quite as romantic as at San Raphael - some glacier ice in a glass with some whiskey on top and only one per person. Luckily as we stayed there the clouds lifted giving views of the mountains behind and towards the end of our time and as we steamed away the glacier was in full sun through a gap in the clouds.

On the way back we circled about the only half decent iceberg we saw, grounded near an island. We wonder if it had not been for the camera crew whether we would have had this little excitement or not. The wind had died quite a lot and was behind us as we steamed back to Candelario Mansilla getting there about 5. There were a number of northbound cyclists waiting for the boat but time was too short to exchange experiences. Bikes loaded up with all our gear, it was only 100m up the hill from the wharf to the branch road off to the camping area while the main road continued ahead to the border post and up to the pass. Looking down below us we could see all the northbound cyclists boarding the boat but we were in a hurry to see if we could get a bed.

There were 5 couples of cyclists making their way and some walkers. We did rush a bit hoping for a room in the farmhouse but in the end it was the tent. The toilet was down at the house but a concrete pad and a few pieces of wood outlining a frame above it indicate that a toilet and shower block are on the way. A hose comes from somewhere past the shed at the end of the camping area and that's where our water comes from. Showers are possible at the house for campers. We picked our spot as a bit more sheltered from the prevailing westerly wind and set up the tent. We are one of five tents here tonight, 5 couples, the younger set from the boat have opted to carry on and search out a camp spot and save some money.

While we had sun for a while it was quite warm but soon the chill set in after it got low and set. After cooking some rice and eating and sorting ourselves we were happy to tuck in to our tent for the night. While we were watching the sunset the nephew of the farmers came along and talked a bit. They were collecting the camping fee. I hope what little we paid helps towards the fast completion of the facilities for future travelers. We realized that he had been sitting beside us on the boat for a while. It was his first time here. It was his great grandparents that came here in 1900 and started clearing the land. He had a bit of English and that always helps as such people often appreciate the need to speak slower and clearer Spanish so we got by a bit. The family is spread out all over Chile now and he is from Los Angeles (Chile, not US). He told us that there is another farm on an island in the lake running sheep run by his Aunt and Uncle.

Photos today again suffered from the snow and clouds combination. Playing with exposure didn't really help much. As usual panoramas were the best to give you an idea of the scenery but it's not easy getting a panorama off a rocking boat.

Anything to Avoid Instant Mashed Potatoes

Candelario Mansillo to Camping foot of Lago Desierto

www.pppg.pictures/LgoDesierto.htm

Anything to avoid instant mashed potatoes - the alternative - a slab of Argentinian steak in a small piece of bread, the hour was late so there wasn't really much of a decision to make. Having arrived off the boat at the end of Lago Desierto at 7:30 and wondering how far we could get in the growing cold of the evening and the failing light the campground a few hundred meters from the port seemed the only real option. It was expensive, by Chilean standards anyway, but being able to have a quick meal that we didn't have to cook seemed the best idea, something not planned or expected when we got under way this morning. The plan had been anything to avoid another cold night in the tent and plug on to El Chalten when we arose early with the light but the best laid plans...

Last night it was cold at night in the tent but it did come over a bit cloudy with some showers and then it seemed to warm up a bit before dawn. In the morning the tent fly had some spots and condensation on the inside so it was still a bit damp when I had to roll it up. Out of the tent at 7 to reheat our oatmeal the cigarette lighter I use for the stove wasn't where I put it last night. It finally turned up again with the breakfast stuff when we made oatmeal for breakfast the day after leaving Bariloche which was our next time but one camping. For now luckily we had bought a spare as I was wondering how long the original bought back in Choshuenco would last before running out of fuel.

Before leaving Alison went down to the farmhouse and bought some homemade breads fresh from the oven to keep us going later in the day. All packed we were on the roll about 7:45, that must be one of our quickest starts of the trip but three of the couples camping had already left ahead of us even though the Carabineros station for exiting Chile didn't open until 8. The wind was cold and we were all layered up. Out from the farm to the official road and Alison managed to somehow hit a rock or two getting started and tumble off at near stop speed. No damage thankfully except pride. The road up from the wharf to the immigration building must be about the worst kilometers of this section, some steep and gravelly bits.

We got to the immigration counter and there was someone talking behind a door but it was a few minutes before someone actually came out of another door to do our paperwork by which time the French from the campground were also there and then the young local couple as well. Finally on our way with our exit stamp the next kilometer was also bad in places.

The road has to climb away from the lake quite swiftly to get above the steep ravine of the river valley that we follow to the border. There are a series of switchbacks going from terrace to terrace before some leveler going. This section of the road has had some work done on it in the last year or so upgrading the surface, it seems we are never far from road works even here. It's all open country the forest having been mostly cleared. As we get into the valley going south then we get more shelter from the westerly wind blowing down the lake and layers start to come off as we climb and more sun comes out. There is a stretch above the gorge where the road is carved into the rock hillside and the surface is pretty bad in very short bits. We ride most of it but some pushing is required. At one stage Alison calls out "Car", our usual call when we spot traffic. WTF I think, this is a deserted road that goes from nowhere to nowhere, how can there be a car? In fact it is the farmer coming down in his camioneta. He offers a service to take you or your luggage up to the frontier. From there horses can take the luggage through the last stretch to the Argentinian border post. For such a deserted road the surface sure looked well used so he must do plenty of business.

We continue climbing and catch up with a Swiss woman who is walking. The farmer has taken her bags up to go across by horse so she only has a light backpack. She stayed at the house last night. She got there before us and got a good bed but in the end had swapped with the young couple so they got a bigger bed and she had the smaller one that we had seen. A little bit more after about 4 kilometers and an hour traveling or so we are nearing a high point and we roll up and down a bit before reaching it. Once there we get our first glimpse between the trees of Mt. Fitz Roy ahead in the distance, it is clear but there are a few clouds between

us and it partially obscuring an otherwise clear view. This is our lucky day. A bit further on there is short foot track off the road a little to a clear rocky knob that gives a good clear view ahead to Fitz Roy again. We think that this is where we read of some cyclists camping on the way through some months back. Apart from there not being water close by it would be a great view to wake up to in the morning.

Then it's downhill into the relatively level upper valley that we follow for 5 or 6 kilometers. Up and down a bit through forest and some grassland. Along here the track surface is smooth compacted dirt and gravel, a bit potholed but good running. We come across a couple of gauchos on horseback herding a few cattle through the trees with their dogs. We are passed by the truck again, this time taking the young couple who got the bed at the house up and back, she has a cold so they decided not to go through this morning but they are just taking the ride for a look. On the side of a clearing there is what looks like a bit of a rotting shelter made out of outer slabwood cut from the local trees. At the end of the pasture is a round corral made from local logs. It's rather amazing to find some open pasture land in this glacial mountainous landscape.

Then we arrive at a decrepit bridge where we must cross the river. It is safe for bikes but not a truck. The beams and piles making the bridge structure look sound but the decking must have been milled from local timber and is rotting away. It looks like the bridge once had side rails but these have collapsed. On the core beams selected logs have been placed to make the underlying deck of the bridge. On these the boards that we have to walk on are warped and rotting and they sit loosely. At the start there are some wider boards of more recent origin but they only go about half way. The gaps are bigger than our bike tires so there is no way that we can ride so we walk our bikes across one at a time. There is a ford beside the bridge, maybe knee deep today, but in wet weather the truck probably can't get past here.

Next we soon reach the airfield. The road ahead is blocked by logs and we are diverted into the aerodrome and along the airstrip. Out of forest and in the open as we bike along the landing strip, now the road, we again are given good views ahead and get a glimpse of Fitz Roy still clear of cloud. Just after the end of the airstrip the road branches. It's hard to tell which way we should go but we choose right, wrong. We soon come to a house and camping area at the foot of Laguna Redonda. We turn around and there is another rough track in the direction we need to go but we go back to the branch and soon realize that a bit further on the rough track connects to the road we need to be on. We can now see plenty of bike tire tracks that we couldn't in the hard gravel at the branch. We come to a sturdier bridge to cross back to our original side of the valley. We have seen photos of this bridge from a couple of years ago with its approaches washed out but it is all fixed with some new decking now.

I am a little annoyed at myself for not checking a GPS track that I had downloaded off the Internet for this route, it would have saved this little side trip. However later examination of that track from some walkers showed that they went the other side of the next small lake ahead and that would have lead to considerable confusion soon after we crossed the border.

Now we get some short climbs, up and down we go several times, there are some sections that are a bit steep and the base is not as well constructed with more of a dirt base than gravel. It looks like some work has also been done on this section in the not too distant past maybe when the bridge approach was repaired and the work was done back near the beginning. Here it looks like it would be too slippery and muddy to drive in the wet. Alison walks some but I manage to ride most of it. We meet some hikers coming the other way and exchange greetings. They tell us it's not far to the frontier and then before we know it a couple of hundred meters later there is the metal border post in front of us. Large signs facing each other welcoming us to either Chile or Argentina. We are a little surprised that the driveable road has taken us all the way to the frontier, obviously the information that suggested it didn't go all the way is out of date but with that last bridge now fixed at least the farmer can drive all the way.

It is time for a break in no mans land between the signs. We get out lunch, bread from the Señora at the farm (relatively expensive but solid and filling) with Tuna. The French couple catch us up again and then the farmer in his camioneta turns up with the young couple (who have changed their minds again and it seems that they are going through today) and some others. It seems that the boat ran again today on Lago O'Higgins and

these people that we hadn't seen before got off and have taken the ride to the border. It may have been challenging for us to get here but I don't envy those who got here the easy way - we were able to enjoy the scenery and we have a sense of self satisfaction. Quite a little party now on this remote road! Now as we understand it there should be some horses about to carry the bags for all these people but we see no sign of them. After half an hour or so we are finished eating and are ready to roll at the same time as the walkers but they are faster than us so they go on ahead and we never catch them.

A few years ago Argentina made plans to build a road on their side to connect to the Chilean road at the frontier. The contract was even let but construction never began. Plans were thwarted by Argentina's economic woes and no money was budgeted for the work. I read a suggestion that differences between the local governor of the Santa Cruz province and the Argentinian president haven't helped. There is no sign that anything will happen in the foreseeable future. It all seems very symptomatic of the problems that beset Argentina again. For us of course a road would be easier and cheaper but somehow the horse track ahead of us is part of the right of passage of finishing the Carretera Austral. In some ways this last bit was one of the mysterious attractions of the Carretera Austral for us, the final adventure. I'm glad that there is no road as we set off for this last challenge.

We start out downwards sitting on our saddles sort of riding and rolling slowly avoiding bushes of young *Nothofagus* and rocks. Within a couple of hundred meters we reach a bit of a cleared area where there is the rusting skeletal remains of some old tunnel like building. Whatever outpost Argentina once had here only steel has stood the test of time and remains standing.

Soon we reach a series of small streams crossing the track. There are the rotted remains of some old log bridges but while the first is still crossable we soon have to cross through the muddy water pushing the bikes down and up out of each. Some have logs embedded in the muddy bottom making a crossing for times of high water but today it is easier to push through the small amount of boggy water. This however fills the brakes with sandy rubbish that grinds away as we continue downhill.

After a bit we come to be above Laguna Larga and here the track gets rockier as it winds along the hillside staying well above the lake. We do get some stretches of riding but it is a horse track with roots and rocks that stop us frequently. In fact we climb again to be higher than the saddle at the border to keep above the lake. Not much riding here as we push up over more rocks and around trees and roots in a section that takes about an hour.

We meet a couple of fellows coming, an Australian has a trailer on his back and is almost bent double and is accompanied by a Canadian carrying his pack of stuff. The Australian is helping out the Canadian who has his family back at Lago Desierto with whom he will come up tomorrow - but he's getting one bike up today.

After this section things smooth out and we can ride and roll downhill a lot more in mature forest. Then there is a bog, perhaps some bits could be best called a swamp for 50 meters or so. It's pretty dry at this time of year and we follow a line through used by others keeping our feet dry until a creek at the far end. I keep my feet dry getting across but then get them a bit wet helping Alison out the steep bit on the other side. It's then good riding and rolling for a while with roots and rocks causing us to stop and avoid but we usually don't have to dismount. Then we have a stretch where the track is slightly downhill on the side of the hill just above the swampy patch and it is narrowed between the encroaching younger regrowth bushes. Alison gets up a bit of speed but then hits something on the track that sends her sideways downhill into a bush.

There are a couple of small creeks to cross and there are logs piled as bridges beside them. We have read of cyclists contributing to these makeshift bridges back in spring when water levels were higher but the water level is low enough for us not to need them. Then there is a larger creek, our last before the descent as it turns out. A couple of larger trees have been laid across it forming a makeshift bridge. I get my bike across on this by walking on one and running the bike wheels on the other. It is tricky and hardly worth all the effort especially as at one stage the bike slipped and was only held up by the main crank sprocket firmly wedged on my shoe which of course contained my foot painfully within. Alison just pushes through the ford in a few seconds as it's only a few inches deep with a good gravel bottom but her feet are now wet and mine are dry.

We have to stop while she empties her shoes and squeezes her socks out.

The running is not too bad as we are starting to fall a bit. There is one large tree fallen across the track and we have to go around it. Oh for my chainsaw sitting in the shed back home. I can't help thinking that it would be minimal effort for those who run the horse service to bring the chainsaw that they must have on the farm and spend a few minutes cutting it away. As the track starts falling we come to bits where it has started to become a bit of a trench, water no doubt erodes it and it is not just the horse's hooves causing the problem.

It's not much more until we come to an open area with views above Lago Desierto and the beginning of the last steep downward stretch. We have caught again up with the older Swiss woman walker who came through with us and we've seen several times today again so we stop together for a few minutes to admire the views. It's warm and sunny and we are down to one layer - the first time for a while. Off the track here by about 50 meters is a bit of a knob that is easy to walk up to through sparse scrubby bushes where we have excellent views south across Lago Desierto and Fitz Roy behind it and icefields on the mountains off to the west. I have seen many pictures of Fitz Roy but few rival what we see today for a clear view. While the sky is no longer 100% clear blue as it was earlier and there is now one small pesky cloud on Fitz Roy to spoil an otherwise perfect picture this must be the view of the trip. We look down the length of Lago Desierto to Fitz Roy framed perfectly in the background. The light may have been better a little earlier but we are grateful it has been such a great day for this particular view and it is hard to leave but we have a boat to catch. Our annoyance at having to wait those days to make this section is all forgotten with this spectacular view.

Then begins the last stretch with a steep section where the horse track is often scoured out to a deep narrow ditch. Based on what we have read we expect to have to take our panniers off and portage them but we start by running our bikes above the ditch on the edge and walking either on the other side or in the ditch. We are very glad we aren't coming up this way, it would definitely require portage of panniers for nearly a kilometer. We come to the stream we have crossed several times already for one last crossing. The crossing is not bad but it's a very steep couple of meters out the other side. It's almost level for a couple of hundred meters before starting the last downward section and the biggest ditch sections of the track. It's not easy straddling this section of ditch track but we are quite pleased with ourselves that we never had to take our panniers off in spite of it being tricky a couple of times.

It's about 4:15 when we hit the bottom. We have a bridge to cross the creek this time to get to the border post. We heard voices just up the creek as we arrived but the immigration building is locked and there is no one about. Well that is except for all the bikes and bikers and walkers waiting for the boat, boiling billies and socializing down by the wharf. We find out that those who carried on last night camped along the road a bit on a flat area and about midnight had someone kicking their tents drunkenly demanding 2000 pesos each (what we paid). I can understand that the farmer might feel they should pay but all were unimpressed by the way it happened. After 10 or 15 minutes a young man comes around the corner of the building and takes our passports, they are returned 10-15 minutes later all stamped. No questions asked of us or forms for us to fill out.

At this stage we are planning to have a go at getting to El Chalten this evening and we are expecting a boat at 6 so we make a cup of soup and eat our last bread. Then a speedboat can be seen coming up the lake. It arrives and the driver comes across and asks who has boat vouchers bought from Robinson Crusoe in O'Higgins. Some people have them (not us). He can take six people but only two bikes. There are plenty with bikes and some without but those without are waiting for packs to come through by horse or don't have vouchers. So he leaves with two bikers and spare seats. A few minutes later the packs turn up but he has gone. He told us that the bigger boat will come at 6:30 and will have plenty of room for those without vouchers - it's a different company. He will be back for those with vouchers.

Indeed an hour and a half later he returns. The other boat can be seen coming slowly in the distance. He still doesn't have enough space for those with vouchers and even though 4 bikes are squeezed onto his small boat this time it looks like Brad and Jill, the young English couple, will have to wait until even later for their pick up. I wonder if it occurs to the driver that now he has decided to take 4 bikes that he could have taken

four last time. Some negotiation begins, the young local couple don't have vouchers or bikes, can they take the vouchers to go on the speed boat and pay for tickets on the other boat for Brad and Jill - and then the speed boat won't have to come back. Logic prevails and thus it is decided and all are happy and we all start loading onto the bigger boat. Panniers by a chain gang and bikes on the back - but there isn't room so the last two bikes are strapped on top of the life raft - we hope we never have to use it! With some locals on an excursion round trip the cabin is full as we cross the lake. Earlier in the season no boat was running here, now there are 3 at the wharf, the speedboat, our medium semi inflatable and a larger wooden boat - not that we saw this last one move.

Looking back as we leave it is possible to see a part of the track rising steeply above the border post towards the gap in the mountains through which we have so recently come. Sitting in the enclosed cabin of the boat there is a sense of camaraderie among the cyclists. We may have just met yesterday or maybe a few days earlier in O'Higgins but we have all shared the challenge of the crossing and the horse track and the Carretera Austral before it. Looking out across to the side of the lake I wonder where the track is that was used by those who walked this way when no boat was running. Most of the forested mountainside rises steeply out of the lake but there are a couple of easier spots with some flash houses. What a place to have a holiday home or are they some fishing lodges, I'll never know. If I ever meet any of those who walked that way it will be on my question list.

It takes an hour or so to cross the lake and tie up at the wharf. Everyone pours off the boat and with a bit of a communal effort to unload everyones gear down the wharf we then sort ourselves out. Some want to get on as far as they can and they head off. After about half a kilometer where the lake transitions to a river we come to the hotel and camping area. We go into the camping and it seems expensive, there are flush toilets and supposedly a shower. The others, younger and on tighter budgets, carry on, we procrastinate but Alison finds out that we can pay in \$US as we don't have much local currency after paying for the boat (160 pesos each) and that we can get a steak. A steak means no instant mashed potatoes. We will stay.

It's quite a nice camping ground - at least it's nice grass to set the tent up on something that we haven't always had. There are a few families under the trees closer to the facilities so we choose to camp a bit more out in the open area. I set the tent so that the open end looks out to the other side of the valley and the snow capped mountains and Glaciar Huemul. The Dutch couple that camped with us last night is staying here and they are well set up by the time we have made our decision. We have a standalone rather rustic toilet nearby and it flushes - somewhat better than the bushes last night. There is a bit of a slab wood shelter but it's a bit dusty. There is a nice new shower and toilet block - but it's not quite finished. That is somehow very Argentinian to be so near and yet so far for the annual tourist season. But maybe we should remember that the nearest hardware store is probably many hundreds of kilometers away. The old showers work but are only hot between 6 and 8. It's darkening when I get there and there is no light apart from a small window. The floor is wet outside the shower are because of the levels sloping the wrong way. I get a tepid shower as the hot water is running out. Alison doesn't bother with a shower.

We head down the path to the man with the steaks. We are offered a good exchange rate for our US dollars by the man in the office if we want to change but we decline thinking that out here it can't be a good rate. This is something we later regret as it was about 10% better than what we got the next day in El Chalten. We are offered steak or sausage but they are not much different in price so the steak is the only choice for us. It's getting dark by the time we are finished and walk back down the path back to the camping area. Thus it is that having had our steak in a roll we eventually settle into our tent for another night below icy mountains with all our layers on.

Some good photos today with blue sky for a change and others were not so good. If there was one day that we wanted good weather and clear skies it was this so we are happy.

Riding in Argentina Again

Lago Desierto to El Chalten

www.pppg.pictures/LagoDesiertoChalten.htm

Here we are finally at El Chalten, back in Argentina, getting used to new money again, where the official exchange rate you get when taking money out of a machine is about half what you get changing on the street. We have ended up in a hostel type place that was recommended to us by someone we can't remember. It wasn't until we were well settled that we found we had searched this place out previously on the Internet. El Chalten is a tourist town, it's only reason for existence being the mountains around here, Fitz Roy being the main one and very impressive it is, a magnet for climbers. We got here for a late lunch on a bit of a tailwind in spite of an early start this morning.

With an early night in the tent last night we were awake at dawn. The sun was just hitting the tops on the mountains just behind our camp and for several hours we watched it move down them to the glacier running towards us. While we were up after 6 it wasn't until 9 when the sun finally hit our camp. We were taking advantage of the cold wind to dry the tent a bit from the previous night. Normally the fly collects a lot of condensation overnight even when it is dry but the wind meant that it was dry and only the damp floor of the tent needed a bit of drying for which I hung it over the wire fence at the edge of the camping ground. As we don't expect to be camping for a few days ahead as we bus north we thought it a good idea to get it as dry as possible before setting off.

It was well after 10 by the time we left. There being a tail wind and an overall downhill we were not in a hurry to do the 37 kilometers to el Chalten. Putting my helmet on I realized that the sun visor was missing after yesterday's excursions. It was only half a kilometer back to the boat we came on so back I went and while there was no one about at such an early hour for the locals. Down the jetty I walked and onto the boat and as it was unlocked I checked inside to no avail. Back to Alison and onto the road we rolled.

It wasn't far before we came across most of the others who came through with us where they had camped beside the road. They had been told in the morning that they shouldn't have camped there but that's all. They were beside the river and had managed a fire last night for warmth. We rolled on together a bit and continued to meet with some of them on and off for a large part of today's trip. There's not much to say, the road started OK but became more potholed and rutted. It wasn't all downhill but the uphill were gentle or short if steeper. Off across the river to the other side was an impressive colorful mountain ridge but with the sun behind it it didn't make for good photos.

We come to an area of flat that is less densely forested, among the trees are a couple of quite new identical houses. They seem somehow out of place here. They don't look like farm houses so maybe they are holiday homes. It's certainly well away from civilization if you want a break from a busy life. After about 6 kilometers we come to a monument for some soldiers involved in a border dispute with Chile in 1965. It was part of a larger disagreement over the whole border along the Andes and in the end the Pope helped sort it out but Argentina reclaimed a bit of land that Chile had got its hands on here. Alison remarked that if Chile had held this bit the road would go all the way through to Lago Desierto and this road would probably be better too! We came to a lake and the road had to rise a bit around it so as we had been going for an hour or so we took a rest on the grassy bank beside the road having a bit of a view for our rest. The mountains were all around us with slowly changing views, some with Ice fields above us and some not, either way it was an impressive landscape. The dominant feature was Fitz Roy itself to which we headed towards the base of before getting further away on the last stretch to El Chalten.

We come to the wide open valley of Rio Eléctrico near the base of Fitz Roy where there are spectacular views of the mountains around us. The building wind is starting to blow a bank of cloud off the Patagonian ice sheet and it looks impressive as it spills into the top of the valley. A few kilometers further on and we come to Camping Bonanza. It offers asado for lunch and a lamb carcass can be seen roasting in the window but it's a bit early for lunch for us. There is a llama tethered on view, if nothing else it is keeping the grass mown. Had

we been earlier last night we may have ended up camping here, it looked not a bad spot beside Rio de las Vueltas, as the name implies the views around here are quite spectacular.

The valley was opening out and wide and flat and then a few kilometers before the end we came across our road newly graded with a line of rocks down the middle dividing the graded and ungraded side. I guess it filled in the potholes for awhile but wasn't much better going on the bike. Then we saw the grader itself heading towards us. Around a bend not much further we came to a carpark with a few buses parked there and a sign for a waterfall so we decided that we should have a bit of a rest as we weren't too sure of our distance. Since losing my computer I was using my GPS based garmin. It doesn't record slow bits as riding distances so it under reports how far we have been. When the data is downloaded it shows everything but that's little use on the road.

We parked the bikes down the track a good distance from the road and walked the 500 or so meter path to the waterfall and joined the two bus loads of people already there admiring it. As waterfalls go it was not exactly Iguaco or Niagra but you have to remember that Argentina is a huge flat dry county and this waterfall was a minor local attraction. After taking a few photos off we moved, we are unused to such crowds of people. Alison decided to take the opportunity to use the toilet, it looked an ordinary plastic portaloo from the outside. Inside there was no seat as we might expect, just a hole in the floor over a hole. Another reminder to us that we are back in Argentina.

A bus was loading to depart so we thought that we would wait for it to leave ahead of us rather than have to be passed by it. On the newly graded road we were keeping up with it, the driver being cautious. After a couple of kilometers behind the bus we rounded a corner to see El Chalten ahead of us, quite a few kilometers earlier than expected from my Garmin, well better that than the other way around I suppose.

So we cruised into town and onto the asphalt road with the gentlest of tail winds. There was some high cloud about but still blue sky and we could see how Fitz Roy dominates the view from town to the west.

We were looking for a place to eat and a place to stay. Just into town we soon saw a tenedor libre, literally free fork - all you can eat buffet. We decided to check it out but at lunchtime the range of dishes wasn't that great. The Dutch couple that came through with us were there eating so we exchanged a few words but we decided to move for now. The first place we stopped and asked about rooms was full, it probably looked a bit expensive for us, maybe we just looked too scruffy for them. We rolled on through town to the Plaza near the other end. There is a travel agent and Internet place on the corner of the Plaza so we went in I asked about buses north and was told that there were seats available tomorrow.

Almost next door was a place offering rooms but there were none available but it was associated with a restaurant and we thought that it looked a good place to eat. Across the road we met one of the other cyclists from the boat a few days ago. He had some useful advice and pointed us to the bus station a couple of hundred meters further along on the edge of town. We went on to the bus station only to find that both the companies offer seats to Los Antiguas had no seats tomorrow. Back we went around the block and spotted this place to stay, Lo de Guille. We went in and checked it out but as they only had a room for one night we put off the decision until returning to the travel place to see if they really did have seats for tomorrow. Of course they didn't - this is Argentina.

The travel place had a sign indicating that they changed dollars, we desperately need some to pay for our accommodation however when we asked they only had enough spare cash to change a small amount which we did. There was a woman in there at the same time as us and seeing our "problem" she offered to change for us. I'm not sure if it was her regular business or just that she saw a good opportunity in a town where the rate was well below that current in the big cities as we found out a few days later. The woman we had been talking to at the desk suggested that we go out on the street for our transaction, it's not that she minded us doing it but I guess she didn't want it happening on her premises. So out the door on the street the woman pulled out a big wad of cash, well it doesn't take a lot of dollars to convert to a wad of pesos. So we made the transaction everyone was happy and we are reminded that we are back in Argentina where no one wants their own currency.

So back to the hostel and we got a room for one night as it was booked for the next. We told them we would just look elsewhere tomorrow, one night was OK for a start. We then went for some lunch being desperate for food as it was now around 3:00. We went back to the place on the Plaza because it was the closest we had seen and looked good, anything else was off down the long main street. We were not disappointed. I had some slow roasted lamb shoulder chops and Alison had a steak, both were delicious. After returning to the hostel we tried the Internet to find that it was very slow - they have to have satellite here so far from any cables.

The weather forecast doesn't look good anywhere north that we want to go so we are left wondering how to make the best use of our remaining month and staying dry. On the TV news San Carlos de Bariloche had snow the night before - so unusual at this time of year to make the TV news. There's a window of good weather north but it is too many days travel away for us to get there in time so we will sleep on our options.

Back at the hostel we were told we could now have a room for the nights to come but we may have to change rooms. There were some climbers that had been staying here for a month and they had decided to try a few nights climbing so rooms had become available.

While we had good weather yesterday today as we rode along the high cloud came in and clouds came around the mountains. It was again a hard day to get decent photos of mountains with snow on them and clouds above them. Fitz Roy itself is an incredible selection of peaks even visible over the hills to the west of town.

Argentina

El Chalten and a Bus to San Carlos de Bariloche

From El Chalten we have some decisions to make. Do we want to head a bit further south to El Calafate and visit the Moreno Glacier or can we give it a miss as we have seen it before and just head north. But just where or how far north north is the decision that we must make. Buses head north to San Carlos de Bariloche but we can stop off on the way. There is the non stop overnight bus or the one that takes two days with a bed for the night midway. The weather is hardly summer with TV news programs showing floods in Northern Argentina. In the end we resolve to restart our biking further north than planned from Bariloche but with some challenging new routes.

El Chalten Day 2

www.pppg.pictures/ElChalten.htm

We went to bed last night to sleep on where to next. Last night's Internet, such that it was, gave us more to work on. The weather is looking rubbish for weeks to come. Our delay days are adding up and we have to decide how to make the best of what time we have left. To continue our plan to Coyhaique would mean days, if not rain, then drizzle and cloud. Bad weather is hitting New Zealand soon and those same weather patterns will come this way across the Pacific as well. Somewhat reluctantly we come to the realization that to do our planned route from Coyhaique and back via Futalafu to Argentina isn't going to be much fun and we won't see much. The weather is going to be better further north. The bonus is that there are routes I had eyed up when doing our original planning that carry on up north from our original plans but back then that we it seemed we didn't have time for them on this trip. One section in particular was a bit of mystery with youtube clips of 4WD going through and references to organized cycling on mountain bikes. A few weeks ago one cyclist went through and has posted photos and his GPS track so now I know enough to be confident about the route and it's quality – it shouldn't be too hard after Lago Desierto, higher and more climbing but a better road. Then there are roads other cyclists have done through the back roads that will eventually bring us to Los Angeles or even then out to Concepcion on the coast. So the decision is made - we will bus to Bariloche. Maybe there is a plan for what to do if we can ever come back - the Lago Puelo route will be finished in a year (if all goes to plan) and there will be seal to the south of Santa Lucia so there will be an interesting loop to do.

We are awake around 7:30 and get some good Internet (well relatively speaking) in before the rest of the town and hostel get going. This confirms our plans. Breakfast is an omelet, this place is more like a hostel than a hospedaje with a big common room and kitchen so we are the first to cook, all those youngsters will be up later. Then it's down to the bus station to buy the tickets. We can get on the bus on Monday, it's a two day trip staying overnight in Perito Moreno - but the bus ticket includes a hostel voucher and the bus will drop us there. Today we get 10 pesos for the US dollar with which we pay - yesterday it was 9 so that's a bonus. We will get to Bariloche late on the second night. We are happy not to travel overnight and take the extra time and hopefully see some of the endless Patagonian scenery. After a day to compose ourselves we will head off north on the 7 lakes route if all goes well. We should have about 4 weeks to get through the section we plan so that is good, it should be plenty of time.

Tickets bought we head back into town (the bus station is on the edge of town 2 blocks from where we are staying). There is a laundry called Maori. Being Kiwis we go in and ask why, maybe the fellow looks a bit Maori. It turns out his grandfather was a Maori from New Zealand 100 years ago - we ask where from - Ashburton - Alison's home town. I joke that as it's such a small town that they must be related.

We decided it was time to take a walk, there are a couple of lookouts on the hill east on El Chalten. One looks out east over Lago Viedma and the other west over town to the mountains that give this place its reason for existence. This is Patagonia, the wind blows from the west most days, not just wind but howling wind. We had a couple of good days to get here but today the wind is howling down the valley and up over these hills. One lookout is called Los Condores because the condors can sit on the updraft generated as the wind has to go up over the hill. Indeed as we walk over the bridge at the edge of town and past the park visitor center and start up the hill we can see condors soaring above us.

At the branch up the hill we choose the half hour walk to Lago Viedma lookout first and follow a long straight flat valley for kilometer or so to its end where we then climb a little to get the best views to the east. In the cold wind it's not a place to stay too long but we can shelter in the lee of the rocky hill a bit and get the view to the east of Lago Viedma stretching out in the distance to the low rolling hills that begin the pampa. We then walk back into the wind and at the branch in the track it's five minutes up to the lookout over town. Up here I try to get some panorama photos but the wind is so blustery it's almost impossible to stand still to pan the camera steadily enough and anyway the clouds to the west hide the tops of Fitz Roy and the distant glaciers and ice fields. It must be a wonderful view on a good day but this isn't one, we had our luck the day

we came through Lago Desierto and such luck is more than most get around here unless they have the time to hang around a while.

At the bottom we stop at the park visitor center for a while and look at the displays there for a while. Back to town we return to the same restaurant as yesterday for lunch, I have a Milanesa - a big thick crumbed beef schnitzel with chips and Alison has a steak. We really don't need this when not biking but we are in Argentina and won't be able to enjoy such meals for much more when we get back on the road. In the quiet of the afternoon Internet response improves - everyone is eating or resting so we get some usable response. After some shopping I take the front mudguards off the bikes and tape and tie them over the back ones. We need to take the front wheels off the bikes to go on the bus on Monday and it gains little with the guards still on except damaging the guards themselves. A bit of bread and cheese and some of a can of fruit salad is all we need for our evening meal after our late lunch. In the evening the Internet response drops to unusable as everyone else in town is online.

El Chalten Day 3

The waitress at the restaurant where we have been having lunch has on her tee shirt: “Viento Mucho Viento” - wind, lots of wind, that sums this place up and why we will be glad to move on.

There was a bit of rain overnight. We awoke early so again took the chance to get some Internet, still slow by most standards but light speed and actually usable compared to the previous evening. All went well for a while until we realized it was more than slow and nothing was happening. Then we clicked that the sound of the town diesel generators that aren't very far from us had also stopped. So we got up and started an omelet for breakfast cooking being by gas. The Señora that runs the place came and turned on the emergency lights, obviously this isn't unusual. It wasn't long before the power came on and we could make our toast. Perhaps Sunday morning is the time for regular maintenance at the power station.

Midmorning we went out for a coffee and hot chocolate and some of the delicious pastries that they have here in Argentina at a place beside the plaza. There is a new deck outside and it has been built around a single scotch broom plant. It has long finished flowering and the seed pods are swelling and darkening. It may be a pretty yellow when it's flowers in this desolate place but don't they know what an invasive weed this is. There are probably several thousand seeds on this plant and they are known to remain viable for over 30 years. All I want to do is pull it out and incinerate it as based on our experience where I have seen it spread and choke open grassland in New Zealand. I can envisage it spreading in the wind across the Pampas.

We then checked out if we could find any places to change money. We knew that the place down by the bus station was one place but we decided to have a bit of a walk down the main street for some photographs and to see if there were others open.

In late 2014 Lonely Planet rated El Chalten the number 2 city in the world to visit in 2014 so I'll take you on a bit of our tour, well a walk down the main street, I'd hardly call it a city. It is more than a main street – but not a lot – but that doesn't mean it hasn't got its charms. A city isn't a city without buildings. Being only 30 years old referring to some thing as old is a relative term. There are some newer flash hotel buildings that really stand out, they are scattered on the south side of town, some of them are on a river terrace above the main area. They stand out in size and style, clearly money from elsewhere has come to town to build these. There is some construction, some, shall we say, more active than others. The Mediterranean style with a light open brick is common. This looks rough in construction as it is plastered over for finishing. There are some buildings that are partially completed shells, it's hard to tell if they are abandoned or just waiting. This is a common problem in Argentina.

The main street has plenty of open spaces along it, it's hardly a dense city. The local police station is on the main street. Outside are the wrecks of maybe half a dozen cars. It's an awfully long way here from anywhere else and just not worthwhile taking a car a long way to fix especially if it's damaged in a major way beyond repair. So here are these cars with the grass growing around them, a reminder to drive carefully on these roads a long way from any major civilization.

There's a camping place on the main street that was recommended to us. It's just a wide open space with a few hedgy trees along the western boundary. All the tents are hard up against these trees getting what shelter they can from the incessant westerly wind.

There are shops and eating places along the main street. There is La Wafleria, guess what they sell, You get bread at the panaderia and hardware at the ferateria (literally iron store) so what else would you call a place specializing in waffles. We didn't have time to try the waffles but it reminds us that we are back on the real tourist route. At almost the end of town is the buffet and grill restaurant that we stopped in at on the way into town but it's such a way from our end of town we never got there again to try the food.

What you can't get away from is the backdrop of the mountains and the famous Patagonian wind. There's even a place that offers to bus you up to Lago Desierto and then you come back by mountain bike on the “Viento a Favor”, a tailwind. There are some young willow trees behind the sign pushed well over in today's wind as if to prove exactly what the tailwind means.

In the end the only place showing any indication that it actually offered to change money was the hostel across from the bus station. Other places indicate a rate that they will take US dollars and may change if they have enough spare pesos but the hostel actually had a piece of paper in the window saying currency exchange and he had some good English as well. A young man happily changed my money from a rather large wad of Argentinian pesos. Today the rate was 9 to the dollar, yesterday his sign was 10, rather annoying, you have to get into the mode of spotting a good rate and we haven't been here long enough yet.

Until midday there was a bit of sun and blue sky to the east, but to the west was cloud and we couldn't see any mountains. In the afternoon the clouds moved over and the rain moved in by the time we had our late lunch. For lunch we went to our regular haunt by the plaza and I had lamb again and Alison steak - well we will be on rations again soon - two days on the bus won't be very exciting fare and then back on the road. We got talking to an American fellow at the next table. He had been here a month for climbing, he told us that the day we came through from Chile was the best day of the month - we must have someone on our side at least part of the time.

We left the restaurant and a few shops down outside an Internet place a couple of fully loaded Long Haul Truckers were parked outside, it was raining with the wind by now. A young couple come out of the door dressed in wet weather gear. They are Matt and Anna, northbound and after an early start at 5am to try and beat the head wind they have arrived here wet and tired. Anna is a fellow Kiwi by birth but she has lived in the USA since she was 7 so we figure we retain our record of not meeting any other Kiwis on this trip. They are looking for a place to stay and head off across the road to a place that they have heard of but we have been told that our place still has a room so we tell them that. About half an hour later they turn up and take the room. They have spent 3 weeks coming north and we are happy to advise them about what's ahead - not so much wind but we can't promise no rain.

We meet cyclists northbound who want to start at Ushuaia as it is the world's southernmost city. There is something about starting as far south as you can. Invariably they have tales of struggling into the Patagonian wind for days. Invariably they just did not know what that wind would be like, it's not until you experience it that you know what it is like. I like to think we have the sense to go southbound so as not to endure such misery but we have the advantage of having been here and experienced that wind before.

Matt and Anna think that this is the best hostel they have come across and they take full advantage of the cooking facilities. But for us it's some bread and fruit salad after our big lunch and we start packing for the bus trip ahead and then we have an early night.

El Chalten to Perito Moreno

Ruta 40 Bus Day 1

www.pppg.pictures/ElChaltenLosAntiguos.htm

We were up at 6:30 for breakfast and packing. We had time for a quick trip around the corner to the bakery to stock up on food for the trip as we had been told at the ticket office when booking that food would be expensive at the stops. Thankfully they open early here unlike Chile. Then down to the bus station by 8:30 where we unloaded the bikes and got the wheels off all ready to load up. The bus came in and we were told that we needed to pay for bikes so I said that we had already paid extra when we bought the tickets - in a tone that said I wasn't going to take any BS about having to pay again. Alison got our small stuff on the bus at our seats and I got to put the bikes on in one of the luggage bays and that suited me, flat, one on top of the other they fitted quite well and then the panniers on top.

We get on the bus but for some reason we were allocated seats in different rows. We are near the back so maybe because we were late to book and we got what was available. There is a group of girls traveling together around us and after some negotiations a seat swap suits all. Then we were off on the road out to Ruta 40, I can't say I'd like to ride this stretch into the wind as so many do - they are the crazyguys - we are the lazyguys. Soon after we leave town we can see Lago Viedma out to our south all along this stretch. There are a couple of estancias along the way but it is dry country. At the junction with Ruta 40 there was a bus stopped and we picked up a passenger from it, I guess it then went into El Chalten because we never saw it again.

Now on Ruta 40 we soon saw our first guanacos, not all were alive, a couple of young ones were mummified carcasses hanging from the roadside fence. Probably panicked off the road then they had run uphill and tried to jump the fence but head and shoulders had gone between the top two wires but then caught by the haunches they had suffered a miserable death hanging head down. We saw carcasses in various states of decay on the roadside, from a bloated carcass of fresh roadkill to a stripped spine along the road. Losses didn't seem to have dwindled the population however.

Our first food and toilet stop was outside Tres Lagos at the gas station - the town was a couple of kilometers off and the gas station stood lonely on the road. A gravel side road from here leads up to Lago OHiggins. Then we went on some rough gravel to bypass Tres Lagos before reuniting with the seal but we didn't drive on it, we followed a gravel road beside the sealed road for over an hour crawling along. The reason was soon apparent - in places the seal was breaking up and soon we reach work where the road is being reconstructed.

We finally hit some good seal and got moving again. After passing Lago Cardiel we left Ruta 40 to head for our lunch stop at Gobernador Gregores, the only town down this way. Our lunch stop was at the YPF petrol station. They seemed well set up to supply food with hot empanadas and other quick food. In true Argentinian style our 20-30 minutes stop was actually 40 minutes. Some maps show this as off Ruta 40 but whether Ruta 40 or not this is where the seal is or will be going to. It is a relatively large town in a wide river valley with water for some irrigation. Apparently there is mining around here also. We had seal out of town for a while then more crawling along a lot beside seemingly new finished sealed road. Finally as the afternoon drew on we had seal into Bajo Caracoles for a stop, Not much more than a hotel and a few houses and a shop. At the hotel the Señora let people into hotel one at a time for the toilet. They must have a deal with the bus company as they didn't sell much in their small shop attached to the hotel (or was it the other way around). From then thankfully it was then seal the rest of way for today. There had been major construction and realignment of the road on this section which was hillier and sometimes the old road was kilometers away from new. The old road took an easy route, the new had been carved with modern earthmovers and could take a shorter route.

Finally we arrived at Perito Moreno at 9:15. Unloading and into the hotel was organized chaos. Not everyone had the room with their ticket and a couple went off in search of camping. In some organized chaos we were all allocated to our rooms - being a couple made things easy and we got our own room with bathroom. We asked where to put the bikes and were told we could leave them in the foyer just inside the

front door. We then walked the main street for some exercise, up and back, it wasn't far, three or four blocks. At the first bakery we got a couple empanadas and at the next a bag of the days leftovers of pastries. Back at the hotel we had the daily of special chicken with chips and salad. Andreas came and introduced himself as tomorrow's guide telling us we would have a 7:30 departure, we told him we had the bikes - hoping it might make things go smoother for loading in the morning. Finally we got to bed after 11.

Today we saw guanacos, dead and alive, rheas, one flamingo, one rabbit, a few horses, cattle and a bit later on some good grass, a few sheep near Perito Moreno, lot's of dry country, short grass, empty rocky country formed by ancient glaciations.

Perito Moreno to San Carlos de Bariloche

Ruta 40 Bus day 2

www.pppg.pictures/LosAntiguosBariloche.htm

We made an early start to our day for a 7:30 departure. Breakfast was in our room, a mixture of bits we had bought last night from the bakery. Then we got our panniers down good and early and the bikes prepared so that we would be ready to load up when the bus arrived.

The bus arrived and by then there were others there so all the backpacks started to go on. The drivers - they have to have two to share such a long day - looked at the bikes with an expression like they didn't want to know. We were clearly going to be the last to load. Then one tells us there isn't room for the bikes. I take a bit of a dislike to him at this - he has such a cool look, Jonah Lomu hair cut and wispy beard. They know Jonah here because they play Rugby (note Jonah was a famous NZ rugby playing great of the 90's). His clothes and shoes are all too fashionable to be dirtied putting our dusty bikes on the bus. We say that we paid for the bikes when we bought our tickets and we got here on the bus yesterday. This no space is bullshit as there is plenty of space in the two cargo bays under the bus. He says something to me in fast Argentinian Spanish that I don't understand. I do understand when he tells the other driver that I don't understand. Now I'm not sure if it was just that I didn't understand what he said or that I didn't understand that they wanted a propina - tip. Everyone else is on and I'm left standing with the bikes for a minute or two beside the bus, Andreas the guide on the bus tells me to wait a minute - that's OK. Alison gets some of our stuff on to our seats. So I'm not actually worried we are not going to go, there is space on the bus and we have claimed our seats, it's a bit of a game that has to be played. Then Mr Jonah look alike comes out and says there is not space again, I point out there is plenty in one bay - but that's the bay for those getting off at el Bolson he says. He's not going to give in easily. There is actually a bit of space in the Bailoche bay and he can't back down being Argentinian machismo so I start to put the bikes there. I don't want him to put the bikes on because I know the pokey out and fragile bits. They just fit standing and he doesn't have to get his soft clean bus driver hands or his cool clothes dirty. I guess we are both happy about that. I guess he's not happy that he hasn't got a tip or that he has had to back down on the no space bullshit. The panniers and wheels are squeezed in around the bikes - there's still half a bay of "El Bolson" space of course. I have read of people not getting their bikes on buses here. One thing to realize is that the flasher two level buses don't have much luggage space but the older single level ones like the one we are on usually have more space below the seating area. I guess it's check with the company and disassemble the bikes and hold your ground, it seems to me that our bikes without pedals and front wheels pack in quite well if it's done right - and then at last resort is the propina.

We are on the road finally. Today we have seats on the right only a couple of rows back from the front so we can see out the front a bit. After 12 hours on the bus it's hard to remember it all, good seal and road works come and go a couple of times. We started climbing out of Perito Moreno in a series of long steps up to wide open plains created as outwash from ancient glaciations. We could see the distant Andes to the west on and off all clear in a blue dome day - even fine in Puyuhuapi over to our west. The road was sealed for a while but that couldn't last and we came to more reconstruction and crawling on a side road. At the first diversion our bus then went back on the sealed road for a kilometer or so up a rise but then the road works started and we had to go on the parallel road again. For kilometers there was an almost completed rebuilt main road beside us - only in Argentina - In Chile they don't have the luxury of space so the road is used as it is rebuilt.

Eventually we dropped off a plain into a river valley for our morning stop at Rio Mayo. This is one of several river valleys that carry a bit of water from the mountains and creating greenery making it possible to sustain some small towns. We stopped at the service station which had a corner inside offering some food and of course toilets. It was a chance to stretch our legs and walk around in the warming day. Out of there the road was sealed again on Ruta 20, Ruta 40 is less direct for out northward direction. Almost immediately there was a big stretch of reconstruction until a turnoff that eventually goes to Chile (Coyhaique). For a stretch we could see a wide valley below with a many braided river meandering through it giving some life sustaining

water to give some greenery in contrast to the brown barren plains above. This supported farming and the small village of Facundo.

Then it was seal until lunch at Gobernador Costa, a relatively large town also in a valley with water and farming, the town even has a meat processing works. The median along the road through town was green and tidy and on display there were horse or bullock wagons of various types along with other relics from the pioneering past. In a little fast food shop we both get variations on milanesa – large thin slice of beef crumbed and fried. Mine is in an equally large flat bread roll with a couple of fried eggs, lettuce and tomato. Alison's is without the bread, the milanesa is topped with a slice of ham, some cheese and sliced cheese which is then all grilled. We eat them in the in a small bus shelter hiding from the hot sun that we have become unaccustomed to.

From then on we had all seal for 3 hours until El Bolson only broken by a toilet and fuel stop at the YPF station in Tecka. At Tecka beside the service station there is a lush green watered lawn. It looks so inviting but a sign says not to walk on it. The sign is right beside the worn path heading diagonally across the lawn to the back of the associated house. It is just a sign after all and this is Argentina.

We passed the turnoff to Esquel but didn't go there although it was only a couple of kilometers. Nearing El Bolson from the bus window we saw two groups of touring cyclists on the road, the first two and the second three. It seemed late in the day to me to be taking on the climbs out of El Bolson but I'm sure they made it somewhere. In El Bolson we made a stop near the center to drop off about a third of our passengers stopping there and then another quick toilet station at the YPF station on the edge of town.

I remember vaguely the stretch from El Bolson to Bariloche from 23 years ago in the bus, it was windy and took ages. Today was much faster than 23 years ago, a wide sealed road. I mentioned this to Andreas, the guide, and he told me at Lago Guillermo the road is now on the other side to what it was then such was the degree of recent reconstruction of the route.

We arrived in Bariloche about 9 and were dropped on the main street, not the bus station as expected. I suppose this suited some and saved the bus company (or maybe the crew) a bus station fee. So here we were with everything on footpath, 8 panniers, packs and handlebar bags. Bikes and wheels all needed assembly and then pedals put back on while people walked around us. I guess that the center of Bariloche is relatively safe but Argentina has more of a reputation for thieves than Chile so we were feeling a little vulnerable as we assembled our bikes. Loaded we get our bearings to search for a place for the night.

Thankfully it was only a couple blocks to the street with the main bunch of half a dozen or so hostels in a row. It was a way uphill, so we had to push up on the road as there is no footpath. The first couple of places that we asked at had no space. We know that the Marcopolo is expensive but we are running out of time before dark. They have room and space for our bikes in the empty lot next door that is their carpark. Reassuringly there is a large locked gate for security. This is good as this street clings to the hillside and no other places seemed to have such space or alternatively we would have to have lugged everything including the bikes up many steps. We get everything to our room and then go down for tonight's meal available from the kitchen of Chicken Rice Risotto. Our room has a bath that is actually a good size so we use it so we don't get into bed until well after 11. In spite of the extra cost we are not complaining.

Today we saw a flamingo, cows, horses, more sheep than yesterday and less guanacos. I saw an armadillo scuttling across the road in front of the bus but Alison missed it. There were 3 condors on the ground beside the road that took off as we passed, perhaps a feed of road kill for them.

Some photos from the bus, not all good but may give a bit of an impression of the road and country.

San Carlos de Bariloche

Organization day

www.pppg.pictures/Bariloche.htm

It was a chance for a sleep in this morning and the breakfast is included here, it's a more western breakfast than usual here with none of the pastries that are usual, cornflakes and toast basically. It's not exciting but sufficient for a day without riding. Then it's jobs for us to do, wash some clothes, put the mudguards on the bikes again and I manage to download two weeks worth of emails. Then we take a morning walk to the downtown. It's a town that exists for tourists, Swiss German in influence and architecture or just plain touristy.

We finally decide that it's time to go out. As we pass the desk there is some kind of police official there. He is just checking the register, perhaps he has nothing better to do but check out that the foreigners are recorded properly – there has been nothing like this elsewhere but here they took our passport details when we checked in. Perhaps because we are in a big city they think it worthwhile to be officious. Just because we happen to be there at the desk and we are foreigners he decides that he should check our passports against the register. Alison has hers but I have decided that mine is safer in the room so I have to go back up the stairs and get mine. There is of course no problem but it reminds us that Argentina still has a more officious streak that seems to have gone in Chile. We remember 23 years ago being on buses that had to stop at internal police check points but we haven't seen any of that on this trip.

We walk down through the square and then down to and along the lake front. It's quite a strong wind coming down the lake and not all that pleasant, part of the unusual weather at the moment. We come back up past the cathedral. Old in style it was started around the 1930s and has a reinforced concrete shell clad in stone. The interior has never been completed and the bare concrete is still exposed in places. For the return I leave Alison to peruse the shops while I head back to do some journal updates and plan our route ahead. On the street I get offered a couple of exchange rates of 115 and 116 for the dollar - about 20 better than the hostel is offering so we will go back later.

In the end we changed after lunch for 115 at an official cambio that needed a passport and home address. Then to the supermarket to stock up for the road and a good feed tonight. We made a good meal of Spag Bol with a pile of sauteed vege - egg plant, the round zucchini things they have here, onion, tomato and capsicum - and leftovers will be great for tomorrow. It was not much of an early night as hostel common rooms are chances to meet and talk with people from all over. I let Alison do most of the talking while I continued to catch up on our journal.

Lake District II: Northbound Through Argentina and Chile

North and Back to Chile

The overall plan now is to pick up our original planned route a few days north of Bariloche and follow it through to Chile. Then where we would have turned back west and south at Regolil we will continue north near the border along roads and tracks before ending up at Los Angeles or Concepcion. I had researched this route before we started but never expected that we would do it. The off road tracks have been passed by other cyclists with an online journals so we have GPS tracks of the routes and so we know where we are going - but no one we have read has put this particular combination together before.

We will follow the Seven Lakes route in Argentina north from Bariloche. Initially we go around the eastern end of Lago Nahuel Huapi to Villa Angustora and then more northerly to San Martin de los Andes all in a bit less than a week. We head on to Junin de los Andes again and then follow our original plan through to Chile via Paso Tromen to Curarrehue then north to Rejoli. That is where we leave our original route and keep going north via the Nevados de Sollipulli track and road to Melipeuco. From Melipeuco we can go north to the east of Volcàn Llaima to Curacautín and then east to Lonquimay. Alternatively we can just go east and north to Lonquimay. From Lonquimay we go northwards towards Chenqueco (aka Ralco Lepoy) where the R791 turns to a horse track and bridge into Chenqueco. Optionally we could do a side trip to Laguna del Barco. Then it's west and north a bit following out the Rio Bio Bio through Alto Bio-Bio to Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. A couple of days more will take us out to the coast at Concepcion if we have time. If we have plenty of time we will get to Santiago and a few tourist days - we never went to Valpariso when we were here 23 years ago so that is a potential trip.

Blown to a Stop by the Wind.

Baraloché to Lago Nahuel Huapi Camping

www.pppg.pictures/BarilochéCamping.htm

The wind is roaring through the trees on the edge of our campsite, poplars, there is something about poplars and wind, it's the leaves, they are sort of stiff, crisp, so that when the wind blows they are a loud tree. The wind may be blowing but our tent is a small oasis of calm sheltered by a couple of trees and our own private toilet, well private that is unless anyone else comes to stay here but that seems unlikely. Some cyclists were seen passing but racing the other way on the tailwind. We on the other hand had been battling into a head wind for 20 kilometers. We had nearly finished battling this section away from the lake, some climbing, gentle enough in itself, but slow going in the headwind when we had at last reached our turn to descend into the lake. We saw a couple of cyclists coming the other way, racing uphill with a tail wind while we were pedaling downhill lest we be brought to a stop - and on some gusts it was prudent to do so anyway. They were a couple from Alaska, 4 days out of Puerto Montt on sealed roads riding 29ers. They were heading south to the Carretera Austral but had heard about the section south of Santa Lucia being bad and were thinking of going into Chile further down. I advised them that Ruta 40 is boring and the Santa Lucia to La Junta section isn't that bad really. I think northbound cyclists have had it easy that this is such a shock to them. We had an idea that there should be some sort of camping here, 30 kilometers on, well we were 40 on the clock at the time, so maybe it was 30 from the turnoff, or 30 from somewhere 30 kilometers away, in a car what's a few kilometers anyway. When we left this morning one of us had it in her head that this is where we would end up anyway, not knowing what this is but that anything further on is a lot further on. So here we are settled for the rest of the afternoon and the night.

It was a bit noisy last night in the street outside our window and at one stage a rubbish truck was banging and clanging outside at sun up, we are not used to city life. We were awake early by local standards, not cyclist standards however. We were up and showering and packing before the common room opened at 8:00 for the included breakfast.

So it was a bit after nine before we left, riding carefully up our one way street the wrong way so that we could pass a bakery that we had found yesterday before heading out of town. Then we were able to get on a street in the one way system the right way and drop down to the main road along the lake shore. It was a bit of a culture shock tangling with Argentinian traffic on a busy morning on a busy road not quite knowing which road to be on. At several intersections there seemed to be a local road paralleling the main road that was quieter - until it ran out.

The wind was on our tails for this first 9 kilometers or so until we reached the intersection to the airport where we turned north across the foot of the lake. The traffic didn't really decrease and we had moved onto the standard highway - one with enough asphalt width for the two lanes and no extra width for a bike. It wasn't so great with the blustery side wind coming down the lake and pushing us into the traffic with some large vehicles. The usual drop off at the edge of the asphalt to the gravel wasn't as great as some places we have struck so it wasn't too bad to get off the road if we needed to. After about 6 kilometers there was a bit of a town or maybe more of a suburb (Dina Huapi) after which the traffic did seem to drop off a bit. Maybe it was just getting later and rush hour had passed or in fact the main highway east that followed the river valley draining the lake also branched off here. We passed several highway police check points stopping cars but they weren't interested in us and we carried on.

Then it was time to head west up a small climb away from the lake over some ancient terminal moraine. Thankfully this corner of the lake had a bit of shelter from the unrelenting wind and it wasn't too bad. Down the other side to a large plain and there was an intersection where we turned left off Ruta 40 to head towards Villa Angostura, other traffic going north had a shorter route to San Martin de los Andes and further east and onwards. We were now heading on into the wind and on a gentle climb. Most traffic was good but when traffic coming the other way met us and traffic our way we were passed pretty close a few times. We often opted for the gravel shoulder which was generally wide and good and solid. A problem was that with the wind

we couldn't hear traffic coming up from behind us well. Up and down a bit we went for the next 22 kilometers. At one point off to the right was what looked like an asphalt plant with steam or smoke rising and being quickly dispersed by the gusting wind. Indeed we were passed by some large trucks carrying hot asphalt mix later. What road works are in front of us we wonder.

The highest section was a kilometer of gentle up and then down hill slope and we rode some of this on the wide shoulder. Here the gusting wind was making us uncomfortable with the traffic. Down we went more steeply but the wind was being channeled up the valley we were following so we had to pedal what should have been a good downhill run. We took a stop at a side road and sheltered behind some scrubby trees for a while. It wasn't any better back on the road so when we met the oncoming cyclists we were counting down to wherever this camp was, they said a couple of kilometers to the lake and that was good news for us.

Coming down to the lake there was no immediately obvious sign for camping but there was a bit of a shelter and some signs for local Artesania. A sign had said we were now in Mapuche country. We noticed one of the not very big or prominent signs said "to camp ask here", not exactly obvious if you weren't looking. Up some steps on the hill a bit above the road was an octagonal log cabin so we went up and asked and yes there was camping here. There was a clean toilet but no shower or other facilities. Walking around we found that there was this sheltered spot. So we went and got the bikes and here we are. The road ahead westward looked dark and showery and nothing but more headwind.

We never expected to make Villa Angostura today. We may have finished the Carretera with a hundred but that was nearly two weeks ago and we haven't biked much since then. Eighty kilometers on asphalt with gentle climbing shouldn't be a problem but we are not hard core touring cyclists. We have no need to push on into misery at the moment, here we can see that we are just beyond the edge of the rain today. It's a quiet place. Hostels may be great places to talk with fellow travelers but you don't get to bed early.

We had a late lunch with some fried breads bought from the Artesiana shop then a few spots of rain came over so we set the tent up. Inside the tent was warmed in the sun and we both fell asleep before finishing setting up everything inside. There were rain showers and sun on and off on the tent in the afternoon, sometimes both at the same time. For once I have a chance to write a journal entry on the road again. If it had been better weather we might have walked down across the road to the lake shore but then in better weather we wouldn't have been here anyway. Being a tourist can be hard work and it was a chance to just do not much.

For company we have some sheep that are grazing the grass. A sprinkler is watering the grass, it obviously gets moved from time to time. Across the fence are a couple of houses with some gardens for those who live here and a menagerie of farmyard animals. Somehow there are cars up here, we didn't spot their access way off the road but it must be there. The little shop, shaped in the traditional hexagonal way is manned all day but they can hardly be making a living out of it on a day like today, we didn't see anyone else come up from the road. All in all it's a far from dull place to be even if the excitement isn't great. For our evening meal I heated up the leftovers from last night, the ease of having a meal balanced by the effort in carrying it all for a day and we get something better than the basic fare we normally cook when camping.

Very few photos today, head down in the wind and cloud and poor light for photos, and well not much to photograph really.

Tempted by Another Argentinian Steak

Lakeside Camp to Villa Angostura

www.pppg.pictures/LakesideCampVillaAngostura.htm

Steak, steak, steak and more steak, well why not when in Argentina, it's been 23 years since we were last here and who knows if we will ever get back again and we won't be here much longer this time. After two nights of pasta and vege it seemed like time for a steak, the smell of roasting meat wafting out into the main street from the restaurants as we rolled into town about midday set the idea in our heads – we are clearly a long way off being vegetarians. Villa Angostura is a tourist town if there ever was one, we had planned to pass on through, maybe after a bit of lunch thinking there was not much for us here. It was still cold today and with 115 kilometers further to San Martin it seemed that there are two days riding ahead for us whether we stay here or not and we might as well be warm and have a shower tonight. When we set out this morning we planned to be hardy and strong, the wind had dropped and the road was good but temptation waved its tentacles in front of us.

We were up at 7, surprisingly late given how early we went to bed last night. The wind was far less than yesterday with only a few whitecaps on the lake below us. It had rained in the night a little bit but the tent was relatively dry. So while we packed and made breakfast I put the fly out on our rope between a couple of trees to dry off the lee end which was a bit damp. Then I moved the tent into the wind to dry its dampness off a bit as well. We were all packed by 8:45 but fluffed around a bit to depart a bit before 9.

If we thought that being on the road at this time would be too early for the traffic we had miscalculated a bit. Sure there were fewer cars but we seemed to have struck the 8am bus departure slot from Bariloche and we were passed by a dozen or more buses. This road is the main connection between here and Chile for many hundreds of kilometers and the only sealed one for further. Thankfully there was not much oncoming traffic and mostly the buses and trucks gave us a wide berth. Unlike yesterday we could hear traffic coming from behind and today when it sounded big we rolled off onto the wide firm shoulder. Sometimes we would get a friendly warning toot but usually not. We noticed a lot of trucks carrying new asphalt mix so we wondered what works are ahead of us, there is only a short unpaved section between here and San Martin so presumably it is being paved.

The first 16 kilometers or so took us up our arm of the lake, there was some headwind but it varied and often there were trees between us and the lake to shelter us from it, or sometimes to channel it our way. In contrast to yesterday's ride in open country we were now along the forested edge of the lake. In spite of following the lake edge we were up and down all morning but the gradients were gentle so it wasn't too bad. The sun poked through the clouds on and off warming us a bit but it was a 4 layer morning. About 9 kilometers on the road we came across the camping at 31 kilometers we were expecting yesterday - 31 kilometers from Villa Angostura it was. There were several other camping places along the way as well - probably far more organized than ours last night but we would have had to have slogged into the wind and some rain to get to them so we had no complaints about our decision to stop when we did yesterday.

At one stage we came to a section for quite a few kilometers where a huge trench was being dug alongside the road. We soon realized that it was for some plastic pipes. As we went along then came sections where the pipes had been laid and covered with fine shingle and then a crew was putting square concrete pavers on top. We can only assume this was ducting for new fiber cables to be laid. Then the trench was all filled in giving us all the road back and that was a relief.

After about an hour we came to a sort of a layby off the road and it was clear there was a bit of a track down the bank through the tress to the lake shore. Access to the lake was something we hadn't seen often in spite of being so close most of the time so we stopped for a rest and made our way down to the rocky beach not far below. The wind was stiff blowing up a chop on the lake here but it was pleasant enough for a short stop.

Back on the road about 10 kilometers from Villa Angostura we stopped at Puerto Manzano for a snack

at some road side shops. A local was interested in our front racks and took a photo - he said a friend could make one - it's so hard to get such things here and importing stuff is far harder and taxed more heavily than in New Zealand.

We leave the lake for the final stretch with a gentle climb for a few kilometers. As we get closer to Villa Angostura the number of houses and holiday accommodation of various sorts increase. They are good homes here, this is a summer and winter holiday destination and far above the standard of houses in much of Argentina.

Arriving in downtown Villa Angostura we slowly cruised down the main street past shops and restaurants emanating the smell of roasting meat until we reached the tourist office at the far end where we asked about accommodation. From the list they had we decided to try the hostel Don Pilon a couple of blocks south of the main road.

They had one room available and possibly for just one night and it was up two flights of stairs. We took it even though we were a little uncertain as to whether we would stay one night or two, we needed to see an updated weather forecast. We need to show our passports again to check in – something that we rarely had to do in Chile. The young fellow realized that we were from New Zealand. “Sweet As” he says in a very kiwi way. He tells us he had been there for three months working as many Argentinians and Chileans do. We were the first Kiwis to grace the hostel - he would have to tell his wife! We carted a few of our panniers up the stairs to our room but were able to leave the unneeded ones and the tent downstairs locked in the service area. There wasn't anywhere for our bikes so we locked them to a tree under the hedge out front discretely out of sight of the road.

The wifi wasn't working, something we really wanted today to check the weather forecast but we had seen wifi signs in restaurants along the main street so headed off for a meal. We eventually settled on a place that had a particular cut of steak - ribs cut across the bone, that we had enjoyed when we were here in Argentina 23 years ago. We got a table just vacated and when the remnants of the last diner meal (the leftovers which in themselves would have fed us well) was taken away we ordered - but that cut wasn't available today - so it was just an ordinary steak. Slightly disappointingly it wasn't as good as the steaks in El Chalten but nevertheless we enjoyed it anyway. With a glass of wine any idea of riding around town and exploring down to the lake in the afternoon evaporated.

We went to the tourist office to ask about Internet and they said that there was a place a couple of blocks down but however then Alison discovered wifi signal just outside the office so we did a few email checks *etc.* The signal identified itself as an Argentinian Government 'Conectado' initiative. Why couldn't they just tell us about it in the office! The weather forecast looked rubbish for some days ahead but better tomorrow than Sunday so we decided that we would get on our way tomorrow and then arrive on Sunday in San Martin, probably wet and cold but we know where the hostel is there so let's hope they have space. The weather here seems worse than we had down south at the moment. The locals have said it is unusual but that is of little consolation.

Back to our room to recover from lunch and write some journal. Then we headed out to the supermarket and get some more Internet by the information kiosk. It was really fast. We got back to the hostel to find the Internet going now! Some bread and tomatoes and lettuce from a small shop on the way back from the main street was sufficient for an evening meal after our late lunch. We enjoyed our room with a shower after only a single night camping.

Is This Really Summer? - Into Rain

Villa Angostura to Lago Faulkner

www.pppg.pictures/VAngosturaLFaulkner.htm

Cheating, is it cheating? Is riding asphalt cheating? Sealed road, we haven't ridden so much of it on the whole trip - not that today was without a bit of ripio, not much, does smooth road prepared for asphalt count as ripio? We have had a couple of days of asphalt now, I say a couple because how do you count a couple of short days and about half today on asphalt - but we began and ended on asphalt. We have only done about seven days of asphalt of the whole trip so far, and only half that, four, on the Carretera Austral. Today's unsealed section will be sealed soon, we found out where the trucks of asphalt that passed us yesterday were going. Between Lago Faulkner and the Trafal Junction the gap is disappearing. Asphalt, a slithering serpentine snake is creeping from both ends as to devour the ripio. Come here next year and there will be no ripio at all. Well I can't guarantee it, this is Argentina, but they seem to be working fast. When the Ruta 40 south is finished - which must be soon, you will be able to ride from Junin de los Andes to Ushuaia on your lightweight road bike on smooth asphalt - well some older bits are cracking up and maybe their replacement will push this timetable a bit.

We were up early as usual to make an early start, the prognostico (weather forecast) was for deteriorating weather. We will be on asphalt to San Martin tomorrow and then to Junin in a few days when the predicted rain passes and then we will be back to ripio. We knew when we set out today that we wouldn't have it all asphalt but set ourselves a target of Lago Faulkner, 65 kilometers, but with a good dose of up and down.

We were up early enough to enjoy our own shower again before the task of making multiple trips to get all our bags down the flights of stairs and out to our bikes. Being a typical Argentinian breakfast what was supplied wasn't a lot for hungry cyclists and not available until 8:00. It was 8:30 when we left the hostel to go a couple of blocks to the main street and the bakery to stock up for the day. Thank goodness they open at 8:00 here, a bit earlier than in Chile. Ten minutes later we were heading west on the road out of town. There was little wind but it was still cold from the light dusting of snow on the mountains from recent days so we had layers on.

The first 10 kilometers were along the lake, up and down a bit, nothing too taxing. At one stage we cross a 20m high bridge across Rio Correntoso from which we can look down at the old wooden bridge below. As we warm up we are thankful to the bridge builders that we don't have to drop down and climb back up again. The river at about three hundred meters long is reputedly the shortest river in the world. It joins Lago Nahuel Huapi that we followed the shore of since Bariloche to Lago Correntoso that we now follow around on and off for the next few hours.

In good time we reach the junction where the road continues to Chile along the south of Lago Espejo but where we turn off to the north. A kilometer further on we turn off the main road to take a narrow gravel side road half a kilometer or so to look at the end of this arm of Lago Espejo. It should be a mirror lake but there's enough of a breeze to ruffle the water too much for any reflections. It has a nice gentle sandy beach, it looks like this place could be busy on a good day and would be a nice place to camp if we had carried on yesterday. It's a pity the cloud is so low, not a good day for photos. There is what looks like a warden or camp manager's house with smoke rising out of the chimney but at this early hour (by Argentinian standards) there is no other sign of life. We use the toilet before leaving. Back to the road it's up and down a bit for 7 kilometers before we reach another arm of the lake.

Since the turnoff the asphalt has been wide enough for us to have a good asphalt shoulder to ride on but there is not a lot of traffic and only the occasional bus. We stop at Laguna Bailey Willis for our first food stop of the day at about 20 kilometers after an hour and a half. There is a picnic table sign indication this is a picnic spot but of a table we can find no sign. Around this area the roadside has a good dose of new volcanic ash from an eruption a few years ago but it has been cleared from the road surface and not a problem.

It's then a bit of a saddle to drop down to the west end of Lago Correntoso. We cross the river running

into it from Lago Espejo Chico on a high bridge. Stopping to look down at the half collapsed skeletal remains of an old wooden bridge below us we spot a loaded bike down below by the river. It turns out that there are five cyclists that have joined up, some local and even one all the way from Alaska. This is the first of a bunch of meetings on the road today. We remain at the bridge and talk with them for a while as one by one they come up. On their recommendation we then go down to the river below the bridge for a look. It's quite a nice place to stop but we can't stay long. Between the road and the lake here there is a huge lodge place but it looks to be decaying having never been completed – somehow so typical of Argentina.

Continuing around the lake we soon come to a side road branching to Lago Espejo Chico where in a couple of kilometers there is camping. We are on a very new road but it's a bit up and down. There is a sign at the branch down the old road for an eating place now orphaned from passing traffic. As we have started to climb towards the junction of the road to Lago Traful we don't fancy going down unnecessarily on an old gravel road just to come back up again. Just before the junction we stop to chat with a hitchhiker from Mendoza for a few minutes.

We reach the junction that is also a more direct route from Bariloche to San Martin. After the junction it is brand new asphalt - this is where the trucks passing us the other day were heading. A rather tired sign on the side of the road warns us "Proximos 15km Obra en Construcion": Works for the next 15 kilometers.

We have both lanes with new seal for a kilometer or so then there is only one lane completed. It is the oncoming lane but our unsealed lane is narrowed to the extent that we decide that it's safer for us to continue on the oncoming sealed lane - which is wide enough for two cars anyway. Some confused Argentinian traffic also comes up this lane. After a kilometer or two the seal runs out and we run on the good compacted gravel waiting for asphalt on Monday. The surface gradually deteriorates the further we get from immediate works although it is quite clear that the works are coming.

After half an hour or so more we reach a bit of a high point and the wide roadside is grassy so we decided on a lunch stop. The nice grassy area is littered with toilet paper behind the bushes, we are not the first to recognize its merits for a stop. We don't stop longer than necessary. Onwards there is downhill a bit, then some up and down before we start some consistently down on the worst road of the day towards Lago Pichi Traful, a bit rocky and corrugated - we are in the mid point of the works as we soon find out. As we near the bottom we come across the crew building the new road base, dumping gravel and a grader going up and down. Along here there seems a bit of coordination between the road works and the cable laying – of course that could just be coincidence – coordination would have had the cable laid before the road works.

As we are stopped for a few minutes a line of traffic builds up and in the end all those wheels compact the fresh surface for us to ride on as it goes through before us. A rider comes uphill southbound but we get only a brief exchange of words before it's indicated that we need to move through this section. The road improves and at the bottom where the road goes off to Lago Pichi Traful. We cross the old bridge beside the new bridge under construction and then take a short stop by the river below a hundred or so meters down a rough track. So far the piers of the new bridge are complete but of the beams to join them there is no sign, I suppose that they would have to come a long way to get here.

Back on the road it's a stiff climb to gain a couple of hundred meters of height but thankfully the road surface is excellent as it has been prepared for asphalt. The drizzle gets heavier and it's jacket time. A few kilometers of gentle climbing until at a high point above Lago Escondido we hit new asphalt coming the other way, one lane, then two. So then it's a run downhill along the edge of Lago Villarino to reach lake level. We have been told that there is free camping here but it's a large open area with a little shelter around the edges and that seems all taken. Across the short river joining Lago Villarino to Lago Faulkner and the lake is on the other side of the road. A sign says no camping but that is clearly just advisory and not mandatory here in Argentina because there are still a few tents here and large piles of rubbish beside the road indicating this place has been a home for many happy campers recently. I wonder who will take the rubbish away?

After a kilometer along the lake we come to the the entrance of official camping site. The drizzle is steady. We go in and there's a large drum fire place in the middle of the café keeping it warm which is most welcome

as we are a bit chill after our downhill. We sit a while and decide on a site sheltered by some trees that is only meters from the lake shore. We are told that the other end of the camp is the backpackers end and is noisy at night so we are happy to be in the quiet end close to the toilet block. With the tent set up we boil the Kelly Kettle sheltered from the wind in our concrete Fogon for a cup of soup. We then eventually make our evening meal of rice with salami cooked into it with a packet of tomato pasta sauce.

The showers here only start at 6:00 and last for 2 hours. I guess you can understand why when you see all all the leaks in the system. We head for ours not long after they are unlocked at 6. There's not a lot to stop any freeloaders coming in from outside the official camping area. They are warm enough but the floor is sloping the wrong way and when finished there is no dry floor to stand on to get dressed again and it's cold. In the toilets some have seats and some don't, somehow it all seems very Argentinian .

Later we head off for some warmth in the café where I sit down with my computer and find I'm next to a couple of Dutch southbound cyclists, not young nor as old as us. I bore them with my Carretera photos as they are heading that way - well they didn't know about the marble caves at Rio Tranquillo or Tortel - they have come from Colombia and you can't know everything about such a long trip. So it's getting dark by the time we get back to our tent and crawl into our sleeping bags for the night, rain on tent - cold but not as cold as a clear night gets.

Up and Out of Rain

Lago Faulkner to San Martin de los Andes

www.pppg.pictures/LFaulknerSanMartin.htm

The Seven Lakes route between San Carlos de Bariloche and San Martin de los Andes deserves its reputation as a very pretty and scenic road, the pity for us has been for us that we didn't get to see it at its best. We saw the lakes but not a lot of the mountains and today was our first day starting out in the rain. I shouldn't complain, it was not much more than a few showers and we warmed up with a Sunday lunch in front of a big fire just when we were a bit cold and wet. Reports from down the Carretera Austral justify our decision to come up here in spite of the fact that it doesn't seem much warmer. We didn't pick the best year to be here - but we did get an excellent stretch of weather until Christmas day. The last time we arrived in San Martin de los Andes we were hot and sweaty and roasted under the sun, Today we were wet and smelly but to be fair it is easier riding in the cool than the hot - you just don't see as much. When we got up this morning we were prepared for a wet ride but it didn't turn out to be terribly bad in the end.

The rain that started last evening stayed overnight, not torrential, rain is always louder in the tent so it sounded worse than it really was. We discovered that we had a sort of leak in the tent, our fault really. We never bother attaching the fly to the tent poles completely with all its Velcro fixers so it's never aligned just right. This never matters in the dry but in the wet the top of the fly touches the tent inside and water runs down the seams - or so we discovered this morning. It was a good lesson for when it really rains if we are tenting.

While we first stirred about 7 there seemed little need to get moving, it was still raining a bit so it wasn't until 8:30 that we started moving. By this time the clouds were lifting a bit and there were even patches of blue sky to be seen, albeit small. I went for a walk down to the other end of the camp where the backpackers were camped in tents or just in the open sided shelters in their sleeping bags. The Dutch cyclists that we met last night confirmed that it was a bit noisy down this way last night and they were ready for an early start. We started packing deciding to forgo oatmeal this morning and subsist on two buns each left from yesterday. We ate these down at the camp cafe/store/common room by the big fireplace still keeping the place warm. One of the workers there told us that he was a cyclist and that he had come from Brazil with his dog in a trailer, a full sized Labrador. He was planning to move on soon after working for a few months.

With our bikes loaded it was about 10 that I decided that there was a gap in the showers to pack the tent away, fly sodden but the tent just a little damp. So it was 10:30 and we headed out on the road in a bit of a shower with jackets on. As always seems usual we started the day with a climb. Today we traversed two long glacial valleys formed in earlier glaciations, later ice ages had carved the main rivers separating them. This meant that in and out of the rivers were climbs but along the valleys was relatively level. So up we started to gain a couple of hundred meters in short order, not as bad as yesterday afternoon's climb but enough to warm us up well and truly. Near the top was a waterfall and lookout. Not much of a waterfall in the grand scheme of things but by Argentinian standards worth a look and people were stopping and looking. We were just about to leave when a couple of southbound cyclists rolled in, Germans with only a few weeks here going on to Puerto Montt. The first of almost too many meetings on the road with other cyclists to remember today.

The showers had eased away so it was off with the jacket to cool a bit as we were back on the road. After that we rose steadily with ups and downs along the wide glacial valley. As compared to yesterday we were no longer in untouched forest, here there had been land clearance and there is farming - well cattle grazing. After about an hour and a half we passed a restaurant beside the road that could have been place for us to eat but decided that with our late start we should carry on even though we were a bit hungry from such a minimal breakfast.

We reached Lago Machónico, all very scenic on a nice day but in the cloud and occasional drizzle not worth getting the camera out today as we traveled along beside it. Then we started a long drop down to Rio Hermoso, a road junction a few kilometers from Lago Hermoso. A couple of young locals were stopped going uphill, you can tell locals, they have mountain bikes and pannier brands that we haven't heard of - and

seldom front panniers. We exchanged a few words encouraging them on before continuing.

The drizzle came on harder as we reached the bottom and saw a restaurant/café in a cluster of buildings a little way up the start of our next climb. It was 12:30 by now and we decided we needed a stop. In we went and saw a good fire going.

The problem with cycling in the rain is that the sweat that builds up inside a jacket makes you wet nearly as much as you would get if you just got rained on. We were the only ones there and so we stripped off a few layers of our smelly clothes lining them to warm and dry in front of the fire. We took a while to decide on whether to make this a short stop and have late lunch in San Martin or to have something more substantial having had little to eat so far today. We compromised but on making our order the chef/owner suggested that he had roast beef in the oven - that this was Sunday hadn't really occurred to us. So we settled on a chunk of beef with chips - the usual is mashed potatoes but we preferred chips. We declined the offer of blood sausage. It was a long wait as we were a bit early really but that was fine beside the fire in front of which our clothes were drying. By the time we got our food the place was filling up and by the time we had finished it was virtually full. An hour after arriving we headed out the door, bellies full to power us up the next hill.

We had sat at our window watching the rain dry away but now as we prepared to leave a heavy shower came over. We waited a few minutes but decided we had to plug on - so all that drying was wasted as we sweated up a few kilometers of climb with a very tumbling river below us. Thankfully traffic had eased a bit as it usually seems to do around lunchtime. Here they were fixing the edge of the asphalt to stop it cracking up more. At the edge of the road there was a strip about 30cm wide for several kilometers with the asphalt cut out - so there was no way off the road for us. We would normally run off onto the good gravel shoulder for cars or larger vehicles, especially on corners where it's not good for any of us to stay on the road. I suppose we were a bit lucky that most people would be having Sunday lunch at this time.

The shower eased half way up where the works ended and it was jackets off. Again we were now in another wide glacial valley with grazing. The rain came on a bit and jacket on again. Alison hadn't bothered with her jacket as her arm warmers under her Icebreaker long sleeved top kept her warm enough when biking even when wet.

Up and down we steadily climbed to a high point which was actually a bridge and not an obvious saddle. Here was the Arroyo Partido - split stream. A stream came in from the side of the valley and then split under our bridge. The main stream went back the way we had come which leads to the lakes and rivers going out to the Atlantic but another smaller channel went the other way. This looked to me like it was a constructed channel to take water to the farm half a kilometer that way. Whatever it's origins this stream headed down to the valley that leads to Lago Lacar which in turn empties out eventually into the Pacific at Valdivia via the route that we started out on weeks ago to reach San Martin for the first time. Thus we began a long descent into San Martin, it only had a couple of slight uphill to tease us. We stopped to talk with another couple of local fellows heading uphill that had stopped for rest and load readjustment, they had come from Cordoba way north but they hadn't cycled all the way.

We rolled into San Martin about 3:30 and headed to Hostel Puma where we stayed last time. There was no room for us - they told us that there was a hostel a couple of blocks up - Hostal Ladera Norte. There a fellow inside had seen us pull up and opened the door for us - Raul, a southbound cyclist from Spain was glad to see some other cyclists. They had a room for us but only for one night but we were happy to take it, it was getting towards 4 and we couldn't be bothered looking around for an alternative. A bed for tomorrow can be sorted later.

The tent and fly were strung out to dry on our rope out the back in the parking area. We showered and checked the weather ahead. We wanted a rest day here and the weather wasn't great for tomorrow but then we have 3 days of reasonable weather to get to Chile before some rain and then fine weather again ahead. That all fits our plans nicely so with plans all settled about 7:30 we headed out for more food.

First stop was however Hostel Puma to see if we could book a room for tomorrow. It started as a very

confused conversation, not that much a language one for once. It seemed that after we had been here earlier a reservation had been canceled or maybe a no show so there was a room for tonight after all and also tomorrow and when we asked about a room the woman assumed we wanted it tonight. We eventually sorted the confusion and booked for tomorrow where we will shift later in the morning.

So then we headed to the Chinese buffet we had spotted coming in weeks ago. After so many weeks of local food a Chinese meal appealed even though we knew from previous experience it would have more local influence than what we are used to at home. We were still hungry as lunch was really only proper breakfast and we had climbed a good few meters of height today. We got there a bit early, this being Argentina it didn't open until 8. So we wandered around the squares a bit. In one some lads were playing football - watched by the girls who they were try to impress in a very Latin way. In the other a couple of blocks away there was some drum group drumming away. Sometime after 8 we went back to the restaurant that was now open where we were only the second customers for the evening. So we had a good feed, not exactly Chinese as we know it. There were a few stir fry dishes, meat and vege - beef, chicken, duck, pork and something we were not quite sure of, some spring rolls, no wontons but there were some shrimp chips. There was some sushi and other oriental type dishes but the rest was a bit of more Argentinian stuff. Not that at home it would be much different in a similar restaurant - they have to cater for all that come. But the only vegetables in the stirfrys were pepper, onion, zucchini and carrot, no discernible difference in the sauces - well this is Argentina. Those behind the counter and in the kitchen looked Chinese a bit they also looked several generations Argentinian and it's hard to get vegetables here - or to get Argentinians to eat them. But there were deserts the like of which we hadn't seem in several months so we really over-ate before heading back to our room and into bed.

Along the way today there was an uncompleted house, not the first building we have seen like this. Yesterday there was a huge lodge looking place, a shell, some windows boarded up, never completed and slumping and rotting, shingle roof leaking. Somehow it's one of the images I have of Argentina - buildings in various degrees of completion left, who knows the story of each but there will be common threads. It's what happens when your economic and monetary system fails. Here the official exchange rate you get on a credit card is about half the street rate for changing cash dollars. The government wants to deny this, a sign of their failure. People don't trust their own currency, it's fine for daily transactions but to save you want dollars, Euros or even Chilean pesos. So when you can't save you spend what you have when you can but then you run out and this is what happens. A young Argentinian told us the Argentinians want change, but in my opinion they have to change and not vote for politicians who make big promises that they can't keep. You have to pay taxes to make an economy work and too many people want too much for too little. Good luck Argentina - you will need it.

Time For a Rest in San Martin de los Andes

San Martin de los Andes Rest Day

www.pppg.pictures/SanMartinDLA.htm

It's only been 4 days on the road and mostly sealed road but it's a bit cloudy and our legs are feeling tired after being back on the bikes. So it's a rest day before 3 days of riding through to Chile in a good weather window.

There was no need to be up early but we didn't sleep that well, noise outside and too much to eat last night. Alison went and found a small coffee shop where she sat with many single older men drinking her coffee and reading the morning paper meanwhile I wrote the journal updates. Sorting for shifting I found it in my toilet bag. I had discovered my missing cycle computer - most embarrassing - it must have got in there when we shifted rooms in O'Higgins and as I usually just grab tooth brush and paste I never spotted it amongst the other stuff floating in there. I felt somewhat stupid but had to confess to Alison. After 11 we packed up and moved a couple of blocks down the road to the Hostel Puma - a better room than last time - bigger and quieter - a double room is usually better than a matrimonial (double bed) and so it was this time.

We went out for lunch to the el Tenedor that we couldn't get into the day we arrived back in December. A buffet with steak added in. It was full and busy. The ordering was a bit farcical as one waitress took our order then another. We ordered some empanadas but they never came, one waitress said there was only one left. Having finished the meal we had given up on the empanadas and we asked for our bill then the empanadas came - this is Argentina. There were four loaded touring bikes outside the restaurant and it wasn't until we were leaving that we worked out that they belonged to four young lads in the restaurant. We went over and talked to them - they were from Santiago, they were amazed that people as old as us could be touring on a trip longer than theirs.

Some canned fruit salad and some bread was all we needed for our evening meal. On this stay here there were more locals. With a less international lot there wasn't the same conversation in the common room, people were just like me - going about whatever on the Internet. In the end it wasn't a very late night at all.

Haven't We Been This Way Before?

San Martin de los Andes to Junin de los Andes

www.pppg.pictures/SanMartinJuninDLA.htm

A relocation day, call it that, to get closer to Paso Tromen, after all we had been on this road before. Both times it has been a short day, and an easy day. The road isn't all that exciting but there were some new observations to make to keep up some interest. There wasn't a great need to leave San Martin early but neither was there any incentive to stay. Getting to Junin before this evening's predicted rain was the best we could do as an incentive. Having transitioned from our previous hostel yesterday meant that we didn't even have much packing to do and it looked a reasonable day to set out on.

We awoke not that much before 8, the rising sun hitting our window, yes sun and blue sky. With breakfast of pastries and cereal included there wasn't much to do before leaving. Alison went to the supermarket to get a bag of yesterdays pastries (again) while I sorted a few things and set about loading the bikes. Then along came Roberto who was staying here very interested in our bikes. While he was kayaking in a car on this trip he had plenty of cycle touring experience including 3 months in New Zealand. Originally from Uruguay he had good English. He was interested in the detail of bikes and panniers and was a mine of information from his experience. Not being in a rush I was happy to talk. Alison came back and as our bikes were outside our room and the door a long way around we started loading out via the window.

We were ready to roll not much after 10, it had clouded over a bit by now, and we headed downtown to the main street to take us north. There was clearly something going on, a parade. We had seen notices that it was the anniversary of the founding of San Martin (114) but hadn't fully registered the date, it not being important to us. One notice we that saw was for a marathon - 10 kilometers or 2 kilometers - well we wouldn't want to put people off would we. The main square was full of people, and around it were army and others in uniform including some in conquistador type dress. The band was all dressed in red uniforms. Beside it the official dais and the roll of those there was being called, it seemed even the Argentinian president was there if I heard correctly. I snapped a few photos before we decided to head off as the band started. Our route was complicated a little now as the main street was closed - we guessed for a parade at some time later but we couldn't hang around to find out how long.

Heading out of town I noticed the large campground at the head of the downtown area, I hadn't noticed it last time because it was empty but this time it was still quite full - and very large. The new supermarket on the outskirts of town had now had it's carpark completed. We came across groups of horse riders dressed in traditional dress heading into town - no doubt part of the celebrations today. We noticed that the edge of the asphalt didn't seem so bad and realized that they had been making an effort to build up the shoulder to the asphalt level and roll it down nicely for us. Indeed some of the asphalt was new it seemed.

We stopped at the cemetery again for a bit of lunch, unlike last time when we were hot and keen to get shade out of the sun the wind was a bit chill and it had clouded over. Back on the road we came to machines resurfacing the road with a couple of inches of new asphalt. The road underneath looked far better than many bits we have ridden lately but perhaps better to make it stronger now than wait until it cracks up. Indeed we then came across a section where river gravel was being dumped along the shoulder to build it up to the level of the asphalt - just waiting for the grader to level it out - but only the roller was working today - the grader was having a rest when we passed it.

So we rolled into Junin de los Andes just on 1:00, only 2 ½ hours riding. We skipped the campground that we stayed at last time with a little sadness - but with rain predicted tonight we don't want to be tenting. The hostel that had been recommended to us was at the south end of town a couple of streets east off the main road so we got there quickly and took a room, it has 3 beds so if a single wants to join us we may have company tonight. We noticed a sign saying that the empanadas were available so we ordered half a dozen. They came a while later freshly made by the Señora running the place. The place looks a single consistent building from the outside but inside has a history of many renovations. When we took our bikes around the

back we were shown the back narrow stairs to take the quick way up to our 3rd level room - it's bit like a cross between Fawlty towers (not the people) and a stately mansion - but half the price of San Martin and other recent places.

It is probably a good thing that we have returned to Junin to give it a second chance, it proves that first impressions are not always correct. Our first visit was to the main road only on a hot dusty day. Today we searched out a supermarket and found that the local chain had a respectable presence here 4 blocks off the main drag. What's more it was just off the plaza, a well watered and treed plaza it is as well.

Outside the supermarket were a couple of loaded bicycles, a couple of Chilean lads, one from Curarrehue where we expect to be in a couple of days, he helped us with the pronunciation of the places we are heading to. They looked a bit tired but had had a tailwind to get here and didn't fancy the headwind to San Martin today. We bought food to cook up tonight for a change - no last night steak in Argentina after all. Now here's a difference between Chile and Argentina: in Chile outside the big cities there seems only one variety of potatoes - red, and in Argentina one variety: white. Around said plaza are shops and restaurants including one of the local icecream chains - Gridos - temptation for cyclists with so may flavors - we couldn't resist.

After our ice creams we made our way back to the hostel. We cooked early - well normal cyclist time but not Argentinian meal time - so we were able to fully utilize the limited kitchen facilities before others wanted them - the place ended up nearly full. Before settling in for the night we went out for an evening walk but headed home a bit earlier than planned as the first shower of the predicted rain arrived. Indeed it did rain during the night and we were glad not to be in the tent.

The Wind is Meant to be the Other Way!

Junin de los Andes to Lago Tromeu (Almost)

www.pppg.pictures/JuninDLAParqueLanin.htm

There are worse places to be I guess, camping in a grove of monkey puzzle trees, a small river out the front door and a near perfect volcano out the back. One of the reasons for putting this pass on the route months ago was the monkey puzzle trees after all. Their strangeness is alluring and while they are easily found as specimen trees at home and most of the world seeing natural forests of them is something else. We could have gone further today I guess, it would leave less for tomorrow but there are incentives to stop here just a bit inside Parque Lanin. The road turning to gravel at the park entrance was more of an excuse than a reason, it has a solid dirt base and not much gravel - well so far anyway. Going further would take us a bit higher towards the pass and frontier, that could make things a bit colder. It will be cold tonight according to the forecast, the issue between the two web sites we use is which side of zero it will get down to tonight. Then there was the wind we had struggled into for the last few hours. The remains of recent weather had us struggling into a fierce headwind most of the afternoon and we were pleased to find any excuse to stop for the day.

I had thought Lago Tromeu would be a good place to camp but the two young Chileans we met outside the supermarket in Junin yesterday were enthusiastic about camping here just inside the park - and someone else had told us something similar. The river outside is small, a large stream maybe, as I write this a fisherman is working his way down past us, this whole region is popular with trout fishermen, it is Junin's claim to fame. Looking around we can see Volcan Lanin through the trees, it has been playing hide and seek with us all day. It was clear when we first saw it this morning but then went behind cloud. Now the clouds come and go, spilling from Chile over it like icing drizzling down a cake keeping to its shape, all remarkably fast. In less than a minute it can go from clear to covered, the wind speeds up there must be horrific, no one will be climbing there today. Getting on further would also increase the chance of the spill over showers we have seen coming from Chile. Perhaps the main reason to stop is that we were getting sick of the head wind, it had eased off but parts of the 30 kilometers that we slogged into it today were quite miserable. This morning we set out hoping to beat the wind, knowing that would be impossible but we hope against hope that getting away early would help.

Our room had a bit of a curtain that we couldn't be bothered closing last night so the light came in early. Not that this early is as early as it was down south, the days have suddenly got shorter at both ends for us by coming north and summer is waning. Breakfast in these places doesn't start until 8, too bad if you have to get away for a bus or something. Not that it's much, some cornflakes and toasted bits of bread and jam and a drink, hardly cyclist fare for a hard day on the road. So we were pretty much packed and partly loaded by the time we had breakfast and rolled away at 8:30 off to the supermarket - but it didn't open until 9. We really only wanted bread and found a panaderia on the main road through town. So we finally left the outskirts of town a bit before 9.

It was a bit chilly as we headed out of town northward, for once we didn't start with a climb, it was flat. Of course that couldn't last and we soon started climbing gently to cross over into the river valley that will take us to Chile. While the wind had dropped off overnight it now started to grow as we climbed and became more exposed. The rain overnight had dusted snow on the mountains back towards San Martin and the air was cool so the wind made it worse. After about 16 kilometers we started to drop down and running into a cold wind fast when you are not generating heat is not all that pleasant so we made a stop to add a layer that stayed on for the rest of the day. We had our first view of Volcan Lanin to the west where we were headed, it was clear but that was not to last. We were also turning west and into the wind. At 20 kilometers we came to our river and a junction. Now the seal we were on went to the bridge but the intersection on the other side was not sealed but then the road we had to follow was sealed again 10m out of the intersection - only in Argentina.

The wind was now a head wind after we crossed the bridge and as we had been going a bit over an hour

we stopped in the lee of a bus shelter at the intersection, the shelter itself being a bit unappealing. Some Chileans coming through the pass stopped and asked us which way to go at this intersection such was the lack of clarity at the end of the seal – they must have missed the sign a few tens of meters back.

We now had a new set of kilometer marker pegs starting from zero at the intersection to help us know our progress. For the next 10 kilometers the road followed the river winding a bit with some gentle climbs. One spot had a camera sign indicating a good viewpoint - and so it would have been a good view of Volcan Lanin but it was now obscured by cloud. Then the valley opened out quite wide and flat. It was good running relatively speaking, we still had a head wind keeping us slow as we very gently rose on river flats. This lasted 6 kilometers when we started a climb away from the river that went into a bit of a gorge in the distance. It was our first patch of Monkey puzzle trees for today. Up we went into the wind and found we kept climbing up and down in a very exposed landscape for the next 10 kilometers or so. The wind was strong, cold and miserably unrelenting in our faces. The land was very sandy, volcanic sand and there were many kilometers of Pinus Radiata forest, some mature but most quite young - still nothing to break the wind for us. Some time back we had set ourselves a target of 20 kilometers from the intersection as a target for our next stop. The 20 kilometers came and went and there was nowhere sheltered in the exposed landscape until eventually we came to a graffiti decorated bus shelter opposite a side road heading off across the valley. It was at a bit of a high point and we could see nothing better ahead so we made a stop there for lunch sheltered in it from the unrelenting wind.

Moving on the wind hadn't got any better so we slogged on slowly downhill for 5 or 6 kilometers until we reached more fertile land. There was an estancia off the road in a carefully chosen spot nestled in the mouth of a side valley with trees providing extra shelter for the buildings from the relentless wind. Maybe the wind had dropped a little or we had dropped lower to be less exposed but the going was a bit better. We crossed a bridge to the other side of the valley and a more mature pine plantation marginally in an upwind direction gave us a little shelter. We had been seeing Volcan Lanin again - or parts of it as the cloud was blowing over and cloaking it but we were on the lee side so we could see a segment of it clear of cloud.

As we moved on the blue sky above that was its wind shadow seemed to rotate more westerly and our wind eased. Approaching 50 kilometers we actually got short views of Lanin's summit but within as little as 20 seconds the clouds would roll back over. Reaching the park entrance the asphalt ended and we began looking out for the camping places that we had been told about. It wasn't long before we found what must be it with some picnic tables. We stopped for something to eat intending to carry on as we had only come 50 kilometers today but we looked around and decided it was a nice enough place to stay for the night so here we are.

The tent was put up, the rope out for a washing line and a rest for the remainder of the afternoon - with fresh legs tomorrow we only have 13 or so kilometers of gently uphill ripio before crossing into Chile and some serious downhill. As we look west the weather in Chile looks wet as predicted but the forecast has it clearing and the worst cloud in Argentina tomorrow - let's hope that it is right. We had an easy meal of last night's leftovers reheated and some rice with pasta sauce. The cloud cleared over Lanin but the sun is behind it - hopefully we are in the right spot for it to rise on Lanin in the morning although the clear sky bodes a cold night.

Back to Chile (Again)

Parque Lanin to Curarrehue

www.pppg.pictures/ParqueLaninCurarrehue.htm

It's a friendly town this little pueblo of Curarrehue that we have ended up at tonight. The people are friendly, a man in the street was keen to help us find a place to stay - not that a place was hard - wifi was the problem. The man at the Hostel where we are staying helped carry our bags upstairs. When we went out for a meal the man at the little restaurant was very friendly. A woman at the next table (there being only 4 tables it was hard not to be the next table) came and chatted - she was Dutch but had been living here for 8 months she liked the place so much. It's not much more than a one street town. Yes there is another street in parts parallel to the main street but the town is situated in a deep glacial valley between the river and the side of the valley so it spreads out a long way along the road - but it does mean most places are on the main street. We decided that when you backpack around in a bus you only get to the main towns and destinations and miss these small towns which give you a different perspective on a country. Perhaps here is a little unusual, it's only 40 kilometers to Pucon which is the tourist town of the Chilean Lake District. We will go there tomorrow by bus because our legs need a rest and rain is predicted and we are not planning to go that way on the bikes. It was with tired legs from yesterday's headwind that we set out on this morning knowing that we didn't have much alternative than to make it here but knowing we would at least have 500 meter to drop from the border to here.

It was cold in the tent last night, the wind only dropped to a breeze keeping it from freezing but it was nearly so. The night was clear and full of stars when we popped out for a toilet excursion. The tent was never really dark due to starlight there being no moon. Our campsite was shielded from the early sun so we made no rush to get up preferring to stay a little warm as long as possible. It was 7:30 when we emerged. As usual our breakfast and packing took just under 2 hours, the breeze overnight kept the tent fly free of condensation and what light rain had fallen had dried away.

The sun was warming things a bit as we rolled out about 9:30 but the breeze was turning into a wind. For the first 6 kilometers we continued on the flat we had followed yesterday and we were sheltered from the growing wind a bit but then we had to start climbing a bit and were exposed to the still chill of the wind. It didn't seem that steep but looking back it was clear we had climbed and then we were in an open exposed plain between the flanks of Volcan Lanin and Lago Trome.

We made the park headquarters in a bit over an hour, not a good rate in normal circumstances. There we had a look at some of the displays and used the toilet. We then looked around and found a sheltered spot in the lee of some trees in front a small poorly stocked shop to have an early lunch. There was a picnic table that probably belonged to the little shop. It didn't have much on display but the camping ground was behind it so maybe campers had cleared the shelves. I went walking for a look at the camping area and there quite a few people there. Maybe it would have been OK last night but we would have had to pay - I think we did better at our quiet little stream. We ate a little as we had to finish off cheese, tomato and avocado before entering Chile.

Moving on it was then only a couple more easy kilometers until Argentinian immigration. It was a bit of a shock for us, other people there. We have become accustomed to having personal service at border crossings in remote places but this is a popular pass leading from Pucon to the Argentinian Lake District so we had to queue. It was a bit confusing as there was only one queue - we would expect llegadas and salidas (arrivals and departures) to be separate but they were one and the same. One man came along with forms for the salidas to fill out to enter Chile. So at the desk we were stamped out and Argentina kept one of the four layers of the form and we kept the other 3 for Chile.

We then rolled a couple of kilometers on the level to the actual border and another gently downhill to the Chilean border post. Somewhere we passed over Paso Mamuil Malal, I guess that is the Mapuche name, it used to be known as Paso Trome. It is a very flat area where the actual pass is but we started downhill after

the actual frontier. The road has been recently widened. Where the gaps between the Araucarias trees weren't big enough the road has sometimes been built around them. I cannot help but wonder that they will not survive root damage and will die anyway.

In Chile we have another nice new building, arrivals are separate from departures, the Chileans are more concerned than the Argentinians about what you may bring in. Coming from New Zealand we understand the concerns of an agricultural nation not wanting diseases borne on fresh fruit, dairy products and meat. We parked the bikes and went in the door just as the first of a bus load came in.

Somehow we were directed to the second window away from the bus load for immediate service where our passports were scanned (actual technology for a change) and two copies of the form retained, the last for us to keep until our next departure from Chile. Then we were told that we had to fill out the agriculture declaration, which was fine, but then we had to put all our bags through a scanner - as did everyone else. The man shepherding us helped with the bags, very friendly and helped carry the bags from the bikes into the scanner. All went well and then we had to reload and we were off. The carload of young girls that were scanned behind us had to give up their packet of salami which the scanner obviously located. Here it seems these things are just confiscated - arriving in New Zealand you are likely to get a fine as well as having your goods confiscated. By comparison with arriving in New Zealand where we don't have land borders and arrival is by plane it all seemed so easy.

Leaving the border post there were 5 or so kilometers of gentle riding downhill to Laguna Quillehue. The enjoyment was diminished by the loose gravel on our side of the road, grader sign if ever there was one, well a sign saying machine working as we left immigration helped with that clue. Then there was the grader racing uphill towards us, not grading, well and good we thought that's fine for us.

After the downhill we reach the head of Laguna Quillehue. We rode along the road cut into the steep side of the lake and by the time we reached it's foot we were a bit hungry again. There we saw a sign for a little nature walk starting by the road and going down to the lake. We stopped and after a biscuit we decided to walk the track as it looked quite short. The first section down to the lake was a formed track and could be driven by a vehicle and at the bottom there were a couple of spots that would be flat enough for a grassy tent site. We carried on up and down on the narrow foot track and we were soon along the swampy edge of the lake as it headed to its outlet river. The river may look gentle enough at its source but soon it has to tumble down rapids and waterfalls and we will be following its valley. Now we had seen some houses across the lake and wondered how those who lived or vacationed there could get across to them. One answer was a small rowing boat locked to a tree by a substantial chain. Following on the track soon began to rise back to the road and we spotted three woodpeckers in a tree above us. These are a novelty to us so we took a minute or two hoping to get a good photograph but they mostly stayed high in the branches.

We had a snack before starting out again and then we realized what Mr Grader had really been doing - making a mess of our road ahead. Loose gravel across the road but I suppose the corrugations were leveled a bit. If we thought our big downhill had started we were a bit wrong, sure no big hills but some small climbs before our run down in earnest began.

After a kilometer or so of careful running on the newly graded road we met a German woman cyclist coming up, she had been pushing parts because of the steepness and gravel. She had started in Salta in northern Argentina and before that had cycled from Darwin to Sydney. She was no spring chicken, more our age! - you don't see many older women riding solo. We chatted for a few minutes - she was not finding coming up on this loose surface easy.

So we had about 10 kilometers of steep downhill on a surface that was quite loose, some bits were good but I would hate to have come up. We crossed a bridge high above a side river stopping to admire the forest and river below. There were a couple of viewpoints, we stopped at one where some cars were also stopped. Somewhere here there was supposed to be a view of a waterfall across the valley but we never saw it. The road was very pretty in the forest but we had to keep our eyes on the road below our wheels and its gravel surface rather than enjoy the views. We have read that subsequently this road has been under reconstruction

however it seemed quite fine to us, perhaps the plan is to seal it.

After dropping 400 meters from the lake we hit the seal at Puesco, just a few houses, hardly enough to be called a village. I think that the old border post used to be here as there some large official looking buildings all shut up. As the grade eased we moved into more farming land in the valley floor. The mountains on the other side of the river are almost sheer and very spectacular, sadly with cloud around the tops we don't see them at their best. A couple of kilometers of asphalt, mainly downhill, and there was a sign for a camping area with a restaurant offering to change Argentinian pesos. We were hungry so stopped and ended up having a beef casserole and rice. I think that there was more bone than meat and it had been reheated in a microwave but it kept us going. It was quite pleasant sitting in the restaurant sandwiched between the road and the river with our outlook a few meters through the trees to the river below tumbling pleasantly over large boulders. We then exchanged our pesos at what was not a bad rate considering that they were devaluing all the time and who knows when our next chance could be. Leaving we saw the camping below, it looked quite pleasant with a swimming pool but with rain predicted we didn't want to be in the tent and we needed to find a cash machine soon to boost our slimming wallets. Just after we are back on the road we see a couple of empty sun loungers down by the river below us the occupants must have given up with the arrival of the cloud.

The remainder of the way was mostly downhill gradually easing off to flatter and the occasional small rise. At one spot we stopped to pick and eat ripe blackberries on the roadside. On the widening valley floor there were now more small farms, one place has an old steam engine parked by the road, a reminder of past forest clearance. It would have been pleasant if the clouds hadn't come over keeping it quite cold. A few kilometers out of town there was a small place by a swing bridge selling food so still feeling a bit hungry we stopped and I bought a couple of empanadas - we had to wait along with some other customers while they were cooked.

So it was about 5 when we finally rolled into town. We spotted some possible places to stay, we were thinking a cabin for a couple of nights would be a good idea with the forecast for a bit of rain. We then hit the tourist office and got a list of places. First we checked the hostel at the Pucon end of town but Alison's knee was a bit sore and we had to go up stairs to a room so we moved on. So then we tried 3 places for cabins but none had wifi and neither did a hospedaje/cabins at the other end of town where we came in. So we rode back to the hostel for a room knowing that they had wifi. Thus it was that we settled into our room, had a shower and headed out for something to eat.

The town may stretch out along the main road but we deviated off it to walk around the plaza. On the other side a local group was putting on a display of folk dancing. I guess you would say it was Spanish flamenco style with a bit of local Gaucho thrown in with music of guitar, piano accordion and modern keyboard. There were quite a number of people watching, locals or tourists we couldn't tell. After watching a little while we moved on and saw this restaurant with some rustic wooden tables outside. It wasn't a night for outside dining so in we went. After a pleasant meal it was starting to get dark as we headed back for bed.

So here we are in Hostal Quechuphuen. It's a big old wooden place a bit back off the road by the school. From the outside it could do with a lick of paint but inside is clean and tidy. Like so many older buildings here the floor has lost some of its levelness but not too badly. So far we're not sure who are guests and who are the family that run the place, there are a couple of worker types here obviously guests but we are off the main tourist route so there are no other foreigners.

It was a long day on the road in the end but not all of it in the saddle. Time at all those eating stops and immigration queues added up. The weather wasn't the best to the end of the day but at least it didn't rain and we are where we planned to be for the next section northwards in a few days when the weather clears. Our legs need a rest after biking into the wind, I think we lost a bit of condition with nearly two weeks with little biking and we are paying for it now.

Some of today's photos were spoiled because of a smudge on the camera lens - it's hard to spot things like this when I pull the small camera out and shoot often while still moving. Some of the scenery later in the day was great but not worth photos as the clouds came over.

A Rainy Day in a Tourist Town

Curarrehue to Pucon and back by bus

www.pppg.pictures/CurarrehuePucon.htm

We woke up to rain on the roof, no surprise in that, the forecast on both yr.no and accuweather.com had been predicting it for days so we are here for our rain day. With no reason to move we didn't leave the hostel until about 11 after the drifting drizzle had eased off. We wandered down the street to the hardware store where I got the only bottle of Bencina Blanca they had - half a liter to stock up for the trip ahead. We also hoped it might be possible to get a new stopper for Alison's thermos but no luck of course - she had seen them in El Chalten but that's nearly 2000 kilometers away and the sort of tourist town where there would be a demand for such things. We passed the restaurant we ate at last night, it was open but it was drizzling and no customers were outside today. A quick tour of the supermarkets followed, we were impressed by some of vegetables on display, massive broccoli heads in one place and huge corn cobs are in season. Pumpkin is sold by the chunk off a large one, in one shop a saw is sitting on a cut pumpkin being the only practical way to cut off a piece. We then returned to the hostel and out to catch a bus to Pucon.

Heading out to the bus stop the chickens are crossing the road, a reminder that this is still a small town. Once in Pucon the job was to find a bank or two for some money. I have Visa and Alison Mastercard so we tried banks on opposite sides of the street and both withdrew our daily limit and that will keep us going a while. Later the machines seemed to have run out of money. In Pucon it was drizzling and there were tourists everywhere with nothing to do but walk the streets. We headed to the beach so we could at least say we had seen it. On the way we purchase a Humita from a lady selling them from a large basket at the edge of a small park in the center of town. It is the season for fresh corn and in many places we have seen women on the streets selling these corn cakes steamed in corn husk but this was the first we had bought. The beach, normally covered in people in summer, was deserted except for 2 dogs curled up keeping warm. We walked back and found a place for lunch that kept us both happy. I had pastel de Choclo - corn cake - it's a signature dish for Chile and corn is in season now. About 4 we headed to the bus terminal for the return. Just too late for a seat on one bus we waited 20 minutes for the next departure rather than stand on the one just leaving.

Back about 5 it was time for some jobs. I cleaned our Whisperlite stove for the first time - I'm not sure if it really needed it but didn't seem as strong a flame as it should and this was a good chance to do my first clean when the pressure wasn't on. Thanks to Katherine who we met weeks ago for showing me how to do this. Then having failed to find a new thermos stopper I had been thinking about how to fix the old one - a small plastic clip had failed. I had picked up a plastic bottle top off the ground at the bus station and with a pocket knife heated in the flame of the stove I fashioned a new replacement clip. The prototype has worked well - it may last better than the original dare I say. Time moved on and being our wedding anniversary (as I was reminded) we decided to go to the same restaurant as last night for a pisco sour and a bite to eat. We were told there is a fiesta on the edge of town tomorrow - and an Asado even - so yet another reason to stay another day while the cloud clears.

Most cyclists don't have much good to say about Pucon, it is the antithesis of the experience of most touring cyclists who pass this way - full of people and expensive - and we would agree. If we hadn't had several weeks of tourist towns in Argentina it would have been a real culture shock. We felt a little disempowered being off the bikes. There were several large supermarkets on the road out of town but without our mode of transport we couldn't stop there even if we had wanted. The road between Curarrehue and Pucon looked a nice ride, I'm not sure how good the shoulder was but it was a really busy road especially the closer to Pucon you got. Maybe out of peak tourist season it would have been better.

World Famous in Curarrehue

Curarrehue Day 2

www.pppg.pictures/CurarrehueFair.htm

I guess we are world famous here in Curarrehue, well in a small town sort of way - Kiwis will understand what I mean, it's a sort of New Zealand joke about being well known in a place so small it doesn't count. We were leaving the fair today and about to cross the swing bridge to the main road when we caught up with a couple of local lads, you are the New Zealanders they said to us. How on earth did they know that we wonder. The only thing we can put it down to is that when we arrived at the fair a chap was very interested in talking with us and how we knew about the fair, in a very friendly kind of way. A bit later we realized that he was the MC for the day on the microphone. We can only surmise that he said something about a couple of New Zealanders being in the crowd today. It's going to be a bit sad to leave this friendly little town. This morning when we were walking along the street a car tooted and it was the man from the restaurant waving to us.

Our plan when we got up was to find some hot pools and a fair. The day dawned with a bit of drizzle, precipitation was not expected, was this an ill omen for tomorrow, what ever, we were not in a hurry to get moving. We chatted with another guest over breakfast - he and his family were here, he had some English, worked as a project manager for HP in Santiago. We mucked around a bit and then did some shopping to stock up for departure and tomorrow being Sunday and who knows what shops will be open early. As we walked along the street a car horn tooted and a man was waving up us - our host from the restaurant where we have eaten the last couple of nights. Then it was time to head out to some hot pools.

Out the gate and off for a ride went Alison and Alec from the hostel (Kiwis with kids may recognize the plagiarism here - we had no Hairy McLary however). Down the road and around the corner we soon came to a side road. A sign indicated hot pools 4 kilometers away. Ah, we remember that the German woman we met the other day mentioned hot pools this way - cheaper than the ones we were heading for on the main road. So a quick plan change and off we went down the side road. After a kilometer we crossed a bridge and came to a branch in the road, to be a bit more correct a side road veered off the main road. A car was coming down the main road so we flagged it down and asked if there were hot pools ahead, a dozen or so kilometers - not the ones we were looking for it seemed so we branched left to follow the river downstream.

A few ups and downs where the river cut in seemed a lot easier on an unloaded bike but we were not sure if we wanted to come back this way! Somewhere after 3 or 4 kilometers we flagged down the only car we saw and asked the woman driver about hot pools, no we should have gone the other way. Is there a bridge soon (so that we could get off the gravel road and back on the main road - for the expensive pools) Yes - a little bit - now a little bit in a car is not a little bit on a bike. On we rode on - and on, not too worried as it was a pleasant quiet country ride and we had plenty of time. Yes the drizzle kept our rain jackets on but it was easing. Then around a corner we came across the fair we were sort of looking for. Quite clearly from the sign at the entrance most people were expected to have come the other way - never mind. We asked a fellow if there was a bridge ahead - 250 meters was the answer. I thought I had glimpsed a bridge in the distance through trees just before we spotted the fair and thought it would be one we saw from the bus yesterday so all is fine.

So we went into the fair. Things were just getting going when we got there. We bought some snacks including some delicious looking pie - someone asked if we wanted breakfast - it was nearly 12 - lunch was on our minds. There were some opening speeches from important looking people on the stage and the Chilean National anthem was played. Some people stopped what they were doing and sang along and others just kept about their business. We checked out the asados in progress and saw they were just getting going so we headed off to find the pools. A couple of hundred meters on the road and a sign pointed down a track for a swing bridge - we had seen this from the bus yesterday. Back on the main road it was 1 1/2 kilometers to the pools entrance. We went in paying the exorbitant price but what the heck - we are on holiday from our holiday today. We were a bit disappointed: of the 5 pools on the sign the 2 main ones were covered - well it

rains a lot here. The smaller hot one was just not too hot if you know what I mean and the second hardly tepid - good to cool down in from the hot one. The 3 outside pools were 2 large tubs not even tepid and the 5th was an empty hole in the ground. We stayed a couple of hours before stomachs dictated that we head back to the fair for Asado for lunch.

Getting out we had the feeling of not having been so clean in ages. It's not that we haven't had showers and the like but I guess the dust really gets into your skin and a hot soak open up the pores. Away back down the road and over the bridge back to the fair. Walking into the fair a woman we walk past asks us if we found the hot pools - it takes a second to click that she is the one we saw in her car on the road - it's a small country fair. Most of the Asados were done and to our disappointment the roasted young pig was gone - but beef and lamb were still cooking away. We eventually managed to put in an order and when the meat was done we got a meal. We then had some more cake from another stall. The young girl said to me that she spoke English - she had spent a year in Canada - I told her she had a Canadian accent. Heading across to some small stalls we buy a small pottle of local honey as we needed more since we had to use up what we had before reentering Chile from Argentina. There are horse rides available for the youngsters, the stirrups are a traditional wooden based boot design. As we started to head away there were some wheel barrow races just starting being MC'ed by the man we had chatted to on the way in. He got them going and stopped them immediately telling them that the pusher had to have a blindfold on. Everyone was amused by the goings on for a few minutes until the race started - some going in all directions and a woman not far from me got hit on the knee for not moving out of the way fast enough and didn't look too happy about it - well if she hadn't been on the course...

We head out and back along the narrow track to the swing bridge again where the young lads identified us as New Zealanders. Up the sealed road all the way back home we went. It was well after 5:30 by the time we were back at the hostel and started sorting our piles for packing for tomorrow. Out the back of the house here is a Quincha, the six side building where meat is roasted. This one isn't actually six sided because it is against the fence but it has the characteristic hole in the roof for the smoke to escape from the fire in the middle. Today being Sunday has been the day for lighting up and roasting meat and for the extended family of the people running this place

Not all that hungry ourselves but wanting something we went back to our usual restaurant for something light which turned out to be a pizza and salad. Before bed we organized our gear a bit in anticipation of being back on the road in the morning.

A Broken Bike Again

Curarrehue to Regolil

www.pppg.pictures/CurarrehueRegolil.htm

She can never complain that I am a hoarder again, never complain about all the stuff I keep that may be useful, not after today anyway, worth it's weight in gold it was, that 100grams of seat clamp I have been carrying since Cochrane where her first seatpost was replaced. At the time I thought that maybe I should just use the seat clamp from the old seatpost as it just looked better quality - and so it turned out to be. But at the time we were in a rush to get away down the Carretera and I just put the clamp in the tools pocket of my panniers. Today she complained that her seat was loose, so I tightened the bolt, then again a few kilometers later, and then again so I set to tighten it again - and the bolt sheared off. Now had I not had a spare clamp several days riding would be down the drain. Well we had been passed by a bus a little bit back so I suppose somehow a trip to Pucon could have been made but it would have taken a day or more - there are not many buses on this back road. Not that it is deserted by any means - small farms all along the way so maybe we could have hitched. But none of this, in a couple of minutes I had fitted the old clamp on the new seatpost and we were ready to roll again although at the time we were pushing up a steep section of road. I'm not sure what we had expected today. It was a long steady climb on the grand scale but in the small scale we had more than half a dozen bits that we had to push, mostly short but the loose gravel on a solid base made it difficult to get a grip to push with our feet even. And it was getting hot in the sun, we had started in the cool morning, mist hanging in the shady areas, but things had warmed up under a cloudless sky.

We got up about 7:30, fairly well packed from the night before but it was 9:30 by the time we headed away. It was still crisp and cold although sunny as predicted. We headed through town to the bridge on the Argentinian end. The supermarket where I hoped to pick up some empanadas was still closed and there was a bunch of men waiting outside the panadería for the morning bread. Another Sunday departure means that we are too early for the shops yet again. Alison went to another supermarket and by the time we met up the bread queue had gone so at least we got bread for the day.

Across the bridge the concrete road ran out after a couple of hundred meters. I noted a camping sign just after the end of the concrete and before a short sharp hill not that we would have camped anyway with the rain coming. The road was now a good dirt base with little loose rock or gravel - good riding. We continued climbing through treed farmland. It was cool and the sun low, mist rising where the sun first hit some grassy bits, The road was very pretty in the trees - even if the farmland was more sparsely treed along the road boundaries there were plenty of trees - nice to ride in but hard to photograph. After a few kilometers we got some views back of the town and Volcan Villarica further in the distance, it had been hiding from us in cloud for the last several days. The road continued high above the valley below for about 10 kilometers, rising and falling a bit. We then dropped a bit to cross the river where it was in a pretty narrow deep vertically sided gorge for a couple of kilometers. Rising up the other side we continued along the edge of the gorge sometimes being able to see the river below through the trees. There are houses and small farms all along road.

A few more kilometers and we saw a sign saying empanadas pointing up a short dirt track to a small house. We stopped and were wondering whether to go in when we saw a woman up the track and so we asked her and she confirmed she had empanadas so in we went. We were directed to a bamboo and fern thatched hut a bit further back where her husband was. We were invited in, there was a fire burning in the middle with a kettle on for his maté. There were dried meats hanging from the rafters and various other local Mapuche artefacts. He tells us that he is Mapuche and 20 years ago his grandfather had taught him the traditional songs. He is a teacher at Reigolil school currently on summer vacation. He played one of the horn things he had for us and then with a drum between his legs with a drumstick with bells on it played and sang a Mapuche song for us. All this time we were waiting for his wife to make and cook the empanadas. This was not helped by the power being out this morning. Eventually the empanadas arrived with a drink by which time

we had had another song or two. So all in all we spent about an hour before moving on. While it was a wonderful experience and insight into the traditions of the indigenous Mapuche people the only problem was that now the sun was higher and it had become hotter.

Back on the road we continued along the sloping valley beside the river, some up and down but not too bad, the road continued to be good, there were farms all along the way. At one stage there was a large swing foot bridge across the river. The other side of the river looked steep but there are still farms on almost any bits of land that are not so steep. We soon come to the bottom of a broad flat valley for a kilometer or two, there is a spot where we could walk down to the river and we stopped for a few minutes but mostly the river was away from us. About 1:00 we come to some sealed road and we have reached a big new concrete bridge at Quinenahuin, I'm not sure if that is the name for the few houses there or just the bridge leading to the valley on the other side. There was singing coming from a church up above the road, this is Sunday after all. We lunched under a big tree on a flat area between the road and the river. I changed from my Tee shirt to my lobster shell top for more sun protection as it was getting hot. I took the chance to clamber down the rocks to the clear river to rinse my shirt and get some water as we were already getting through our bottles.

The road then seemed a bit gravelier and away from the flat we had the first of many steeper bits. Here we had to stop for a bus coming the other way, proof that there are services to the population along the valley – even on a Sunday. It is a very populated valley - and we passed 3 schools in all on the way and then finally the big one at Reigolil. It got hotter and there were some very steep short bits between easier bits, sometimes we were high above the valley looking across to farms on the other side. We were starting to come out of a side creek pushing on a steep bit when Alison's seatpost clamp broke. It didn't take me long to replace it but we were finding the steep bits that needed pushing hard going. It was hot and while the road was generally good the usual rules applied on the steep bits and the cars had loosened up the gravel making it hard to get traction for our feet. There was only one bit much more than 50 meters so don't think its too bad. At about 36 kilometers for the day we had climbed high and were feeling tired when the main valley opened out at a large side valley. For our final stretch we had some downhill and then it was pretty much flat for the last few kilometers into Reigolil. The town is situated in a larger wide part of the valley.

Now we faced the danger of chickens crossing across the road as we hit the asphalt at the beginning of the town. There wasn't much sign of life We went through town slowly. The first shop we see is closed – which is a bit ominous and we never did see it open. Then we find the small shop at the northern end - We buy a drink and iceblock from the freezer. We went across the road to the hospedaje next to the fire station but no one was at home. Back at the shop we were told they wouldn't be back until later. We had heard of a fiesta here today but we are told that it was well up the road and uphill. We asked about camping and were told that down by the bridge across the river would be OK and the young lad at the shop walked with us to show us the place. It looked fine. He also gave us the wifi key for the school which is still working over summer (wifi that is) - not that all the connections required a key. We walked back to the shop where we had left our bikes with the young lad and there bought him an iceblock for his trouble. I think that it was his mother who ran the place so there was a little confusion.

Back to the bridge the camp was in full view of the road but I figured that if everyone sees you it's safer than hiding. There were signs of previous fire places and discarded cans and rubbish so maybe it was a bit of a place to hangout for the young locals. The young lad told us they swam here in the river, the deep bit maybe a meter deep. We waved at anyone passing and said hello. It was on towards 4 by now so we set up then tent, washed a few things and ourselves in the chilly river. We cooked up some rice and sausage and settled in for an early night. The sun disappeared behind the hills on the other side of the valley quite early and the air began to chill so we headed for bed.

An Unplanned Rest Day

Regolil

www.pppg.pictures/Regolil.htm

When we traveled in South America 23 years ago we soon found that the first topic of conversation when meeting other travelers was the bugs we all had, the state of our stomachs and bowels and what came out. We don't tend to talk of such things in our polite society but it becomes very important to know what you have got and whether it's passing or serious therefore knowing the nature of what you pass is important. This next section tells you what my symptoms were - skip it if you are a bit sensitive to such things.

We went to bed early last night, it was still warm but while the valley has a wide floor here it is still a deep steep sided glacial valley and the sun went behind the mountains on the other side early. It was about 11 that I woke with a desperate need for a toilet. There was of course no toilet here so grabbing the trowel I headed out to find a suitable spot. The moon was still up and it wasn't too cold. I chose a spot by a big old log where the ground was deep sand - easy digging. What I didn't know was this was to be the first of many trips out of the tent in the night. On the third trip I decided not to fill my hole in this time - it will be there next time. Now I remember seeing comedian Billy Connolly in a show on TV talking about getting old - never trust a fart he said. He did also say never waste an erection but the former was my problem and in my state there was no chance of the latter. I got terrible stomach ache for a couple of hours so made repeated excursions outside not sure if I had gas or solids. It should be said that I didn't have diarrhea, the runny kind where liquids just pass through and dehydration can be a problem, we have pills for that, I would gladly have had a pill to get it all out of me this time not a bung you up pill. All I produced was a pile of pongy cowpats. The moon went down and as it was a clear night the southern stars were spectacular - but I wasn't in a state to appreciate them. And it got colder - so there I was, squatting over a hole, my manly bits dangling in the increasingly cold air. At one stage I went to steady myself by putting my hand on the log beside me it felt slimy, turning the torch on it showed one of the giant slugs they had here just where I wanted to put my hand.

I'm a believer in getting it out so decided that if I could throw up that would help matters in the long term. The trouble was it had mostly moved beyond my stomach so there wasn't much to come. Once I started I seemed I had to keep going out and trying again, retching on an empty stomach. So I didn't get much sleep during the night, and neither did Alison. On one trip out just as dawn's light was lightening the sky I saw a bus coming up the road in the other side of the valley - it came and crossed our bridge. It was an hour or two before it returned. There are a surprisingly large number of people on the small farms in the valley and I guess some work further afield like Pucon. It had got cold with the clear night - not as cold as we have experienced but still nippy. Even with sunrise it didn't warm up as we were on the shady side of the valley however I finally got to get some sleep. It was clear we wouldn't be going far today. Finally the sun hit the tent and it was like an oven almost immediately. It reminded me of the Vin Diesel movie where he is on a prison planet, molten hot in the day and sub zero temperatures in the night. I slept on and off while Alison had breakfast - I wasn't ready for food.

Before you or I are quick to judge about stomach problems in these places I have to say a couple of years ago I caught a bug at home. It seemed just like cryptosporidium that we have had traveling - but it could have been Noro virus which was about at the time. I blamed it on cold meats and a buffet at a flash restaurant. It was far worse than what I have this time. Alison and I had the same foods in the last couple of days so who knows what caused the problem.

We decided that Alison should go and check out the Hospedaje for tonight - off she went and returned with the news that we could go there. So began a leisurely packing. In spite of everything this was a nice sunny day and by the river was quite pleasant. Some locals with horses turned up about midday and just sat in the shade between us and the bridge - we will have to adjust our daily schedule to rest in the height of the day for this last section. Alison took one set of panniers off to the hospedaje and I continued packing. She returned saying that we could have separate rooms - given my state it seemed sensible. Three daily meals were included. So we were all there about 1:00 in the end. We had lunch, a little salad and some beef and

vegetable mix on spaghetti - a good choice for my recovering stomach even though I didn't have much.

I slept a bit in the afternoon, woke later and went down to the school for some wifi. It is a large regional school and some of the local kids are also there sitting outside getting some Internet as well. I was able to eat the evening meal as was much more energized by the end of the day. Another cyclist came in but from the Lago Caburgua direction – the way we had intended to go in our original plans. Thomas was traveling lightly with only a couple of small rear panniers on a 3 week tour heading to Bariloche – he had been here for a longer tour 20 years ago. Unusually for a German his English wasn't that good and we conversed mostly in Spanish.

It's an interesting place here. Our host is the local fire chief and the fire engine is parked out front. It's a rather old fire engine obviously retired from a previous life but suffices here. The fire service here – Bomberos – is fully voluntary in Chile so there is a siren on a pole outside the front door to call local volunteers to duty. This house is in many ways representative of what we see a lot here in Chile. The outside shows its history of extensions. The front section is the newest being a two storey addition. The front is clad in a horizontal narrow weather board painted purple. The side are however clad in vertical unpainted metal sheeting. One end of the second storey is clad in overlapping vertical untrimmed wooden slabs, a style we have seen often. The front entrance is a sort of porch under the end of the second storey supported by three large vertical logs, the corner one with a large burr. There are two front doors, the old and new in the extension, the old one is closest to our rooms so is most convenient for us.

The three guest rooms are on the ground floor off the open plan kitchen and living area. The family live upstairs, it's a bit hard to tell in our short stay but it seems there are three generations here. In the kitchen one wall is bright lime green, the end wall is bright blue, the cupboards are bright yellow. I find Chileans like of bright colors refreshing and uplifting – I can't see and design consultants being so brave at home. In the middle of the kitchen is the free standing wood stove. A water jacket on chimney heats the water for the house. The toilet and bathroom are off the laundry area. In laundry there is a large packet of Rinso washing powder, a brand we haven't seen at home for over 20 years.

Outside beside the house is a bit of a shelter containing a round drum like oven. There also a similar one over the road at store and we have seen some around this part of Chile. It looks like there is a fire box underneath that heats up the oven and I guess you cook within. We haven't had the chance to see one in action however. The chickens wander around outside. It's a bit hard to tell if the chickens belong here or just wander around the town. There is a wood shed out the back with a shiny chainsaw sitting in it to remind me of jobs to come when we get back home.

There is a rifle on the shelf of my room tonight – but not the bullets. We took a relatively early night in anticipation of a big climb tomorrow.

Be Careful What You Wish For

Regolil to Cattleyard Camp

www.pppg.pictures/RegolilRvrCamp.htm

Be careful what you wish for isn't it said. If you get what you wish for do you really want it? Today was one of the best days of the whole trip for the scenery, I now have no regrets that we skipped those bits down south and came this route. There were however a couple of hours or so that were tough with two on a bike pushing uphill because the track was bad and steep. I'm sure those who came north through Largo Desierto would think it a doddle, after all most of it could be done by keen 4WD enthusiasts, indeed there is a youtube clip of some going this way in snow. The soil in parts is hardly soil, a mixture of scoria and pumice and other volcanic outpourings from eruptions of nearby Volcan Sollipulli. This means it very easily washes away and on the steep sections of track it had become a deep "V" almost impossible to get up. Alternative routes had been formed and we didn't have to do the worst bits. Going up here I couldn't help thinking how a good 20 tonne digger could sort all this out in no time with a good driver, after all the track was 4WD width. In spite of it's state and all the pushing and puffing - we got to 1400m altitude - the scenery was great and the narrow track in the forest had it's beauty especially amongst the Araucaria trees and old growth forest.

So we went up and down and up again and at the final highest point what did we see, not a grader, but a big yellow digger. He had made a huge mess of the road and widened it considerably - it really needs a grader now to sort out the surface. I have no idea what the sections that have been worked on were like before but now it's a wide highway width carved through the forest. The forest and views are there but the road has changed. It was not until the next day that we found out that the digger is going all the way through to the Reigolil end to connect the road for 4WD and bikes. So I'm kind of glad we have done it before this happens but for those who come next year maybe it will be an easier ride I suppose. Certainly the works were not expected when we started out this morning.

I was up around 7:30 feeling fine and recovered from my bug. Not having to disturb Alison as we had separate rooms I went down to the school for an Internet check. We had breakfast and were ready to leave around 8:30. The woman of the house and their young daughter had left on the early bus, something about school. I guess they want to get their daughter into some boarding school for the new year as apparently the Chilean public school system is not held in high regard. The man of the house had to make sure we got breakfast - it didn't seem like he had had to do that often. Our fellow cyclist left heading south the way we had come a few minutes before us.

It was still cold as the sun wasn't on us yet deep in the valley. The road surface was worse going out this side of town but after the first 200m we then had sun but it was low and we had shade from the trees around us denying us warmth. A couple of kilometers north of town there was a place advertising hospedaje - a pity that we didn't know about that a couple of days ago. The turnoff to the bridge was at about 4 kilometers. The road was now better as it is not used so much. It was easy going along the valley and just as we got to the river there were a couple of Fishermen camped. They had a couple of fires going against the cold of the early morning. Some of their baby salmon, only a couple of inches long were hanging to dry in a tree. There was a net on the ground with which they must have caught the salmon. Perhaps they have no rules here about such small fish or maybe they we so far from any rule enforcers that it didn't matter.

We cross back across the main river again on a small bridge. To our right is the rougher road on the eastern side of the valley that would have been a shorter route back to the bridge that we camped by a couple of nights ago. The road is still good for a couple kilometers from the bridge but at the last farm the good road veers right into the farm and a poorer track continues straight ahead. Here having the GPX route on Alison's tablet and my computer was most handy to verify that we did indeed leave the good road here and take the rougher fork.

The road then deteriorates but is still quite rideable, more of a narrow track with fences close on both sides (I can't see how it's wide enough for the big digger to be able to come out on this track). Another

couple of kilometers and we come to a gate at the entrance to the park and then not much further on the Carabineros post. The fellow there is friendly but asks us a few questions - where are we going? You can go to Argentina this way and for a few kilometers the track parallels the border hardly a kilometer away but almost as much higher above on the ridge line. Do we know the track? he asks - yes we had the GPS route. Where are we from and our names - nothing is written down. We shake hands and are on our way. Across the grass to the track which starts severely rutted and washed out, a sign says no vehicles even though it is wide enough and clearly vehicles have used it in the past.

The short first climb is on broken rock but then things get better, we are able to ride a bit but with stops because it is so steep. After just under a kilometer we pass a small farm house with some flatter open grassy ground. We continue another half a kilometer until the junction to the track to Laguna Huaiquifilo, I had once thought we might camp there but a sign says no camping but we wouldn't be heading there today anyway. Its clear 4WD drive vehicles have been here in the recent past. There is a sign saying no vehicles or boats on the lake, no hunting and no fires. You would have to be keen to try and get a boat up here. It's time for a cup of tea as we've been going nearly 2 hours. Our initial pace was slow but not tiring on the ripio but a rest is much appreciated.

It's then down steeply to cross the river out of Laguna Huaiquifilo. We walk down on the steep track, it's slipperiness due to a mixture of loose fine scoria and leaves fallen from the trees. At the bottom is a good solid bridge but just after it are some rotten logs in a bit of stream. Then it's 300m of stiff climbing starting with two on a bike (both pushing). We dip down into another stream and up the other side is another gate. On the other side we are in the open on a flatter area and there is another small farm house with a couple of young children outside. We wave but I guess that they are shy of strangers living in such an isolated place and keep their distance.

After that it's a bit flat and grassy and some boggy bits on the track before we come to a steep climb out of here. We don't quite realize what we are in for now. You can see it on the elevation profile on the map and we had Carl's track but it's not until you are there that you realize just how steep it really is. It's two on a bike for quite a bit now. The track is steep and deeply eroded. Eventually we get leveler but there are roots and erosion so we keep pushing, two to a bike - it's slow going up and back for the other bike. This short section takes well over an hour with pushing and resting. Eventually things level out and we can ride some bits but only for every short bits in the tens of meters before roots or erosion stop us. The very worst is half a kilometer in the beginning and after about a kilometer of climbing we've gained 180 meters of altitude.

We come to a level area among the large Araucaria trees about 1:30 so we decide that it's time to have a lunch stop. These trees still have an exotic appeal to us. Rested we move on and it's flatter for a bit but there are so many roots and eroded bits we don't get much riding and there are still bits requiring two on a bike but they are thankfully shorter. Another kilometer of this and I see a junction and what looks like a more constructed road ahead. There is a sign on a tree and when I get to the other side to read it it says "Argentina", this is the junction with the road to Argentina - well it's not much of a road now but it's wider and flatter than what we have been on.

We had to make this high point for the junction and we are now high above our river in the valley below. Nevertheless we are now sitting on the saddle again running downhill. We get slowed by some eroded bits but we are now making good progress for the next few kilometers. We come to a gully and on both sides the pumice is hugely deep on the side of the track and has collapsed almost blocking it. We can see a white camioneta parked on the track ahead and some people there. We can pass the blockage easily but a 4WD would be on a precipitous side angle and unable to pass if it tried. This must be why the route is now closed to vehicles. In the head of the gully there are huge boulders but have been sort of flattened so that a high vehicle could cross. On the other side the track has been recut through pumice to vehicle width and has been used but for now it seems pointless with the uphill side impassable to vehicles, maybe this blockage is more recent. The white camioneta and the people are gone by the time we are across a few minutes later. At least this must mean much better road ahead, the worst must be over.

We roll down a little more in the open but soon come into forest and start climbing gently again appreciating the shade we now have. A kilometer after our highest point we come down to a bit of a side valley and several large trees have recently fallen over the track. They have been cleared and the track rebuilt, burying one of the trees. A new gate has been built and we go through it with a very short sharp climb. We are among forest again but now we must continue for another 2 kilometers of reasonable climbing to reach the actual pass at the head of the valley. It's mostly rideable, some steep sections need pushing for tired legs. There is one big muddy puddle, recently stirred up by the camioneta and consequently too murky to judge it's depth but the side is firm for feet if not room for a bike. The bike wheels show the water is about 6 inches deep.

Our drinking water is getting low with all our pushing we have drunk more than usual to replace lost sweat. We come to a nice clear stream running in a rocky bed beside the road where we take a break to filter some water to fill our bottles. There is a bit of a road on the other side of the creek and there are signs of a bridge long washed away. We wonder what the road could have been for – probably logging. Carrying on we climb a 20 meter section of road that is built on a pile of large logs filling a swampy section. The logs are really rotting and we have to wonder how much longer this section will last like this. We climb on with stops to admire the scenery but we are in forest with huge Araucaria trees now and don't seem to get clear views of the magnificent almost sheer mountains around us.

It's at the very top we see the big yellow digger blocking the track. It has stopped for refueling. We try and chat a bit with one of the men – we still aren't good with this regional Chilean Spanish. It seems that I waved to him and his son from our riverside camp at Reigolil! He tells us the short bit we see is the bad bit and it gets better. We move on and he is right - the more the work crew have driven up and down on their workings the more the loose dirt had been compacted and it's not bad running downhill with care. They have sure widened it for the future though. There's a very short section seemingly untouched but that's about all.

About 1.3 kilometers down we dip into a side river with a short climb out and soon in another kilometer or so downhill we reach the river level in the flat-bottomed valley where the track winds along beside the river, at river bed level. In one place a new track has been built but it's too boggy so the old riverbed track had been worked on for us to follow. Then we come to our first ford. We are not sure how many fords that we will have to cross so take our shoes off. It's wide and calf deep. Over the other side and along a bit we see three gauchos on horses who are checking cattle. There is a bit of a corral and an old shelter off the track.

We carry on in the river bed and come to what seems a dead end by the river but realize that we cross again where we are standing. But there is cliff just over there on the other side so where does the road go? Then we realize next that we have to cross back again almost immediately. Across we go on the twin fords and then another 100m and we cross back again. I decide that I might as well get my shoes wet after all as we are mucking around a lot taking them on and off for each ford. We are now looking for a spot to camp - where we saw the Gauchos back a bit it was grassy and level and would have been OK but now it's a wide flat but almost marshy and covered in rushes. The road hasn't been worked on here, we have been along the river bed for about 5 kilometers and now it's just a rocky track and it is here that Alison's seat clamp bolt breaks. We go a hundred or so meters more to the gate ahead and then through it but looking at what could be done to fix it we realize it might take a while.

We look about and back the way we came we see the cattleyards over by the river. We might as well camp over at the yards on what looks to be better grassy ground. There were used wheel tracks through the rushes and we headed over and the problem was the choice of suitable spots, not the lack. Judging by the pile of cans and rubbish the area had been a camp recently. We are setting up camp when one of the Gauchos comes out of the river on his horse near us, he's not concerned about us camping and we wave, it's all very friendly but he carries on without stopping.

It's after 5 by now, it's been a long day. We put up our rope as a drying line using one of the 4 inch nails that I picked up way back. I check out where we are from the GPS and realize the Eco camp is less than a kilometer on. We are fine here, we are not moving on now. Alison has a bit of an explore and in the bushes

she discovers that we even have a toilet – it's a double seater and what's more and open to the fresh air. Someone has recently cut some bushy branches and placed around it for a bit of privacy but they are drying off. Our tent is erected beside a shelter standing here. It's made of slabwood however the end is made of large stacked squared logs from which the outer slabs have been removed. There must have been more trees here on the flat once and people must have gone to the effort to get some kind of a mill up here. The roofing timbers of the hut have rotted and it is partially collapsed but the corrugated iron is still there. Inside are bits and pieces indicating that the hut must have been used by Gauchos working up here. More recently there is fresh rubbish outside from recent campers. The cattleyards are made of old logs piled up to make the fences and these are now rotting away. The river is quite close but the satellite imagery we have is a few years old and shows it about 30 meters away. Much more erosion and the old hut will go into the river and that can be seen by an updated satellite pass taken only a few weeks before we were here.

The tent is pitched near the old hut partially under a tree and we have one of the old square cut logs for a bit of a seat or maybe a table. We wash ourselves gingerly on the steep slippery edge of the chilly stream and one of the spots where there is a bit of a gap in the cut in bank. We do need a good wash after the afternoons hard work, we are dusty and sweaty. It's a quick fallback meal of instant mash with pumpkin soup added - nutritious if not exactly haute cuisine. The workers from the digger go down in their camioneta about 6:00 with people standing in the back, they are full, we couldn't have got a ride with them even if we had begged. We are still at 1200m, 250 off our high today and even though it's clouding up a bit we expect cold in the night. I spend some time on working out how to fix Alison's broken seat in the what spare time we have before dark.

It was great scenery today - the best of trip maybe in some ways, lots of photos for our biggest page in our journal even if it couldn't be photographed as we saw it.

Makeshift Repairs for a Big Downhill

Cattleyard Camp to Melipueco

www.pppg.pictures/RvrCampMelipueco.htm

A Kiwi bloke, it was once reckoned, could fix anything with a piece of number 8 wire. Number 8 wire is hard to find these days although I did buy a roll a few years ago. At 1/8 inch in diameter it is thicker and softer than modern thinner high tensile wire that is used for fencing these days. It is also very hard to find in the mountains of Chile. There are however fences of barbed wire and some strands from a piece grown into a tree by our campsite would have to suffice. Additionally a 4 inch nail is about the same diameter as number 8 wire and I had three picked up weeks ago. The problem: Alison's seat post bolt had broken again and we were 25 kilometers from town on a steep gravel road. I shouldn't have been so cocky the other day in using the spare clamp - the diameter of the clamp didn't quite match the diameter of where it sits on the post, a recipe for trouble. So a temporary lash-up job was done on the seat clamp. Luckily the nail was a flat head style and not jolt head so it slipped in place of the bolt being held by its wide head. Then it was bent over but not as tight as I would have liked. A strand from the barbed wire was then threaded around and the ends twisted together to tighten it up. Then a length of our spare rope was wound around numerous times to add extra strength. Firm but a bit sloppy it was all we had to go with for the descent ahead.

It was a few minutes before 8 before I emerged from the tent, it was cold, the sun hadn't reached us above the range of mountains separating us from Argentina. While we were under a tree for a bit of shelter out in the rushes there was frost on the ground. It was nearly an hour more before the sun reached us and Alison managed to stay in the tent for that time while I made breakfast and started the packing process. Normally I do the breakfast while Alison packs away the sleeping bags and mats and sorts her stuff in the tent and when she is done I'm about ready to finish my stuff in the tent. I had the fly off the tent and on the fence around the cattle yards to dry before reentering the tent today. With some final work on Alison's seat it was our usual 2 hours from rising until departure just on 10:00.

It had warmed up with the sun as we went out to the gate. A sign proclaimed private road. Certainly mister digger had done nothing here, indeed it was a wonder he was able to get along this narrow dirt road between the trees and in parts we could see his tracks up on both edges of the muddy ruts of the road simultaneously proving that he was wider than the road. Through a gate and there is a house just off the road that looks like it is where our gauchos are based. We soon came to our last ford by the eco camp. A gate at our end of a swing bridge beside the ford was locked with a massive chain and padlock but it looked a bit too swingy for a bike anyway. The crossing was about knee deep. On the other side the eco camp is on the side of a small lake. It's possibly formed by some terminal moraine from a recent glaciation because here our flat valley ends and we begin a rapid 600 meter descent.

Just after the camp we have a little climb amongst trees which is quite pretty. Then the descent began in earnest. There is a very steep section on a rocky scoria covered road with washed ruts in places. We even walked down some bits because of the surface and steepness. Very soon there at the side of the road was a platform perched on the vertical edge of the canyon overlooking the river below and we stopped to admire a waterfall from it.

In less than a kilometer we reached the park camping area where we talked to a couple of park rangers. That's where we learned that the digger was going all the way through to the Regolil end of the track. There were some bikes there, some young Chilenos going through tomorrow from where we have come, not today however. There are walks up Volcan Sollipulli from here and that's what they are doing today. Another half a kilometer and the road was better and then there were farms on the other side of the river and the road was even better for riding. There were several more waterfall view stops on the way down. There is an intersection and we stopped again to admire the tumbling river below the bridge on the side road. There were spectacular views to the main valley seemingly vertically below us. The road is better and we had not such a bad descent for a while with views of the valley floor below but the final kilometer or so we had some incredibly steep sections and the surface was rough. Uphill traffic couldn't help but churn the surface so we eventually walked

down parts after riding for short bits and stopping to rest brakes and brake hands.

The grade eased off and once on the valley floor we initially had a gentle downhill slope following the river beside us and riding the gravel road wasn't too bad. A bit after the intersection to a road out to the main road we crossed a bridge. Here we stopped as it was 12:00 and I got out the stove to toast up our day old breads to have with tuna for first lunch.

After that we had gravel road that could best be described as monotonous for a few kilometers on the valley floor. Then the road moved up onto the side of the valley, a small climb showed how tired that we were from yesterday. The view below was of very flat almost swampy farmland, all the houses were on the bottom slope of the hill just off the valley floor. There was a good reason for winding the road along the hill but our legs were in no mood for some of the short climbs we struck. Alison walked most of the climbs, not wanting to put strain on the lashup seatpost bindings and spent most of the downhill standing on her pedals. Up and down a bit for 8 kilometers then at an intersection we turn north and then run on a very gravelly road for a kilometer to finally reach the main sealed road. It's then 5 kilometers more into Melipeuco on smooth asphalt. With a couple of kilometers to go there is a car park area and some information boards where lava flows from an eruption of Volcan Llaima several hundred years ago cross the road so we stop for a look.

We passed several camping and hospedaje places on the way into town but we had read that this place we have ended up in was good and so we stopped when we reached it. It was only 2pm but we were ready to call it a day anyway as it had got hot and this is where we planned to be – there's nowhere else for us to go today. My lashup had held out without much deterioration although the seat alignment kept changing a bit, at least we were here. A shower and second lunch - steak salad and chips a couple of blocks down from the hostel. The rest of the day was spent just resting, journal writing and deciding on what to do next.

Our room is one of several in a row off a courtyard at the back of the hostel, more like motel rooms. We are opposite the main kitchen and dining area. While the owners use the kitchen themselves we are able to use it and there are more rooms inside. The Señora is very friendly and made sure that her husband looked at our bike problem when he got home from work. Although we only need a bolt it has to be a special bolt unlikely to be attainable here. Time was spent on the Internet locating bike shops in Temuco so that tomorrow we go to Temuco for another new seatpost.

So you want to go through this route? I'm not sure which way is best for you but this was best for us. For our big climb we had just over 350m to climb from the Carabineros to the track junction and then the climb to the pass was another 100m but easy going. From Regolil to the Carabineros was 100m but so gentle it wasn't a problem. We went the main road way but from the bridge on the south side of Regolil would have been shorter on a poorer road. Coming south from the valley floor to the eco camp is a 700m climb and from the river to the pass is about 200m of steeper climbing. At least our climb was in shade although once widened who knows. I guess we just put two on a bike and pushed - the other alternative would have been to unload some panniers at times but that would have been a pain as there would have been plenty of on and off. Younger, fitter and more lightly loaded could do it alone I guess especially after the digger had been through. If you come from Regolil you could take some misturns - the rule is keep to the river at branches. Coming south it would be hard to go wrong anywhere - don't go the Argentina way!

Bike Shop Hunting

Temuco and Back

www.pppg.pictures/Temuco.htm

We woke around 7:00 with the rooms next door stirring for an early departure. Not having anything to do we were up and to an early breakfast as the other rooms were also up for an early start meaning breakfast was available at what we would consider an unusually early time here. That made us realize that we could make the 8:30 bus. I wandered down the street about 7:55 to find the 8:00 bus about to go and the next at 8:45 - the timetable had changed this year from what our host knew. We weren't ready for the 8:00 bus so worked for the 8:45 departure for which we were at the stop in plenty of time.

Off we went stopping in an hour at the terminal at Cunco (more or less half way) for five or ten minutes to lose and gain passengers. We had thought in our original planning that we may have ended up here, it looks a country town with not much for the tourist. I had an eye on the next section for riding as we may have ridden it. It was gently rolling hill country, not too hard but with plenty of spots to work up a bit of sweat. We finally arrived in Temuco about 11. Now we stayed on the bus to the terminal so we would know where to catch the return bus. Silly us for making the assumption that the return bus would leave from where our incoming bus ended. We asked about departure times and were told the bus left 5 blocks down the street. We realized a lot of people had actually got off at the roadside stop back there. That was the general terminal for local departures of all companies, we had ended up at the company terminal - more for long distance departures with them.

So then we headed off to find the bike shop. The one we were looking for was at 602 San Martin. What Google doesn't realize is that they have the crazy numbering system - 0602 is west from the main avenue and 602 is east, the numbers going in the opposite direction. Google maps showed us 0602 when I entered 602 so we ended up walking the wrong way wasting a couple of kilometers before realizing the mistake and heading back to 602. The shop had some flash seatposts so we bought one with two bolts - surely that's a harder challenge to break - and I have compatible spares. Heading back through the center of downtown to the bus station we passed the bank district around the main Plaza for some money (note that Alison later found the cash machine in Melipueco across from the plaza). Then we came across the big indoor, mainly fish, market where there were lots of small restaurants so we had lunch there. Then a few blocks north and east we came to the main bus station where lots of companies leave from for local services. We got our tickets ½ an hour before departure and were well down the back. So at 2:30 we set off and with more stopping for drop offs get back a bit before 5. The new seatpost was fitted in a few minutes and we are ready to roll again.

For our evening meal we indulged with some canned strawberries and a 1 liter pack of 3 chocolates icecream. I think we forgot that we had an icecream after lunch in Temuco. With the decision to stay another day here we decided that we could buy big pack and keep it in the freezer for an extra day. We continue our pattern of spartan fare on the road and indulgences in the towns.

When we woke this morning the wind was strong from Argentina - we are used to it being the other way. At times a sheet of iron nearby was banging because it was so strong. We were glad not to be biking into it. As we bussed to Temuco the wind dropped and in Temuco it was calm and hot. When we returned we returned into the wind. It was hard to see Volcan Llaima in the dust and haze blown from Argentina until we got closer to Melipueco. It didn't feel like much of a rest day and the forecast was for the same tomorrow. We weren't organized enough for an early start tomorrow so decided to call a rest day tomorrow. We have decided to go north through the Conguillio National Park. Alison has decided that her knee is feeling OK so we will take on the challenge. It is a high route between Volcans Llaima and Sierra Nevada and we want an early start to beat the heat for the big climb. So as tomorrow is a rest day and I'll catch up with writing our journal.

The Wind Is Against Us

Melipeuco rest day

www.pppg.pictures/Melipeuco.htm

The wind wasn't so strong this morning but still enough to make us happy we weren't moving on. Without noisy neighbors we didn't wake until nearly 8. The Senora here is very friendly and made us some eggs for breakfast which was a welcome change. The standard breakfast here is breads, jam, cheese and maybe some cold ham and coffee. We can also cook here in the kitchen so will do tonight.

For lunch we headed out to the Saltos de Triful, a waterfall 5 kilometers out of town. There's not much shade for a picnic so we ate under a tree on the side of the dusty road at the entrance to the carpark there. As I headed back Alison decided to take her time and pick some of the ripe blackberries to go with our remaining icecream that we had bought last night. She made sure to pick these on the sides of the sealed main road and not the dusty roads remembering the warning about Hanto virus.

In the afternoon we walked a few blocks down to the stalls at the plaza. No doubt they hope to attach custom from passing traffic. Among the usual tourist stuff were a few food stalls and we bought a few treats.

As usual on a rest day I took the chance to catch up on my journal. For our evening meal we cooked spaghetti bolognese with sauteed vegetables. For anyone traveling here it's hard to find minced/ground beef fresh. The small places don't have it but you might see it fresh in large supermarkets in small towns. In these small places you need to find it frozen in small plastics bag/tubes of 250gms, look or ask for carne molida. It's taken us almost the whole trip to work this out! I've cooked plenty of leftovers for tomorrow.

North into Mordor

Melipeuco to Lago Conguillo

www.pppg.pictures/MelipeucoLagoConguillo.htm

It seemed like a good idea, perhaps it was the only idea. We decided that it made sense to go only as far as Lago Conguillo today - camping is available here so we would have a nice camping site with facilities. To go all the way through in one day would be a big ask on legs still tired from our haul a few days back in spite of a couple of rest days. Also we would be hitting the last steep ascent at the hottest time of the day and for what - the next camping is quite a bit further on and then it would be a very short day to Curacautin. We are here so see and experience things not just push out the kilometers. So we got here about 2, we passed through the camping areas but were directed to camping reception - about half a kilometer on in the end, down a side road beside the lake, not exactly near the camping itself. We got there and eventually we were allocated a site so we headed there to find it occupied. One of the park staff happened along and there was some discussion on what to do. In the end we opted to go on a corner of the site under some trees, the alternative being in the open on scoria gravel. What we didn't take into account when coming here were several factors. The summer has finally come right for Chile, this is Saturday and schools aren't back for a few weeks yet - and that this lake seems very popular. So we were surprised to find so many people here - and so many tents. We were told 11pm is quiet time and our site is at the end of the bunch so it should be quiet for a cyclist's early night. We weren't expecting it to be so expensive - nearly half the price of a hostel or hospedaje - but maybe that's foreigners rates. We also had to pay an entry fee to come into the park earlier which was a hit to our pockets already. When we started out this morning we were only really going one way - up, sure there was to be some down but we haven't done many days of such relentless up so we hoped for an early start.

Again our place was quiet in the morning so it wasn't until about 7:45 that we stirred. We were already partially packed from the night before so by the time we had breakfast including eggs again from the Senora (she likes to spoil us) it was a bit before 9 that we rolled out the gate. Being Saturday there weren't so many shops open yet for bread and we headed in the opposite way to that which we needed to leave town to get our bread. By the time we passed back again with our purchases a couple of shops had their signs out - it just doesn't pay to be too early here on a Saturday. Heading out of town there seemed to be a get together of local Mapuche at a site just east of town where there were temporary covered stalls like those we had seen at the fair a week or so ago. There were many men on horses in traditional garb. This explained the blowing of bugles and drums that had earlier in the morning roused us from our slumbers.

Three kilometers to the turnoff and the road was sealed and climbing gently. Then after a couple of kilometers we had some steep climbs and some downs. It was pleasant through treed farming country giving us shade from the early sun. There was one place with old farm equipment and bullock carts on display and a bit of a café but we carried on.

Eight kilometers from the turnoff we got amongst scoria from the old eruption and a kilometer later reached the park entrance. Our asphalt had ended. Here we had to pay, I'm not sure how they worked out the rates, we got less than the foreigners rate listed on the board outside - maybe because we were just passing through. We had a drink and a bite to eat at one of the picnic tables before continuing.

The seal had ended but we had a kilometer on a good dirt road through the last of the forest although it was steep in places. Then we came out into scoria country, all open with no trees for shade and the day was heating up under a blue sky and we faced a stretch in the open. It lasted about 8 kilometers, rising gently and sometimes with steep bits. Along this section we had good clear views of Volcan Lanin to the west and the mountains to the east all around. Some photos on the Internet show the road as a track through scoria but now it has all had a good layer of river gravel and clay on it. It is quite corrugated - dare I say it needs a grader. It was plod along on the consistent grade in the sun. At one stop a friendly Chilean family were interested in us and had photos taken of them with us. Moving on we took a rest where there was a tree a bit off the road for shade at 18 kilometers where we had a drink before coming to Laguna Verde.

We stopped at 12:30 for lunch at the end of the scoria section where there was a shady parking area and the beginning of a walking track to the lake. Just as we were about to start off again a young Chileano couple passed unloaded on 29er's. Just round the bend they were walking up where we could ride! So much for youth! We then entered forest on the side of the hill on the boundary of the scoria. Here the scoria flow had hit the other side of the valley and the road was built mainly just inside the forest but occasionally was bounded on one side by the scoria. It was quite pleasant and the road turned to a solid dirt surface. It was smooth and rutted in some places but generally good riding.

After a few kilometers we came to Laguna Arcoiris, a small clear blue lake where the scoria flow had stopped and blocked the valley damming it to create the lake. Lots of locals were stopped there as we did to admire the view and the clear water of the lake and the sunken logs in the water. Then a kilometer or so with some climbs that needed walking for short sections and we left the larger forest to more scrubby forest for a final more gentle climb over a bit of a saddle to Lago Conguillo.

Nearing the lake we came to a sign saying Playa Linda (pretty beach) and several dozen cars parked. We thought we should investigate as we had plenty of time. Starting down the track we came across Ivan and his family again that we had met earlier having their lunch in the shade. They insisted on offering us juice and sopaipillas. How could we refuse such generosity and although appreciated we had just had a drink. After talking with them a little we went on down the track to the beach but I think we gave up before finding where most of the people from all the cars were. Although there was plenty of beach to be seen it was hard to know just where the best bit was and we could only see a handful of people by the waters edge. Not seeing a real way down we scrambled over large rocks to reach the beach but we didn't stay long before starting our return. Even here along the track there were large cut stumps indicating that the original forest had been cut at some time in the past.

Back on the road it was 3 kilometers further down to the camping area. The road base was fine volcanic sand and we had to watch we didn't run into the ruts hidden by soft and deceptively deep sand. Along here we both had some close calls nearly coming off with our wheels sliding out from under us.

Dropping down and across a small bridge we came to some camping facilities and tents beside the road. We saw a young woman in ranger uniform who told us we must go on a few hundred meters more on the road and then down a side road to the park office. Finally there and not looking forward to coming back up and out again we had to walk on past the end of the road and parking area to a new park building under construction to find the office where we are allocated a tent site and pay. Not in a mood to get straight back on the bikes and having plenty of time Alison went down to the lake for a swim while I sat in the shade on the decking around the new buildings for a while. Then finally we set off to backtrack uphill and back down the road to get to our camp So much for efficiency that I credit Chile with.

We get to our camp site around 4:00 and see that another tent is occupying the main area. We wonder what to do. One of the staff passes and can't offer us much help and we decided to park a bit off the main area under the trees where the space is just large enough for the tent. This seems fine as the main area is just loose scoria which is quite sharp and unpleasant under the tent, After getting everything set up I eventually went down to the lake for a walk. Coming back half an hour later I was a little unsure where to go as I couldn't seem to recognize our spot and then I realize that the tent next to ours had gone. The owners had returned, a bit miffed we were on their site as well but Alison showed them our receipt that I had asked for our site number to be written on (I get a told you so type moment). Then it turned out that the site they had been allocated a couple of spaces along had still been occupied when they arrived so they just moved to this one. Their allocated site was now free so they had shifted their tent.

As evening set in the clouds built on the mountains around the other side of the lake and we heard thunder but the possibility of forecast rain never eventuated. For our meal we heated up the second half of our Spag Bol and vege from last night and had a quiet evening. I have to say the showers were great, plenty of pressure. Although we were at 1100 meters it was still warm and the night ended up as one of our warmest tent nights although evening cloud cleared and it cooled a bit by morning. No doubt the sun's heat stored in the black

scoria around us helped. There were plenty of people about and some noise continued until late but we were at the most distant point in our little area so we were relatively quiet.

Dust, Dust and More Dust

Lago Conguillo to Curacautin

www.pppg.pictures/LagoConguilloCuracautin.htm

We deserved a beer, well we had a beer, we thought we deserved a beer. Dust, dust and more dust. Beer may not purge the dust physically but psychologically it helps. We found out yesterday how popular Lago Conguillo was to camp, today we found out even more. The traffic seemed to be streaming there. We thought that we would be on a quiet back country road but today is Sunday and where better to go on a summer Sunday than a lake. At times there were four cars in a row stirring up the dust, Some would slow and pass us carefully so as not to envelop us in their dust. Others neither realizing nor caring would just race past us raising an impenetrable dust cloud. Some days on the road we don't see much traffic, today was the opposite. The first order on reaching our hostel in Curacautin was a shower and washing our dusty clothes. We knew when we set out early this morning we had a dirt road all the way but didn't expect this.

It was 7:55 by the time we stirred in the tent. The days are getting shorter and we are further north, it's taking a bit to adjust to. The sun was nearly creeping over the ridge line as I left the tent and soon it was pushing its warming rays through the trees upon us. Hardly any of the many locals were up, certainly not in packing mode. I tried to dry the fly a bit by draping it over some bushes but we really didn't have time for this. We surprised ourselves by being ready to roll by 9:30, an hour and a half, a record. We wanted to get up our first hill before it got warm.

The first hill started almost immediately we left our camp, we knew this and we knew it was steep for ½ a kilometer or more. The road was solid dirt so it was a good surface but I biked short bits, resting in between and Alison walked, each making the same progress more or less. It then eased from super steep to steep and after about a kilometer it had eased to a hard climb. We got a respite of easy going after 1 ½ kilometers but then another steep bit and steady climbing. All this time we were going through untouched forest of mixed Nothofagus and Araucaria. It was very pretty when we had a chance to appreciate it. Up and a little down a couple of times then another steep section signaled the top - nearly an hour to do 4 kilometers. As we progressed so did the "improvements" to the road - more and more rounded river shingle on the surface making tough traction for cyclists on the steep bits. After the top the surface was pretty much all shingle on the dirt making the steep downhill tricky with the need to concentrate all the time.

A couple of kilometers after the top we reached Laguna Captrén, a very pretty little lake. There we stopped for a break having been going a bit over an hour by now a lot of which was puffing uphill. We walked the start of a longer track around the lake. We know another cyclist had camped here but there are no facilities, not even a toilet or at least one that we could find. We had a bit to eat and drink before starting out again.

The downhill continued and a couple of hundred meters further on we came to the park boundary, the boundary between the forest and the northern scoria fields of Volcan Llaima. Here in spite of the surface we were running downhill well. With downhill speed on a rough road we had little time to appreciate the scenery but it wasn't as pretty as yesterday. The surface improved after we left the scoria and we soon reached a junction in the road with a sign saying 20 kilometers to Curacautin. It was nearly 12:00 so we decided to look for a place to stop for a first lunch and soon spotted a track that led off the road towards shade and a creek. It was a pleasant spot for a short break under some shade and a creek to sit beside. So it was a bit after 12:15 we were back on the road looking forward to a second lunch in Curacautin. The rolling down was good but we soon had a short climb out of a river - pretty much how the rest of the road went, consistently losing height but with some ups and downs.

By now the traffic was building. While the road was generally shaded by trees either side we were running through rolling farmland and fields of grain, some harvested, some not and in one the harvest was in progress. It is pretty dry now and the dust was getting to us from the traffic, a slight headwind along the road was not blowing the dust off the road so it took a while to clear. Eventually Alison decided she needed to put on her

orange vest to be seen better. A couple of hundred meters later around a curve and across a bridge was asphalt - so recent as not to be seen on google earth imagery. It was a very pleasant surprise for the last 6 kilometers into town.

We rolled down the main street to a hostel recommended by Lonely Planet, there were signs for other places as well. Here we got a very nice double room with private bathroom for not that much more than a bunk room bed with shared bathroom. Here they hire bikes and arrange rafting trips on the Rio Cautin from a small office on the corner of our building. Outside on the wall there is a big banner in opposition to plans to dam the Rio Cautin, the river that we will follow tomorrow. There is even a Patagonia Sin Represas sticker on the window here.

A couple of doors down the street we had a late lunch before a bit of a rest. Later in the afternoon a couple of local cyclists from Valparaiso rolled in - Alison had met them in Melipeuco. As our tent and fly were still a bit wet and dusty and there was a large yard with a hose out the back I took the opportunity to wash them and get good drying in the afternoon sun. We washed the worst dust of the trip off our clothes.

I found the location of the Unimarc supermarket (a Chilean chain) on the Internet, this town is big enough to have a real supermarket - and a cash machine. It was only a couple of blocks away so I went to get a bottle of juice. I spotted some mushrooms so when we went back for some real shopping later in the evening we got the mushrooms and some bacon and eggs for the morning. We wanted some bread but there was a big queue waiting at the bakery bins. We waited and soon enough the ovens were emptied into the bins but everyone dived in and it was all gone and we had missed out. We realized we had to play the game for the next load. We saw the next load go in the oven and the time set and we counted down the minutes, 10 or so, from the front of the growing milling queue - not that we'd think it a queue, it was not ordered. Anyway when the time came we were at the front and got our bread and with the rest of our purchases were off to the checkout.

Now Curacautin is at the mouth of a wide valley going into the mountains. To the west is the large rolling central plain area around Temuco and to the east mountains. All afternoon after we had arrived clouds had been brooding in the mountains. We were almost exactly on the cloud boundary, fine to the west and to the east we could no longer see mountains. We had heard rolls of distant thunder for a while. As we walked down the street almost directly under the cloud boundary there was a huge clap and crackle of thunder directly above us. I've never been under thunder so directly, it was incredible and around us car and other alarms were set off. It wasn't for a couple more days that we discovered the amount of rain that this storm dropped in the mountains and that made us realize how lucky our timing was for us to be here tonight.

Back at the hostel we ate a light meal and went to bed late. It was hot and humid, not exactly the early night we wanted for a 60 kilometer uphill ride tomorrow which we hoped to do before it got too hot.

This route was a late addition to the plan, Alison's knee had been playing up and I didn't think we would be up to it. We had planned a more direct way to Lonquimay but were told the saddle we would have to pass isn't sealed yet. In spite of the tough going we enjoyed this section and it comes highly recommended.

Crossing Mountains the Easy Way by Tunnel

Curacautin to Lonquimay

www.pppg.pictures/CuracautinLonquimay.htm

The Lonely Planet was once a bit of a bible for travelers, we have the digital version with us for Chile. It did us well last night in Curacautin and were happy to end up in a place that got a good writeup in it. Today in Lonquimay there was nothing recommended, Lonquimay is not exactly on the usual tourist route. Somewhere on the Internet Alison had come across a recommended place here so we sought it out. Well we thought it over priced and not as good by far as our hostel of last night. It advertised as a hostel but the accommodation was above a restaurant so you couldn't cook - something we usually expect in a hostel. The rooms were small and none had private bathrooms - something we have had for less recently. So we went back towards the entrance to town where we had seen a place that advertised itself as a hostel/hospedaje. There we found a very nice room, albeit without baño privado but otherwise fine. You have to wonder when a place gets a recommendation on the Internet that the prices go up. Anyway it is hard to know what you will get with hostel/hospedaje. Here we can use the kitchen if we want. The bedrooms are nice and the bathrooms excellent as places we have stayed go. The rooms are on the top floor of the house and the stairs go up through the living room. The place is run by an older couple who live downstairs. Really she keeps the place far too nice and well presented for the likes of us. Their family area where breakfast is served is full of homely things, nice furniture, family photos and knickknacks, and all the things of a family home - we almost feel like intruders there but that's the way they choose to make their guests at home. Other places like Melipeuco it feels more like the owners live in a section of their business. In Curacautin it was clearly a hostel - the owners lived in a building adjacent to the hostel and didn't use the hostel kitchen. Neither is better, just different but you can't tell what you are getting from the sign, the Internet or the Lonely Planet description. Here though the place is so tidy and clean and the rooms well appointed we feel out of place as grubby smelly cyclists. That's not to say that we were particularly grubby today after our own bathroom for a shower before we set out on the road this morning.

We woke rather late. It was hot in the night after the heat yesterday. We had kept the window open to let air in and that meant keeping the curtain open so a street light shone in. Then this morning it was misty down to ground level so it wasn't until 7:55 that we stirred - so much for an early start. Our own good shower was too good a chance to miss before we left, we never know what is coming next. Having seen and bought some mushrooms in the supermarket yesterday I had eggs and bacon lined up to cook for our most gourmet breakfast of the tour. The leftovers made a sandwich for later. So it was with surprise that it was only 9:30 when we were ready to roll. I suppose we hadn't unpacked much yesterday being in a room and we didn't have to pack the tent.

It was a bit chill for the locals with the mist but we headed out anyway soon warming up as we began the long ascent for today, gently enough but consistent. In the mist we passed a machinery yard with lots of old steam boilers parked up rusting away by the road. These were reminder of days gone by but there was plenty of modern machinery in the yard as well.

We had been told before we left that the mist would clear. Sure enough by about 4 kilometers the mist was breaking and by 5 kilometers it had almost gone and by 10 the sun was out kilometers it was getting hot. The road was quite treed and shady at first. We actually had quite a bit to climb and lose today and as we went up the valley each side river gave us a bit of a challenge, every time we had a down into a river we knew that a climb would follow. At times the road was beside the old railway line route to Lonquimay with embankments and abandoned bridges. At one side road I divert for a few minutes to look at the Rio Cautin in it's rocky gorge below the suspension bridge. We saw occasional signs protesting the plans to build a dam on the river in this area where it is rather pretty and popular for rafting. We then climbed a section of the road above the river in a gorge below and came out onto some flat land and the village of Manzanar where we stopped a few minutes.

Further on and at 21 kilometers we came to sign saying pedestrian crossing ahead - WTF we think, this is

a highway. The mystery was solved soon enough. Parts of the old railway line that went up the valley had been made into a cycleway and there were crossing places where it crossed the highway. We stopped as it was a bit shady and while we were having a bite to eat a group of cyclists on a tour came through. Sure enough a car stopped for them to cross the road! I'm not sure that would happen at home. We thought about pulling our bikes up the steep gravel to the track but decided not to and carried on with a climb on the road. I'm sure the railway would have been a better gradient but without a map or anything we didn't know where it began or ended - we never saw any signs, just a few more crossings along the road. Perhaps we should have been more observant back at Manzanar.

The traffic wasn't bad most of the time but we were passed by some long trucks including asphalt tankers - there must be road sealing somewhere ahead on the way to Argentina. There wasn't much of a shoulder, perhaps there was one once but an overtop reseal of 4 inches of asphalt made a sudden edge even if there was old asphalt going wider. It's nice to have a shoulder when there are big trucks about.

There were several waterfalls just off the road but we couldn't be bothered having a look preferring to keep going before it got too hot. For half a kilometer or so the valley was narrow and the river in a pretty gorge below. I can see why the locals would not like to see the river flooded by a dam. We did stop briefly a couple of times where bridges crossed the river and it was in a gorge below. Another 10 kilometers from our stop brought us to Malalcahuello, a small town off the main road. Alison had seen a sign for a restaurant with pizza a while back and had decided that was what she wanted for lunch so we were aiming for it. There were several other places offering food along the way and it was actually well past the town 2½ kilometers later when we saw the sign to the place we were looking for down a gravel side road.

It was after 12 now so we thought we would buy lunch here today. Down a gravel road a couple of hundred meters we turned off at a sign into some welcome shade. The place was called Café Almacén. As soon as I walked in the woman asked me "Sprechen Sie Deutsch, Alemania?". I said no to both, "New Zealand". We often get asked if we are German, there are lots of German tourists on bikes and I guess being ethnically European we look German enough so it's often the first question that we are asked. The pizza was pleasant enough but on pre-prepared bases it didn't reach any great culinary heights - but with a hefty layer of cheese it filled a cyclist's stomach. We sat at a table in the shade and ate. After topping up our water bottles we then went back out on the road about 1:00 after a good break.

A little more than a kilometer on we come to a fork in the road and we veer right. Ahead and then veering left is a route some cyclists have taken but it rises to over 1800 meters on the eastern black scoria slopes of Volcán Lonquimay and eventually joins our route where we will be in a couple of days. Alternately there is a fork at which we could take the shorter old road route to Lonquimay but it would be a 600 meter climb on gravel roads. We will stick with the sealed road. We knew we had only 8 kilometers to go to Túnel las Raíces - the old railway tunnel that the road now passes through. It's 5 kilometers long and we knew we had to cadge a lift - but we hadn't seen many camionetas on the road so we didn't know how long we might be waiting. Soon we cross the railway line, the section of track for the level crossing here and in two spots further on wasn't lifted with the rest of the line so a short section of line and sleepers remain. I suppose that saved the cost of fixing the road. We had done most of our climbing before lunch and the last section was an easy gentle grade. We were passed hardly at all by any cars. About a kilometer to go to the tunnel a white camioneta passed us and we thought there goes a lost opportunity. Rounding one last corner we could see the tunnel entrance in the distance and the camioneta was still there waiting at the red light.

When we arrived at the tunnel the camioneta was at the front of a two car queue. They must have just missed the lights as the tunnel is one way and vehicles were just coming the other way. Off our bikes quick as and we ask if they have space - not can we have a lift. So we get the bikes and panniers on the back and realize they have a young child sleeping on the back seat. So we ask the folk in the SUV behind if they have space - which they clearly do so they let us in. So there we are, the traffic comes out of the tunnel and the lights turn green and off our bikes and all our possessions (including cameras) go in front of us - perhaps only in Chile would we be so trusting. Out the other side it's a quick "muchas gracias" and unload and now it's

downhill ahead in the valley of the Rio Lonquimay, a tributary of the Rio Bio Bio - the river we will follow for the next few days. We weren't passed by many camionetas at all in the rest of the afternoon - we considered ourselves lucky to have got a ride so quickly even if we were a bit brazen.

Downhill for 8 kilometers it was good running for a change - we even had a good wide shoulder. We were following the old railway line and at one place there were two gaunt chimneys standing near some old building, clearly a remnant of some old railway station. A bit further on was another level crossing with the lines still intact and a shrine to Gaucho Gill up on a wooden platform. Across a bridge and a gravel road came in from the right, this was one way that we could have come more directly from Melipueco. Then things leveled out and it was goo running gently downhill. We passed what must be the local electricity plant well out of town. Certainly any noise wouldn't be a problem so far away for any houses but it seemed a long way out.

Then the valley floor below was a bit swampy so the road moved higher up the sloping side of the valley and towards a bit of a saddle across a ridge that pushed out into the valley. It had got hot and running downhill generating our own cooling breeze was fine but on this uphill grind we were sweating away. Perhaps this wouldn't have been much of a hill normally but halfway the grade eased and there was a shade tree on the roadside so we stopped for a rest under its welcome shade. I pulled out the tent foyer groundsheet and after a drink we lay on it in the shade with a bit of breeze that there was and for a while we rested until we were cooled off. While we were resting the asphalt tankers that had passed us earlier all returned in convoy. After about half an hour we decided that we should move.

The stop certainly made the rest of the climb easier and over the top we saw that the road was cut into the hillside up on the valley edge well above the river with another gentle uphill ahead until a gradual drop down to the turnoff to Lonquimay in the distance. Beside the road there were several new buildings in the rustic log plank style that seems to be the fashion, one was a café but we couldn't be bothered stopping and it didn't look open anyway.

At the turnoff we could see the old railway station ahead where the line had terminated, never making it to Argentina before it was abandoned. A fisherman was fishing in the river below as we crossed the bridge off the main road for the last stretch into town. So we were sweaty again by the time we rolled into town. The street system is based on some concentric ovals around the main Plaza - very confusing to get your bearings at first.

We arrived in town and found the little tourist office just north of the Plaza and then we were directed to the hostel that Alison had read of. It seemed expensive and the room small and it was above a bar/restaurant. We decided to make our way back to where we spotted on the way into town a place offering rooms. It was cheaper and bigger room and looked quiet - a shared bathroom - or bathrooms - separate for men and women and adjacent to our room which may have made our room choice a bit of a mistake as a family with some teenagers also stayed but it didn't turn out too bad.

So settled into our room and showered we headed out for an icecream and I got some tempting fresh fruit - a pear and a peach. Then later we went out for a meal to the place we chose not to stay at, it was about the only place that we could find open. It has to be said this doesn't seem a cheap town and Chilean steak isn't tender and if we'd paid what we paid tonight for a piece of tough steak at home we wouldn't be very happy at all - but we are on holiday. The evening stayed warm and it's a good job we promised ourselves a day off tomorrow because it's predicted hot again and we want an early start when we leave here on a gravel road again.

A day with 60 kilometers and 1000m climbing today is the longest for a while but it was sealed and even the steepest bits not too long but it was hot enough for cycling in the middle of the day. Nothing exceptional to photograph today, most snaps were made on the move.

Our room near the toilets turned out not a bad idea in the night. During the day I had been tempted by the nice summer fruit on sale, a peach and a pear. Here in Chile they tend to peel their fruit - tomatoes are always peeled. Maybe there is good reason for this as I ended up with a few toilet trips in the night - nothing bad but

glad we weren't in a tent again!

Lonquimay Rest Day

www.pppg.pictures/Lonquimay.htm

Today is a rest day. We have been on the road 3 days in a row now and have a few more ahead of us with not much chance of a rest so a rest in anticipation of what is to come seems appropriate. It was hot yesterday afternoon when we arrived here and it was predicted hotter today (which indeed it was) but also that the next few days could be a bit cooler. It seems a good choice for a rest day and to catch up on the journal. After my slightly dodgy tummy last night a day holding fast seemed a good idea also.

So we had a leisurely start to the day and we had a walk around “town” following up one oval street on one side of the central blocks and back on the other, town is not very big. We found a small bakery at the opposite end to us and bought some decadent pastries and where we will pick up some bread as we leave in the morning. Back at the square I headed back to do some more journal and Alison explored a bit more. She found some more shops for our stocking up for the next few days ahead. We had a bit of a problem finding a place for lunch that appealed or was open but eventually ended up at a place near the separation of the oval roads a couple of blocks from the hostel. It was the place that really didn’t seem like it wanted customers last night – but it was busy for lunch today.

Lonquimay is unusual for Chile in a way, it is sort of on the Argentinian side of the Andes. Sort of because the watershed is still out to the Pacific but it is east of the main mountains to the Pacific that catch the rain and the spine of the Andes here is relatively low. So it is dry and the vegetation away from the mountains more similar to that in the Argentinian Pampas than Chile. It is this low point in the Andes for which the Túnel las Raices that we passed through yesterday was constructed. Lonquimay was founded in 1897 as Villa Portales but was renamed to its Mapuche name. The railway only got as far as here but this pass was recognized as being the best to construct a railway between Chile and Argentina. While the railway was started in the early 1900’s the tunnel was not completed until 1938 and it was abandoned in 1956. For several decades a tourist train ran on the line but it closed and the rail tunnel became a road tunnel. In 2006 the project was restarted with some construction in Argentina but this has halted. But for now Lonquimay has a bit of tourism but not much for us on a rest day – which is no bad thing.

The buildings in Lonquimay are mostly wooden, in a way they typify what we see in Chile. The older ones are run down and unpainted. The Chileans build a building, paint it and then use it until starts to decay. They don’t seem to do maintenance like we do to keep their houses going so you see lots of weathered timber clad buildings slowly sagging as their piles and timber rot away. They are then abandoned but it gives places like this a run down feel that may not be entirely justified.

At our hospedaje we can cook if we want but for our evening meal we toasted some old bread and used up some other bits that needed using – after all we had had a big lunch. We go to bed knowing that tomorrow begins what is the last leg of our cycling. We arrived in this large flat valley that is part of the upper reaches of the Rio Bio Bio but following this river out towards the Pacific is no easy run, tomorrow it will be back to Gravel roads. We must pass back through the mountains separating this area from Chile's central valley. The river has carved a narrow valley with many gorges. These have attracted two large hydro dams supplying electricity to the more populous regions of Chile. All this means that we have plenty of up and down in the next few days around the reservoirs behind these dams the first of which has several arms extending up drowned tributary valleys of the Rio Bio Bio. Our legs will be glad we had this rest day.

Our room gets the afternoon sun which seemed nice when we chose it but it gets almost too hot to be in during the afternoon and it stayed hot well into the night making an early night for tomorrow’s exertions a bit hard.

Down the Rio Bio Bio

Lonquimay to Camping past Troyo

www.pppg.pictures/LonquimayTroyo.htm

Tonight we are camped by the Rio Bio Bio a few kilometers north of the small village of Troyo. Our tent is shaded in a grove of trees overlooking the river and we have a flock of sheep for company. We are where we aimed for but we certainly had some stiff climbing to get here and we were glad to get here before the hottest part of the day allowing us to rest for the afternoon and I can write some journal.

The alarm was set for 7:30 and although we had been starting to wake before then it was still unwelcome. We had been well on the way to being packed the night before so we were showered and bags down and on the bikes by 8 before breakfast. With the usual Chilean breakfast of bread, jam and cheese we were out the gate by 8:20. Heading up through town we stopped at the bakery for some bread and pastries before heading out of town. The cloud was low, almost fog, and we were looking to get as far as we could before it warmed up.

The way out of town that we should follow wasn't clear and we took an unplanned route from the bakery and turned away from it into the oval streets as it seemed shorter. That was a mistake as it took us onto a road one out from the one we needed. We then decided that it made sense to follow the concrete road when we came to an intersection. That was the wrong wrong way as it only led us into a subdivision at the head of town. To be fair there is a hilly route that we could have followed this way so the person we asked if this was the way to Troyo could have been right in telling us this was a way to go. We wasted a kilometer before turning back and finding our correct way out of town. We did ask another local who confirmed we were on the right track but you can never be sure - they don't like to say no here.

The road began as good ripio, not too corrugated and not much loose shingle on a good base. Just out of town is what was once a sawmill, there are piles of logs yet to be sawn and stacks of weathered sawn timber but there is no sign of recent milling. A bit further and the airport such that it is is on our right. Next we come to a farm where all the sheep are in a dirt area. While there are plenty of paddocks around it looks like they have been here for a while. Maybe the farmer brings them in each night as it doesn't look like they are fed here. I used to work in the wool industry but these don't conform to a breed I know well and they are a mixture of colors, not the uniform white we see at home.

The road had been described as undulating and that is probably the best word as it takes a straight line along the edge of the valley above the flat valley floor. After about 5 kilometers the clouds began to clear away although looking back it was still over town. There was still a higher level of partial cloud so it didn't start to get too hot at first. By the time we reached Laguna San Pedro the low cloud was pretty much gone. It then took us another 15 kilometers before we were to get beside the Rio Bio Bio. The first 10 kilometers were undulating through scrubby farmland, not the easiest farming on gravelly sandy soils. Some of the undulations required first gear but at about 10 kilometers of this we started a long 5 kilometers run down to the Rio Bio Bio. The road surface did get looser requiring concentration as our speed built up but we made good time on this section. From time to time my eye and camera is caught by the piles of firewood beside the road. It's dryer here and the forest isn't as luxuriant and the trees are nowhere near as big as down south but they still make firewood. We move out of the wide open plains and the mountains close in on the narrowing river valley.

We get progressively closer to the river and on getting right to the edge of the Bio Bio we spotted a flat strip between the road and river about a road width wide and it had a bit of a formed entrance. There had clearly been camping here and it looked as good a spot as any to stop at just beside the river. The river itself was quite dirty and it wasn't until later in the day that we found out that the dirtiness was due to the rainstorm a few nights earlier. Here we had a drink and finished the pizza we bought a couple of days earlier (it had been in the fridge at Lonquimay). Moving on we thought that we might see similar spots like this again but we were either further from the river or it was well below us in a gorge, this was one of the few possible wild camp

sites between Lonquimay and Troyo so we were glad to have stopped when we did.

It was only about another kilometer to a pedestrian swing bridge and barge for larger traffic that connected to another more hilly route to Troyo which we were in no mood to take as it would mean several hundred extra meters of vertical climbing. We started climbing up and down as the river gorge became narrower below us, some of the climbs were quite steep but at least we were going down river. It was another 3 or so kilometers before we reached the large bridge across the Bio Bio that meant we were starting an entrée before the first of two big climbs for the day. Here the old suspension bridge had been left beside the new modern concrete bridge. Almost all the way we were passing farms and some had firewood piles for me to indulge and add to my collection of photos of firewood stacks.

At one farm was a nice new tractor but at another a bit further on the farmer was leading his bullock cart out to collect some fresh hay, it seemed quite a contrast from the old to the new. The road we had to climb wasn't too bad but the first climb was 200m in 3 kilometers, not much on average but with the easy bits came some usual steep bits that had us walking. Just before we finished this first climb we passed the branch to the road that could have brought us here from the barge crossing that we passed earlier. We then dropped down into a valley before a second climb out, maybe less than 100m over 1.5 kilometers but with a drop in the middle it also had super steep bits.

Rounding a corner at a high bit we see the village of Troyo below in the distance. The drop down into the village was most welcome where we finally arrived about 12:30. We stopped across the road from the small shop there and rested in the shade of some trees deciding what to do next. There were some piglets wandering around and across the road happily. At the shop there we bought a few things including an iceblock each. We have seen photos of this shop, as a sign of the times we notice the pay phones have gone from the outside – cell coverage must have reached even here not that we have any reason to pull out our phones to check.

The question was then should we wait here for a bit or plod on the next 5 kilometers and another hill before it got hotter. Refreshed we chose to carry on at about 1:00. There were some steep bits but it mainly wasn't too bad and we only had to climb 100m and 10% gradient is manageable for us but slow. I did keep thinking that it must be worse the other way coming upstream. We could see the road below getting closer beside the river and figured that must be where the camping that we were looking for that another cyclist had mentioned in his journal must be.

With about half a kilometer to go we were running downhill and somehow a wasp got caught around Alison's collar and stung her several times before getting free. So by the time we got to the camping it was getting sore. It wasn't like there was a lot of signage coming this way, a small sign saying camping was all. The gate to the house seemed locked but I saw there was someone at the door and called out and they came over. The gate had a chain and padlock but they were just draped there and not actually locking the gate – somehow very Chilean. Anyway we went in, they were all very friendly, they brought Alison some ice for her sting and then a melon drink for both of us and invited us to sit on their "love seat" overlooking the Bio Bio, their house has a great view well above the river. The camping entrance was further on a 100m or so along the road down on the flats by the river where we couldn't see from here even though the toilets were back where we first came in. The place was well fenced and they had to unlock the big padlock on the metal gates for us to get in - we wouldn't be getting out tomorrow without paying! (Not that we would try anyway – note that Chileans are very trusting generally and usually you don't pay until you leave). Coming the other way from Chenquenco you see the metal gates by the swing foot bridge across the Bio Bio and then carry on up the hill a bit to the house. The foot bridge leads to a large flat area of farms on the other side of the river. As a sign of the commitment of the government to improving life in these far flung places along the road are new concrete power poles down the valley taking electricity to where life must have been quite self sufficient previously.

So we settled in for an early stop for the day - we had done enough and it was getting hotter. We took the chance to wash some clothes and hang them up, The black polythene pipe to the tap at the outdoor sink gave really warm water for a while and we washed ourselves as well before having a quiet afternoon. A flock

of sheep was grazing in the camping area making it one of the tidiest places lawn wise that we have been in. In the early evening a local bus came by and dropped maybe half a dozen people who then crossed the swing bridge. We never cease to be surprised how many people live in these seemingly remote places and the public transport that serves them. We cooked rice with Tuco for a simple meal planning an early night and an early start the next day.

About 7:00 three young cyclists came through from Chenquenco. From Santiago they had been on the go for 10 hours today and were looking really tired. Talking to them across the roadside fence they said that they were heading for Troyo so I told them I didn't think there was much there and a few minutes later they had gone on to the house and come back to park up here for the night. They lit a big fire - as if Chileans would do anything else - I think that they must have bought some meat from the hosts, probably from the flock of lawnmowers. They were well away from us so we were undisturbed. It was a relatively warm night for us - we were now down to a relatively low 750m.

A Big Day of Pushing and Hills

Troyo to Termas Avellano

www.pppg.pictures/TroyoTermasAvellano.htm

Today would have to be one of the biggest days of the trip. Not quite the longest in terms of distance but the longest time on the road. Darkness was coming as we arrived at Termas Avellano and I just had time to set up the tent as the light was going. I don't think I expected that we would get here, yes, I knew we possibly could but whether we would want to make the effort was the question. Alison on the other hand had the incentive of some hot thermal pools for a soak at the end of the day to spur her on. We did think we would do better than the Chilean lads we met last night as we were going the easier way on today's section but this extra 30 kilometers was always going to be a stretch if we did it and a slightly delayed start this morning didn't help.

These days are getting short and it was about 7:30 that we started getting up. We had left things well packed the night before with nothing unnecessary unpacked. It looked like we would be ready to go by not much after 8:30, a record but by the time we went up to the house and got the gate unlocked it was just after 9 when we started our push for the day. Our side of the valley was still well shaded from the rising sun so the first couple of hills warmed us up without overheating us.

The first 7.5 kilometers took us along a narrow road cut mostly into the steep side of the valley, the river well below us at times until we reached the bridge across the top of the reservoir for the hydro dam. There are alternate routes to or from Curacautin across this bridge, one from where we branched to Túnel las Raices the other day. This section was mostly forested and quite scenic even though we huffed and puffed a bit on the climbs. There were narrow strips of farms along the way on both sides of the river when the valley sides weren't so steep.

Immediately after the bridge turnoff the road deteriorated into a track of poorer quality - quite rideable however, in some ways better without loose gravel. The first obstacle was a short tunnel - but it was long enough that it was sufficiently dark in the middle that we had to walk. Before the hydro dam the road was below what is now lake level for the next kilometer or so. After about a kilometer we came to a locked metal gate across the road but there was also a small wooden gate beside it that was unlocked and quite wide enough for a horse or bicycle. Here there were some extensive cattle yards but no sign of a dwelling. After the gate the track climbed a bit and deteriorated in quality. While the track was never a highway it did get better on and off after that. We then had 3 kilometers that was a gentle climb and some up and down through scrubby farming country before we dipped into a side valley and came to a bridge over a small stream. Knowing this signaled the beginning of our big climb we stopped for a while to have first lunch.

Moving on a very short steep push was required to get us away from the creek but most of the next kilometer or so was rideable as the overall slope increased slowly until we reached the last lonely farmhouse. Here four dogs came racing to the gate barking their heads off. One even slithered under the wooden gate and came towards me. Chilean dogs are well trained - they know that when you pick up a stone off the road that it means it is for them and as soon as I did this he slunk back submissively under the gate tail between his legs - from where he started barking again. Some gruff shouts were heard from the direction of the house directed towards the dogs. We then had to get around a small stream creating a small pond across the road - probably only so large due to recent rain but we were able to walk the edge with wheels in the water.

Then our next three kilometers of climbing started in earnest. It was pushing up the next hill that switchbacked around, it was not long but it seemed that the preferred route for 4wd was more or less straight up the hillside for this section bypassing the switchback. I tried but it was so steep I wove back and forth to ease the grade - luckily it was an open grassy area. I should say that in spite of the gate being locked to traffic there were three or four sets of wheel tracks that must have been more recent than the rains a few nights ago. In spite of all that was to come it wasn't all that difficult for an experienced 4wd driver. The grade eased a little before the worst stretch of the track where the track had washed into a deep "V" and we did two on a

bike for a couple of hundred meters. It was nothing like as bad as we had experienced a week or so back after Regolil.

The next kilometer was steep in parts requiring walking but with rideable parts. Then we reached a more flat open area with the remains of some old wooden buildings - maybe never permanently inhabited but just shelters. Here in the open the Briar (Sweet) Rose (locally called Rosa Mosqueta) had become well established and it's thorny tendrils encroached on the track at times. After that we lost much of our shade and the road turned to fine soft sand where it was in the open. In the shade it wasn't so bad and the track stayed damp and solid. There were large stumps in the forest that was mostly regrowth, even here the forest had been milled at some time. Sometimes the track was rideable even if it was ride 1 rest 2 it was so steep. I was more likely to ride and Alison push but we both would make much the same pace. This lasted the next 2 kilometers to the top, there were even some small downs as we dipped into a couple of side valleys. There were some side tracks probably from when the forest was previously harvested but they were clearly unused and not the way for us to go. Some dog leg switchbacks signaled the last half kilometer or so to the final top. Determined I rode to the top but in small bursts, Alison walked.

At the top we had our main lunch about 1:00 where we rested for a while. Here at the top we are on the boundary between the Chilean regions of Bio-Bio to the north and Araucania to the south. We have seen lots of road building in Chile on our travels and this little connection would seem to be a wonderful tourist route – if only it was built as a proper road. I guess such a project would require interregional cooperation. For better or worse it remains as an option for only we cyclists. We started our trip with a a not dissimilar option and it seems we are finishing that way as well. Only time will tell if the road builders will get this way. Postscript: In June 2013 it was announced that studies would begin on the engineering costs and details required to construct a new bridge and upgrade the road and in 2015 that study was underway.

Next came the downhill, 2 ½ kilometers averaging 15% gradient. We began to see why the young Chileanos had taken so long yesterday, I guess we rode most but in parts the track had large broken rock on it - not exactly easy to brake or stop on so these bits were walked down. We got our first views of Chenquenco across the river in the distance, not seeming that far in a straight line. After a gentler bit where the fresh wheel marks continued on to a farm we turned back down river. Looking on Google Earth if you went the way of the wheel tracks you might be able to ford the river at times of summer low water level about 4 kilometers further on upstream and then join the road back downstream on the other side. Don't take my word for that, there is definitely a ford but the river level must vary.

The track deteriorated even further although it still looked used. There are some farm buildings on a bit of a terrace well above us more or less a kilometer on and they must use this part of the road for access. After that there were signs it could be driven but only by the brave and experienced in parts and not recently. It looks like before the dam was filled in 2002 it would have carried on and crossed the river but now is a dead end and has fallen into disuse. The next 3 kilometers were easier and in parts good riding - the briar rose hanging over the track being a threat as we had to keep to the wheel tracks on one side or the other mostly. Then we came to a bit of a terrace from where the last drop to the river started. It wasn't clear when we hit the terrace whether to branch onto a narrow single track of carry on a bit on the 4wd track, we did the latter because it was on the GPS that we had for comfort but you could have taken either. Turning off the track at right angles where there was a clear branch we soon came to our descent.

There were several routes to start with, none easy, we sort of followed the wheel marks from the Chileanos yesterday. The track was very dusty and full of large boulders. We didn't unload but it would have been impossible for us to come up without unloading and making several trips. We zigged and zagged down a couple of times - never riding, that would be impossible or suicidal.

Near the bottom we met a couple of fellows trying to get a motor bike up - a trail bike but a large one. There were wheel tracks from a motor bike that we had seen and I think a light trail bike unloaded could have made it up with an experienced rider but too many of these would make a real mess of an already messy track. The riders were stopped planning their next step up and had to help us around the first bike as it was in

the middle of the track. A little further on there was the second bike only a few meters past the horse bridge. We had to get around that bike ourselves. We crossed the bridge and the motorcyclists were in deep discussion. The top bike had come back down and it looked like they were giving up. Just downstream of our bridge a couple of rusty wire ropes attached to trees at either side of the gorge were just about all that remained of an old swing bridge. Two planks joined them towards one end and several others dangled now only held to one rope. There is a story on the Internet of a cyclist crossing here on a flying fox (zip wire) which must have replaced the old bridge for a while before this current bridge. We are glad of the new sturdy metal bridge.

Then it was two on a bike for us to get up to the top. The track on the Chenquenco side was much shorter and better than the other side from which we had come but it was still a huff and a puff for us. By the time we were getting to the top the motor bikers looked like they had decided to have another go, the bikes now heading uphill again, we never saw them again so maybe they did carry on.

At the top it is a long way around to the spread out pueblo of Chenquenco any direct route being blocked by a barbed wire fence around the complex of old buildings. Immediately at the top we have to pass a barbed wire gate and are then on a dusty but level track beside a barbed wire fence. On the other side of the fence there are buildings that could have been an army base from the days when you could head about 60 kilometers to Argentina from here. We pass through the gate and down the dusty track a couple of hundred meters more to where another substantial wooden and wire mesh gate takes us out onto the road on a curve. A sign says to keep the gate shut but there is nothing to indicate that it is the way to the bridge from this end, you would have to know where you are going. Going right would take us down the valley we have just come down but on the other side and even to a possible vehicle ford that could connect to the road we have come through on today. Left takes us the way we want to go but not without a half kilometer climb. I don't suppose it was that bad but our legs were tired after pushing up out of the gorge and it is the hottest time of the day and the sun is upon us.

At the top of the climb is the turnoff that would take us to Argentina via Paso Copahue as it is known in Argentina or Paso Pucon Mahuida as it is known here in Chile. It was an official crossing until 1997 when the Argentinians closed it at their end citing lack of maintenance and accessibility. Heading North East from Ralco Lepoy the road first goes to Laguna del Barco before becoming worse and heading more easterly towards the border on the northern flanks of Volcan Copahue that erupted a couple of years ago. From there it's only half a dozen kilometers to the road to the Argentinian ski resort of Caviahue. In 2008 The regional mayors and locals from both countries met on the border in order to persuade their governments to formalize an official crossing again. They hoped that a proper road would benefit tourism for all. In 2014 maybe there is some progress to this pass reopening formally. There is a story of a cyclist who crossed here but having found that he was in Argentina without the official stamps in his passport he headed back to Chile at a nearby crossing as quickly as possible so as not to be in Argentina illegally. If this route opens officially again it would be an interesting way for those cyclists doing the length of South America to skip some of the less interesting corresponding section in Argentina.

We then drop down towards the few building marking the center of this small spread out pueblo. There is a store there, it doesn't have much but it does have a sign outside say it is Chenquenco. We have been a bit confused as whether this small settlement is called Ralco Lepoy or Chenquenco. A couple are there in the shop with some bags of mate and are having some discussion with the owner. From what we can gather it's Argentinian mate which generally seems to be regarded as better than the local stuff. The discussion concludes with the store owner taking the bags of mate – it seems a deal has been done. We can now have the attention of the storekeeper. We bought an iceblock and some pineapple flavored fizzy drink and a can of peaches. We drink much of the sugar laden fizzy with relish before we leave.

We have made it here in about 6 ½ hours, considerably quicker than the Chileans yesterday going the other way but had we been going their way I'm not sure that we would have been any faster than them. After resting a while in the shop it was time to go out back into the sun and move on. There was no obvious place

to stay here but the Chilean lads had stayed here last night and they had said just ask and you will find something but for us there was the incentive of the hot pools after another 30 kilometers to make us carry on. Not that this would be easy for us, there were two good climbs ahead of us and we could see the road winding up around the hill down the lake in the distance and it was after 4:00 by now. Our best riding rate in this country is 10kph and in addition to that we would need stops - but the day was cooling now and we would have light until about 9. We could reasonably expect to make our destination around 8pm.

We had promised ourselves that if we were to have a go at this push then we would need a good rest - the problem was that there wasn't time for a good rest - only a short one. We began to look out for a pleasant place for such a stop. It wasn't until after a few kilometers on the road we found a place. There are no nice places to stop on these dusty shingle roads like this one that had recently been reconstructed and widened, there are just places that aren't so bad and maybe a bit of shade. We found a spot with a bit of shade. There was a bus shelter but it stank of urine so we just sat at the side of the road. We ate the can of peaches we had bought at the store in Chencquenco and then continued up the first climb. In normal circumstances it wouldn't be that hard but for us today it was slow going. On the way up a loaded bus was going the other way - there seems not a place with people here in these remote spots that isn't serviced by a bus. Finally at the top we could see the next climb in the distance across the lake - but first we dipped into a side valley and down to lake level. Knowing from a map is not quite the same as seeing the challenge ahead when legs are tired. To get there was obviously downhill and was not too bad going. At the bottom was a bit where we could have camped by a stream if we had been desperate but there was no shelter at all. There a Chilean family were collecting the hips (seed pods) from the briar rose. They tell us that it makes a good preserve, we have actually had it a couple of times with breakfast. We are too polite to tell them that what they are harvesting is really too green and that we have seen too much of this stuff today. We then carried on for 6 kilometers or so at more or less lake level, rising and falling a bit but not much.

Then came our next big climb, about the same as the first of the day but then we had fresh legs. To be fair the gradient was quite good for low gear plodding but my legs were very tired. Not long after the start my right inner thigh started to cramp. That was the muscle that does most of the pushing uphill as I'm on the left side of the bike and it had been given a good workout earlier in the day. A couple of dextrose tablets containing magnesium and after walking a few minutes I got back on the bike and had no more trouble apart from general tiredness.

We had decided on a stop halfway up this hill and when we came to the switchback we stopped. At this point there was an intersection and downhill traffic had a sign telling them to carry left from where we had come for the public road - I guess no one except us goes out of here without first coming in as it's a dead end. That branch was the old road and went down to the lake from where it was drowned when the dam was completed. Checking my cached track on Google earth I realized that the coarseness of the GPX points cut over the hill making our climb seem higher than it actually is. So we were well past halfway at our stop and it wasn't long before we hit the downhill.

We passed a small village with a shop but it looked shut. We asked a young girl who was outside if it was open and she got her mother. We fancied some eggs but she didn't have any so we carried on. Not our final downhill as there were still a few small climbs before the small pueblo of (I think) Villa Ranco. We stopped at the small shop at Salto Moyo and bought a bottle of sprite and a tomato. It looks an impressive waterfall from photos but we didn't have time to look at it. It was getting on towards 8 by now and the shopkeeper told us it was still 6 kilometers to the Termas. After this it was down to a big bridge over Rio Malla just above the waterfall. Then it was 7 kilometers on our measurement of almost all downhill with only one last small rise on tired legs and we turned off into the Termas.

At the entrance there was a small restaurant so we asked there about camping there being no obvious signs but we had to carry on a little bit more. We paid our fee at the gate and the barrier was lifted and we had to find a spot, there was one under a willow tree that looked to have a spot level enough for our tent so we chose it. I put up the tent and Alison had a shower - priorities. Then we went back to the restaurant for a

meal so happy that after such a long day we didn't have to cook. After talking for few a minutes to the two women there we were told that we couldn't have a meal here tonight - go back to the restaurant at the camp we are told. So we did and then a few minutes the younger woman we talked to at the first restaurant came in. We could understand her as she was actually Ecuadorian with much clearer Spanish. Anyway it was her mother in law here at this other restaurant. Somehow we negotiated eggs and chips. After a while the chips were on - some others came in the door and ordered chips as well - it was all very confusing. Then they presented us with some warmed up asadoed goat so we didn't need the eggs. Then the chips turned up. We ate and it was very cheap and then we went to the pools - we were so late we had the lights turned out when the staff wanted to go - we had been told 11 was closing time but it wasn't 11 yet but everyone else had left so we went back to the tent. Midway between two lots of loud music we finally fell asleep being so tired.

It was certainly a long day – our longest in time if not distance. We were tired at the end. After nearly 3 months of cycling for some reason my rear was sore from sitting on my saddle. All I can think of to explain it is that we did lots of downhill bouncing and the angle was such that the rear rivets really got to me. I should have got the Brooks Flyer Special with the flatter rivets although the one I have has been fine for the whole trip until now.

Tortured by the Smell of Roasting Meat

Termas Avellano Rest Day

www.pppg.pictures/TermasAvellano.htm

There wasn't going to be much chance of a long lie in here this morning. There was no way that we would be moving on today after yesterday's big effort. However camps always have early risers so although it wasn't excessively noisy we were woken before 8. Eventually the need for food got us up and some oatmeal was made. Our neighbors on one side started an early pack up - that's one source of noise gone we thought. Plenty of campers were getting their fires going again if only to boil the kettle. We headed off to the hot pools before it warmed up and they became busy. Only the small one had water in it. We later realized why they emptied the pools every day - the "soil" here is all volcanic dust and it all gets carried to the pools so by the end of the day they are quite dirty even though they start clear so the water is refreshed each day. Anyway at this hour only a few people wanted to be in a pool so there wasn't a problem. We chatted to several other women there one of whose husband arrived before we left. They were "locals" from one of the small towns out on the plains from here.

We returned to the tent and I tried to rest a bit and catch some sleep while Alison went back to the pools. We had new neighbors now, two older couples had arrived in a camioneta and soon started their fire for an asado for lunch - pork I think. They were directly upwind from us so the smoke of roasting meat was being blown around and into the tent - and our washing hanging on the rope. It's a sort of torture when you only have oatmeal and those around you are roasting meat. The whole camp was hazy with the smoke of roasting fires for some hours in the middle of the day. As the morning went by more day trippers arrived and the place filled up. It was a bit hot for us to be in the pools anyway.

From our tent we watched the world go by. Chilean men seem to like to walk around with the tee shirts pulled up sunning or proudly displaying their round bellies, after seeing several I managed to get a discreet photo of one walking by. People would go up to the entrance where the wood pile was by the entrance gate and come back carrying pieces of wood for their fires. Earlier a man had been there starting split a huge pile of cut logs (Australian Gum - E.Niten) with a hefty axe. It looked like he had big day in front of him. These logs looked like they had been in a forest that had been burnt as they were all blackened on the outside but most of the logs were now cut into firewood lengths. I presume campers had to pay for their wood, most carried a few pieces but some even wheeled back a barrow load. Some had been out of the camp and foraged for their own wood it seemed from the loads in cars that came in. Our neighbors had brought their own wood with them. So all sorts of roasting was going on - from bits of meat and sausages to whole lamb sides on a spit. The smell was wafting around us on the gentle breeze but we only had the last of our meager rations to eat, sufficient but not exciting especially with our taste buds aroused by such tempting odors. Whereas at home we would expect a bit of a shop in a remote place like this to supply campers here it appeared that you were expected to be self sufficient.

As the afternoon wore on some campers and day trippers started to leave and the place thinned out a bit. Back down at the gate the woodpile had now all been split, I was impressed. Our neighbors left on both sides and we thought we might have a quiet night. We returned to the tent after a dip in the pools to observe that it was hardly before the neighbors on one side were finishing packing that a new family group with 3 tents turned up eyeing their site and ready to move in.

Eventually after sundown we thought about buying a meal again but were told to come back later so we spent some time in the pools again, now almost empty again. We did get a meal and by this time it was getting dark as we walked back to the tent. On our return we were confused in the dark as there is not a lot of lighting - one light only by the toilets at each end of the long narrow camping area. We weren't sure where we were until we realized that a car was parked across the front of our tent. In our short absence a new family group had moved in next door on the other side, one tent was only about half a meter from ours! They were still unpacking, the loud music blasting and we were ready to sleep for an early start in the morning tomorrow. In the end we again fell asleep in spite of the music. Many cyclists complain about the noise in camping

grounds in Chile and Argentina – the locals seem to like their loud music, it's all part of their camping tradition. I recommend that you take earplugs!

This must have been the laziest day of the tour - but then yesterday was the hardest – and why not rest somewhere with thermal pools. Today was an observation of Chilean life the average tourist wouldn't get to see.

At the start of the day the pool down by the river was well above the river level and there were exposed rocks in the middle of the river. As the day began and the need for power grew in far away places the river level rose as the flow through the turbines grew. All the rocks in the river were submerged and the pool ended up at water level. As the day ended then the flow decreased again. I guess this is a short stretch of river between the two big dams and there is no need to worry about keeping the river flow constant.

Leaving Ripio for the Last Time

Termas Avellano to Dona Pola 10 kilometers west of Ralco

www.pppg.pictures/TermasAvellanoDonaPola.htm

It's a long time since I wrote a journal entry having imbibed a honey beer, maybe it was blueberry back then but today we ended up having a honey beer with lunch at the flashiest restaurant that we have eaten at all trip. From a dusty campground to a flash room overlooking the river at a resort where we had a swim in the pool we have gone up in the world tonight. The cycling gods certainly played around with us today. We knew that we had a few hills to climb before we were out of the mountains - well within our daily ability but we didn't expect the corrugated ripio. Just as the number of patrons at the Termas had surprised us then the change in the state of the road surprised us as well. I suppose that the two go together as the traffic decreases after the Termas then the road wear also decreases. So to finish we had some of the worst corrugations of the trip, maybe not covered in loose shingle but miserable enough. Then we struck road works before at last hitting asphalt for the last time. It was a bit of everything that we had experienced in the last 3 months. When we set out this morning we weren't quite sure how far to the asphalt but we did our best to make an early start anyway.

It wasn't the best nights sleep ever. About 3 in the morning our neighbors decided to admire the stars or something - lots of not so quiet conversation a meter or two outside our tent. Then again some time later before dawn there was more talking - they kept their fire going all night. So it was about 7:30 when we woke and started stirring with other noise about. It was a remarkably quick decamp - in an hour we were nearly ready to go. A friendly Chilean man came and was talking to us. One of the unexpected joys of this trip as compared to our previous backpacking experience is that we got to interact with the locals far more this time. I didn't want to be rude but the cool morning was going to turn into a hot day and our tail wind would probably turn into a head wind so I was keen to get moving out on the road.

It was a bit before 9 that we rolled out of our camp and up to the road. That was when we had the realization that the road surface deteriorated considerably from here on. We had two main climbs gaining 100m or so of height and small ones before hitting the end of the dam system and our first climb started as soon as we passed out the barrier arm at the entrance of the camp. The gradient wasn't too bad but it was low gear uphill crawling most of the time and choosing the best line, if any, over the corrugations. At least being not too bad a grade mostly the surface wasn't churned up and there were some respites and even small downs. Soon out of the camp was a flatter area with dozen or so houses before climbing again. At the first top we could see our next climb across the lake in the distance. The run off the first top wasn't fast because of the corrugated surface and as soon as we hit lake level the second climb began. In the distance on the lake shore we could see some large white building in the distance and we began to wonder what it was. The second climb wasn't quite as big as the first and then we dropped to more or less lake level until the dam.

Just before we reached lake level we came across several houses above the lake. Outside a couple of men were talking and had a bullock cart with a bale of hay on it. There didn't seem any farm anywhere near so it was a bit perplexing why they were here. Just past there were sprinklers watering the road. I guess whoever owned or lived here felt it worthwhile to water the road to keep the dust down but we had to choose our moment to run the gauntlet of the rotating sprinklers to avoid getting wet. We then had a short climb around Salto San Pedro. We couldn't see where to get a good view of the waterfall but could hear it. It was hardly half a kilometer until the mystery of the white buildings that we had seen from afar was revealed, there are half a dozen flash holiday cabins and a lodge like place all painted bright white.

After about 12 kilometers we came to where new shingle had been put on the road about 40 cm deep, it had a loose surface but was surprisingly easy to ride on. Another kilometer and we were riding along the beside lake when we spotted a small opportunity of a track to get down the couple of meters to the lake side. In fact it was our only opportunity to actually get to the lake shore. We had been riding for over an hour and a half so we decided it was time to stop for first lunch. The lake level was clearly higher than normal and it rose a few centimeters starting to drown our narrow gravel beach in the short time while we were there. They had

switched on the upstream power station but not the lower enough to compensate for the water flowing in.

From our stop onwards the fresh road top had been spread a bit more and well rolled and watered - it was almost as good as asphalt to ride on for the next 3 or 4 kilometers. All this section we had our usual yellow distance markers on the side of the road counting down to somewhere, we hoped it would be the asphalt. To our surprise we reached the asphalt with the markers just under 3 kilometers further on. Of course the cycling gods couldn't now let us away free so we had to climb over a small rise at the dam itself.

The next 10 kilometers of asphalt were pretty much all downhill and the up that we did have was gentle and not too long. We passed a large collection of beehives just below the road. The forest honey they produce has a strong flavor and the locals are proud of proclaiming it to be the best honey in the world. It does give a distinctive flavor to the honey beer that we have imbibed occasionally. It didn't seem long before we arrived at the small town of Ralco - or maybe it's Alto Bio Bio depending on which map you look at - Ralco seems the favorite with locals. There I pumped up the tires for asphalt and oiled the chains for the last time now that we were off the dust. We looked around and bought an icecream each and then a tomato and an avocado for lunch. Then we went to have a look at the plaza. A man was walking through the plaza with a basket in which were wrapped some local style artesiana large round flattish breads so we bought one. As we were by the new museum we had a quick look at the displays about local history and used the nice clean toilets.

It was after 12:30 when we rolled out of town on the beginning of a big descent without much pedaling. We were soon riding right beside the Rio Bio Bio. Reaching a large bridge for a side river there was a herd of goats on the road. We nearly stopped for lunch on the other side at a bit of a shelter offering welcome shade from the hot sun but it was occupied. We carried on and soon saw a sign saying hostel and restaurant down a side road. It was getting hot so we thought we would investigate.

We came to the restaurant and there were 4 smartly dressed waiters with 2 patrons for this very flash restaurant. Did we have a booking? We were asked - of course not. They may have had a cabin - later when someone left - but they did have a room - and while it is expensive we have a view out over the Bio Bio across a cow paddock. It is a room in a block of five lined up all looking out to the river, more like a non-detached cabin. We'd call it a cabin at home. I suppose having luxury by the Bio Bio for the last time is somehow appropriate after 3 nights in the tent - we haven't actually done 3 nights in a row in the tent until now. We remember reading a journal of another cyclist who ended up at this place when he passed southwards through the route so when we realized what we had struck here it wasn't such a surprise as it could have been.

It was getting to one by now so after a shower we returned to the restaurant for an expensive flash lunch with incredibly expensive beer on the veranda - no one was inside and others did come in while we were there. After lunch we wandered over to check out the pool, the sun was a bit high in the sky for us pale skins but there were locals there. We resolved to come back later. Walking back across the grass we went through a patch of clover and somehow I kicked a bee under my toes between my foot and sandal. Of course he stung me - now I'm not allergic to bee stings, not more than a prickle to me - well that was when I had my last one so many years ago I can't remember. This one wasn't too bad then and there but the itch did last a day or two.

There was a hose outside our cabin so I was able to wash down the bikes and string up the rope and wash and tent and fly to try and get rid of the volcanic dust and the smoky asado smell. Some washing was hung outside on our sunny patio, the view being only to the river and not the rest of this place. So an afternoon of rest to make up for a very disturbed night and we kept out of the heat of the day.

We decided for our meal at night to have the bread and other stuff we had bought for lunch rather than go back to the expensive restaurant. We have a private terrace looking out over the river and not visible to anyone else here so I was able to get out our little stove to boil some water for a drink. We may be far from the other building but we have passable Internet and if that is not enough we have a TV! At least we have a quiet spot for an early night, the other units don't seem occupied.

The End is Upon Us

Hostal by the Bio Bio to Los Angeles

www.pppg.pictures/DonaPolaLosAngeles.htm

What's it like to finish a cycle tour, sadness, relief, confusion, expectation of getting home? It wasn't planned to end today, we were going as far as Santa Barbara, a nice easy day. We got there about noon and it isn't much of a town really, I don't mean that disparagingly but there didn't seem much in the way of places to stay, it looks mostly a service town for the area around and not a tourist town. So we sat in the square under the cooling shade some large trees for shade, found the free wifi Internet and checked out some things including Los Angeles. By 1pm we had resolved we might as well push on to Los Angeles, the wind wasn't bad, it didn't seem to be getting too hot and it was 40 kilometers mostly downhill - and being Sunday the road would be relatively quiet. So a bit after 1:00 we rolled out of town prematurely on the last leg of the tour. We have over a week before we need to be in Santiago for a week long tourist tour to Iquitos in Peru but there is nowhere we want to cycle. There is not enough time to cycle anywhere worthwhile and still get to Santiago in time. We had thought of Concepcion but the roads there are not nice and nothing much to see that interests us so we will bus out of here sometime for somewhere. It's not quite what we planned when we got up this morning.

Funny thing is that it was Alison who was first up and getting dressed this morning by 7:30. It has always been me up first but the bee sting on my toe yesterday had been annoying my sleep in the night so I wasn't so full of morning cheer. We were all packed and over to an expensive but nice breakfast at 8. So by 8:30 we were ready to roll out the gate onto the road. It was still pretty chill in the air, the sun hadn't reached this side of the valley yet. We had a bit of a rise as the Rio Bio Bio went into a gorge below our home for last night so we were soon puffing and warming up. There have been several signs it's time to come to an end. This morning the bottom split on the bag I keep my computer charger and mouse in and then on my third photo of the day I had a "memory card full" error. A quick change of memory cards and we were on our way again but maybe that's a sign.

There's not a lot to say about the 38 kilometer road to Santa Barbara. It was mainly downhill but of course there were a few rises, some in low gear but not hard, all asphalt of course. We moved into more farming country as we would recognize it - large open paddocks with fewer houses about, not the small holdings in the mountains. We passed several signs for cabins along the roadside so we could have had options had we not stayed where we were last night. We passed what looked like a horse stud with irrigated paddocks.

We had a bit of a surprise when we came to a new bridge and dam on the Rio Bio Bio. Google earth was not up to date with imagery showing this here when I was researching this bit but a fellow who talked to me back at the Termas had said something about 3 dams so I wasn't too surprised. We had been planning to keep on the north side of the Bio Bio but the road took us across the new bridge and the road on the north turned to gravel anyway. That gave us a bit of a climb away from the lake before dropping down to it and then having to cross the river just below the new dam. As a reminder of just how the seasons have changed since we arrived beside the road a large paddock of wheat or oats had recently been harvested but somehow a fire had caught in the dry stubble and burnt through it. The fence and trees in the paddock are scorched suggesting the fire was unintentional. Fires caused by sparks from harvesters are no unknown and with the sun beating down on us now we can understand how a fire could race through dry stubble. On the other side of the road we saw that there was what looked like a visitor center for the new dam but there was no entrance or signage that we saw - perhaps it wasn't finished yet, there was still some work happening on the top of the dam. The dam itself was long and diagonally across the wide valley until it reached a gorge where the spillways were, the turbines were underground down a tunnel into the hillside.

Riding up from the bridge across the gorge was our last steep road sign - and it wasn't all that steep or long and at the top was a stall selling food. Alison had been wanting to try the Mote con Huesillo, a sort of Chilean national drink of pearled wheat in juice of rehydrated dried peaches served cold. Stalls sell it

everywhere but we hadn't tried it. It was sweet and filling - a food and a drink together. We tried it and that will be enough for now however. We also had filled sopaipillas - the first time I remember seeing them filled, mine had delicious pork and Alison's cheese. Back on the road it was mostly downhill with a few rises. After one was a patch of really thick black berries with so many hanging ripe across the fence onto the road side the we stopped and picked and ate some.

It was around 11:30 that we arrived at the entrance to Santa Barbara. The road into town was in the process of reconstruction - it is/was/will be concrete. The road around town more of a bypass road so we went in the way under works to discover that the works continued on and off through town - and we ended up going the wrong way as the street turned one way. But we passed the Plaza anyway which we wouldn't have had we followed the one way system. So we rode around a bit trying to find some place to stay. I went into the large supermarket to get some supplies. We ended up in the Plaza to decided what to do next. A man came up to me and said that there was camping down by the river but in his Chilean I couldn't understand where exactly from his instructions. Another couple came up to us - from Santiago and they had a holiday place 10 kilometers back up the road. They had some English and invited us for lunch but we were in no mood to ride back even if the uphill was gentle and the wind not too bad. So we pulled out our computers and found which of the Wifi's in the plaza was free and after some agonizing we decided that we might as well head on for 40 more kilometers. A visit to the toilet across the Plaza and we were ready to roll.

I have to say that the 40 kilometers to Los Angeles was the easiest 40 kilometers of the tour. Asphalt, slightly downhill with only a few gentle rises. The wind was forecast to be strong but that never seemed to eventuate, sometimes I thought we had a headwind but mostly it was our own wind as we raced along plus a bit of underlying tailwind. It was hot but not too hot - generating one's own breeze cycling can be quite cooling. After about 10 kilometers we stopped at a roadside shop and bought some iceblocks and I put my lobster shell top on - it keeps me cool as well as giving sun protection.

We rode on through farming and forestry country - corn, grain, dairy. There were some irrigation races, the first big one must have taken water from the Bio Bio. We passed some feedlot cattle, the first time that we had seen anything other than open cattle grazing. We made good time, mostly about 20kph without any effort much at all. In parts we could see that we were traveling along beside the old railway trackbed that had linked Santa Barbara to Los Angeles and at the Río Duqueco the old abandoned rail bridge paralleled the road bridge. The traffic wasn't too bad most of the time. We had road signs telling us how far to go - but there seemed two different systems with 5 kilometers difference - sometimes only a few hundred meters apart. From what we knew one must be to the edge of town and the other the center - but how would the uninformed traveler know this?

With a couple of kilometers to go to the edge of town we saw a restaurant beside the road and decided that we should stop for a late lunch, it is Sunday after all. I had slow cooked pork with papas fritas (which later sat in my stomach and I regretted for a while) and Alison had Pastel de Choclo again. Good cycling food but we weren't actually that hungry or cyclists for much more now. Back on the road an hour or so later traffic had built up but with only a few kilometers to go it wasn't too much of a worry - at least it was cars and not weekday trucks.

So we hit town and followed our way in, once checking my cached Google Earth for directions - it doesn't however show the one way street system the Chileans seem fond of. We found our way to the hostel we were looking for - thanks to the one way system we were a street west of where we wanted but the hostel is a street west of where Google Earth says it is and on the opposite side of the road. So we found it anyway, just prematurely. It was a good thing Alison was looking on the wrong side of the road because she didn't know better while I was believing Google Earth.

Here the hosts speak good English, the rooms are around a courtyard, there is a good kitchen and the owners live in the house next door. A German couple are staying here, they have bikes - they have cycled Asia and New Zealand - their bikes are in Santiago - they were told they couldn't get their bikes on the bus south - it is high season - so we will see what we can find out tomorrow about busing north with our bikes.

We have to find a bus that will take our bikes. Alison went out to find a shop for a few things to eat but walked around and it being Sunday didn't have much luck until she was almost back at the hostel. Then she realized that one house down on the opposite corner was the biggest supermarket/general merchandise store that we had seen in ages - one of the big chains that we hadn't seen further south – just where Google earth has the hostel located.

So it at 4:30 on a Sunday afternoon that we finished our cycle tour somewhat unexpectedly early. We will find a few things to fill in our time. There isn't time to cycle to Concepcion and then get ourselves to Santiago for our deadlines but we will work out something.

The Long Road Home

Los Angeles to New Zealand

So our biking days are over. Some hot days in the more relaxing hostel here and we will clean and pack the tent and bikes. We can then catch a bus to Santiago. We have a hostel booked there in a weeks time but they have space now so we will get there early. For a while we have realized that there is no point in using our ticket from Valdivia to Santiago – the cost of getting to the airport from Valdivia alone on a shuttle is almost as much as the bus from here to Santiago.

From Santiago we will have a weekend in Mendoza back in Argentina by bus. The scenery through the pass is fantastic. Back to Santiago we then fly to Peru for a week for a jungle tour just out of Iquitos. With a night back in Santiago we catch a plane home back to real life.

Cleaning and Resting

Los Angeles Day 1

www.pppg.pictures/LosAngeles.htm

Our room is semi detached from the main house in a courtyard, quite shaded, so it was 8:30 before we realized the time and got ourselves out of bed. After breakfast we organized to have some washing done here and headed off to the bus terminal to find out about a bus to Santiago. With possible problems getting on a bus with bikes we have decided to skip Concepcion and go straight to Santiago and do touristy things from there for a week or so.

So on our unloaded bikes we headed off towards the northern outskirts of town where the long distance bus terminal is located. There are two terminals side by side. JAC/Tur-Bus/Bio Bio have their own flash terminal as they dominate with a country wide network and the other smaller companies are in an older terminal. We tried Tur-Bus first but the bikes could be a problem - if people turned up with too much baggage the bikes might not get on. We tried to have some discussion about sending the bikes as freight but we didn't get far due to either our Spanish or their seeming lack of interest. So in the end we went to the other terminal and watched a buses coming and going for a few minutes and seeing numerous companies offered services to Santiago we then started at one end of the ticket office hall. The first thought it might be a problem - very friendly - try next door they tell us. Here this also could be a problem but the woman then took us a couple of counters down and told the woman there we had bikes. The woman there said the 11:00 bus would be best - each company had pictures of their buses and theirs looked good and we got tickets. One of their buses rolled in and it was higher than others with good high luggage bays underneath so all should be fine.

Back to the Hostel I wash the tent thoroughly and hang it on the rope to dry. NZ agriculture inspection can be strict when it comes to tents and the dirt that they can bring in so the quick wash a couple of days ago was never going to be a final wash. I can still smell Asado smoke on the fly. I also washed some panniers and started on the bikes. The afternoons are hot and sunny so everything dries well. Once washed we head around to the supermarket for some lunch and dinner makings. Oh such choice as we haven't really seen in 3 months.

The tent dries in the hot sun but still smells of asado smoke - we wonder if will ever go away! I spend a lot of the afternoon writing to catch up on our journal. That night we cook our meal here. There are some workers living here and they get meals but we were never offered that option, ours looked more interesting anyway.

Los Angeles Day 2

Apart from breakfast that is supplied here as part of the price there was no reason for us to rush to get up today. I hadn't folded the dry tent after washing it yesterday - it felt too hot to be bothered in the afternoon so that was the first job today. Then I still had some panniers to wash a bit. There were still some journal updates to tidy off (although looking at them weeks later they were still full of typos).

We then head out for a morning walk. First we go south and west a block to Plaza de Los Angeles, a quiet treed park. Then we go north a block to Avenida Ricardo Vicuña the center of which is wide enough to be a long park eight or so blocks long. There are gardens, fountains, a skateboard park. Most poignant is a memorial to those dead or disappeared from the Pinochet years. "With your memory we live" is the inscription on the top of a large granite block below which are carved all the names of those local victims of those troubled times. At home our memorials are for those who fought in foreign wars so it is sobering to think that in this modern age so many can be lost in civil conflict.

At the western end of the avenue is Laguna Esmeralda, a block filled by a large lake, I would think that it was once excavated as some sort of quarry now leaving a great park around the lake with a children's playground with dinosaurs at one end. On the other side is the City football stadium, there are preparations for some concert on here tonight We then head east towards the downtown area along one of several water

canals that channel water from the mountains to the east through the city. The other side of the shopping area is the market area where we buy some delicious looking raspberries. They must have a late summer variety here ours at home are done by Christmas and we missed them as they were just starting to ripen in the garden before we left. It's getting warm now as we head back to the hostel.

Back to our room before heading out for lunch we have a rest for a while. For lunch we go a block over the avenue to a small place with various items on a set menu, all quite adequate. Then as we pass the supermarket heading back home we need to buy some icecream to eat with the raspberries that we bought earlier - the problem now that we are back in civilization is getting anything at the supermarket less than 1 liter! So we had our dessert of half the raspberries and icecream for lunch leaving the rest for the evening.

We had a quiet afternoon. I finished preparing the bikes for the bus by taking off the front mudguards again. We finished our packing making sure that the now bone dry and clean tent was packed ready for the trip home and agriculture inspection when we arrived back in New Zealand.

Our evening meal was leftovers from the previous night and the second half of desert. A quiet day all in all.

A Hot Bus Ride

Los Angeles to Santiago

www.pppg.pictures/LosAngelesSantiago.htm

We were up a bit before 8 - this seems to be our regular time now that the days are shorter. Breakfast and showered before nine we had nothing to do so we decided to head off to the bus station good and early and hopefully before the traffic built up. Our route that we came back on the other morning after buying our tickets was still relatively quiet and we were at the bus station by 9:30, an hour to spare before our bus. I took off our pedals and we sat around watching the world of a bus station. They have TV screens with departures listed but ours never made it there. We were assured by a man at our bus office that he would tell us when our bus came in - he later turned out to be the ticket man on our bus. We watched buses come in and pick up passengers, we could see we would have trouble getting everything on a bus just stopping as it passed through here. Towards our departure time I took off the panniers and front wheels. Somewhat after 10:30 our bus rolled in empty as it was starting its journey here. It wasn't quite as flash as the one we had seen the other day. Well as long as it had room for our bikes and it did so that was fine. It turned out that we were making a stop at Chillan, a city about an hour up the road. As we were more transporting locals than tourists the baggage requirements were less which is why they had no trouble with our bikes. With the bus commencing its journey here it was relatively easy getting the bikes on.

We picked up a few people along the way which the big flash buses don't - they are direct. After Chillan we picked up a woman on a roadside stop. It turned out she wasn't going all that far - well more than local bus but less than most of us. But our ticket man charged her more than she expected - well she had got on a long distance bus and it's the getting on that often costs rather than the distance traveled. She was not happy. An animated discussion started and she kept calling our crew ladrones - thieves. She demanded the police so we stopped at a police checkpoint along the highway. So there the bus was stopped on this hot afternoon for 15 minutes or more while she registered some sort of complaint before we moved on again. When we eventually dropped her she was bid farewell with "adios loca" (bye crazy woman) from our ticket man.

So we rolled on further northwards on a hot afternoon into the early evening. The land got drier around us but we were traveling up Chile's Central Valley that is their agricultural heartland. We left the grain and forestry behind. We saw lots of corn, vineyards, fruit of various times. There were warehouses and plants for large multinationals along the road. The tomato harvest was in full swing and truck loads were being delivered to the factory beside the highway. We passed grain harvesters on the highway, there is often little option to this one central 2 lane highway that runs over a 1000 kilometers south of Santiago. For one short section the hills closed in on us but not for long, it was agriculture and urbanization all along the way.

We arrived in Santiago about 6 and we were disgorged out of the bus in the central station. People were all around as I reassembled the bikes and loaded them for the few kilometers to our hostel. Onto the main avenue after a block or two we realized a cycleway followed down the middle of it so we managed to cross onto it. We didn't need our calculated route as we went down the cycleway until it was time to go the few blocks up to our hostel. Luckily we wanted to go the right way up a one way street - almost all streets seem one way alternating which is which.

With our bikes parked out the back and unloaded and us showered and everything in our room we headed out for a meal. Our hostel is in the older part of town with many old buildings. It is a couple of blocks from Avenida Brasil - the main restaurant and bar area in central Santiago so the problem was which place to eat at and not can we find a place. We ended up at outside a place looking across the road to the square. I had a Choriana, it's a relation of the Pachingas from down south which doesn't seem available in the north. On a bed of chips are bits of steak fried with onions with a couple of fried eggs on the side, no pickles. If I want another Pichangas I will have to get back to southern Chile sometime in the future.

Boxing up the bikes

Santiago

www.pppg.pictures/Santiago.htm

We were up for breakfast at 8, almost too soon for it to all be out. It was the best breakfast of the tour, eggs, cereal, fruit, toast, and we aren't biking any more - I suppose we are paying well to be here. Out early, our first stop was a ferreteria (hardware store) a couple of blocks away at 9 to get some boxes for our baggage. It is too early, all the boxes go out at night - come back at midday we were told. So we walk about 8 blocks east to San Diego - the street where all the bike shops are and start heading down it. We are still too early for the bike shops to open - it's still not much after 9:30. At one some women are putting the bikes out on display. We ask for a box - we are told that at the end of the day they put them on the street and the cardboard collectors pick them up, come back then.

So we go back up to Avenida O'Higgins - the main avenue and we take the subway 6 stations west to the bus station to check out departures for Mendoza. There are a number of companies advertising lots of departure times so we figure we can turn up tomorrow morning and buy a ticket - they won't all be full. On the subway we go back to the Hostel to rest a while before heading back to the hardware store and getting 2 boxes for our general stuff. There follows a couple of hours of packing and repacking as although we seem to squeeze everything in boxes a bit bigger would be nice.

About 4:30 we figure that it's time to go out for bike boxes. We walk the couple of blocks to our nearest Metro and take two stations south to Parque O'Higgins. After a quick look at the park we walk the half dozen blocks to San Diego and start walking up it. We pass the first couple of bike shops as they are on the wrong side of the road and then go into one on our side. We explain to a fellow there and he asks the boss who says OK. So he disappears out the front door and a few minutes later comes back with 2 boxes. They are a bit ripped but beggars can't be choosers so we start the 2 kilometers trek back to the hostel carrying the boxes. About a block later we see a better box on the footpath so we swap it for the worst box and carry on. About 30 meters later is another better box so we swap out the second of the first 2 boxes. We now have 2 boxes without handholds - the source of damage on our original boxes from New Zealand. Thankfully the afternoon is cooling as we make our way home. We wonder what people think about a couple of foreigners carrying a couple of boxes through the city, generally it's the down and out that collect the cardboard.

It's about 6:30 when we get back to the hostel and then begins a hour and a half of concerted disassembly and packing of the bikes and panniers into the boxes. It's easy to say that now but at the start we wondered if we were going to be able to fit everything in. The rear tires had to be let down completely flat to get the bikes into their boxes and it's a good job we don't have bigger frames is the best way to sum it up. Our boxes were on the small side of the range. After some trial and error and unpacking and repacking we are all done and the boxes wrapped in the mattress bags that we have been carrying and they are left down the side of the hostel where we are assured that they will be OK.

Then it's out to find some food. We head past Plaza Brasil on the look out to try the local Chinese - we are not far from the restaurant part of town so there's 3 or 4 to choose from. We choose one and have one of the set meals for two, chicken chop suey and Mongolian beef. It came with wontons. Not wontons as we know them as filled parcels of pastry but a softer version of wonton wrappers just fried as sheets. As any Chilean meal comes with some ahi - hot spice - we got some sliced hot peppers.

Now as usual in such places the TV is going in one corner of the room. This week has been the annual festival in Vina del Mar, a popular place to the north of Valpariso. There have been concerts and other events including a beauty contest. As we watch the item on the beauty contest one cultural difference that I hadn't really appreciated is brought home to me. Now in our Anglo Saxon cultures we expect the contestants in a beauty contest to smile for the camera and say something vacuous about wanting to travel and meet people while we appreciate their cleavage. Here in this Latin culture there seems none of this. We wouldn't know if the girls were smiling or not. They are lined up on the stage facing not the audience but the rear of the stage.

We get to see their derrières, all in skimpy almost nothing bikini bottoms. They shake their firm but ample buttocks for the camera. I wish them well, what may be a prize-winning rear at 18 or 19 will soon head south in later years. It makes me think of the advertising for western products with multinational advertising with smiling faces and cleavage but the local advertising is more likely it emphasize ample buttocks.

Then it's home to bed to be ready for a new adventure tomorrow.

Backpacking to Argentina for the Weekend

Up and over the Andes the easy way - Santiago to Mendoza

www.pppg.pictures/SantiagoMendoza.htm

We were up a bit before 8 to finish packing the boxes and tape them down. Knowing that the 8:00 start for breakfast really meant they start putting it out at 8 we didn't rush down so it was a bit after 8:30 that we finally came down with our boxes for storage. We had learned earlier that in spite of what we had been told when booking that there wasn't room to store our bikes inside. The storage room just wasn't big enough. They had to be left outside under the eaves of the building – but there was virtually no chance of rain at this time of year and I still had our old mattress bags to wrap the boxes in.

Then it was down to the subway to head to the bus station. We went to the next stop past the terminal which is almost as close to the international end of the terminal complex anyway but there is a huge supermarket there so I got some juice to drink on the 7 hour trip. We got to the ticket counters about 9:45 and by the time we decided on a bus it was nearly 10 so we asked about the 10:30 departure. Sure, there was space. The fellow went out to the company next door and came back with their tickets – it seems they work with each other. But we are confused as their departure time was 10:00, but no, the bus will leave at 10:30. We are wondering which bus to catch when but then a young woman comes and picks up her backpack from the office and she is on our bus and she shepherds us to the right place. She works as a tourist guide in San Pedro de Atacama but is from Mendoza and is traveling home as a surprise for her grandmothers 90th birthday. She is full of useful and interesting conversation. She travels by minibus on this trip because it is quicker than the big more comfortable buses. She has already been on a bus for 24 hours from the north already.

Santiago bus station is a marvel to behold, there are 2 stations on blocks side by side and we were at gate 48. There are huge buses coming and going constantly most of the time. They somehow squeeze into their small place, disgorge or pick up passengers and leave in a remarkably short time. This morning for nearly 10 minutes our terminal nearly hit gridlock. Buses couldn't get out to the narrow street so buses couldn't get in so buses couldn't get out. Our little mini bus managed to sneak in amongst the giants but they were probably hoping to pick up some last minute passengers (like us) so our driver disappeared and was in no hurry to return. It was a nice new mini bus, our new friend told us they had some old skungier ones so we were lucky today. So eventually we are loaded with some seats to spare, our driver looked about 70 but certainly knew how to drive a mini bus. On the road we were off.

One of the reasons I wanted to do this trip is the scenery. We did it twice 23 years ago but I'm still keen to travel it again. From Santiago we go north on Ruta 57 towards Los Andes, it may not be the shortest route but it bypasses the city so is the fastest and from the moment we hit the motorways leaving the city our driver showed he was not the type to take the slow option. We go up a valley In the first section we see how dry and arid the land is in the mountains here with Cacti among the scrub. We have to go through a tunnel a couple of kilometers long, cyclists have to choose a longer route or face a 600m climb over the saddle on the old road or hope for a lift through the tunnel. We come out to another valley and travel along with vineyards and orchards beside the road. We get a brief view up the valley we will soon follow of Aconcagua, South America's highest mountain, far away in Argentina in the distant haze. Just east of Los Andes we turn east up the valley of the Rio Aconcagua that will take us to the border.

Up a long narrow river valley into the mountains we go. All the way there is the old railway that once went through to Mendoza, it is mostly on the other side of the river. The valley progressively narrows. There are houses and small holdings along the way, some of those on the other side of the river are serviced only by narrow swing bridges. We get a glimpse ahead of an incredibly narrow gorge, Saldo de Saltado, where the railway goes in a tunnel on one side of the river and seems to come out on the other but there is an a short bridge in the middle apparently. Upstream the valley opens out a bit but the mountains are more jagged and spectacular. There are several small hydro power schemes with penstocks clinging desperately to the precipitous mountain sides. The water is carried along the mountain sides by tunnels and water races. The

railway continues to cling to the other side of the valley and above it is another water channel, both disappear into tunnels at times.

We pass the village of Rio Blanco where the railway now ends and passengers had to change to a narrow gauge train for the trip through to Argentina. We pass under a rail bridge, now disused but no one seems to have thought of taking it away. Almost immediately we come to a section where at one time the main road crossed the river for a kilometer or so before coming back. With the railway gone the road builders have taken the opportunity to keep the road all on the same side of the river through here. The old road is still in reasonable condition although starting to break up a bit. Our driver knows that he can take this old road and put his foot down and hopefully get the jump on some of the traffic in front of us. We are not the only one to try this and I'm not sure we gain much as we get held up by a larger truck. After this the road continues to rise gently and with some good clear straights our driver keeps his foot down and lightly laden we pass one of the larger buses heading our way. We pass under our first avalanche tunnel below where the road passes under a spectacularly steep valley up the side of a mountain.

Then there is the climb of 30 or so curving switchbacks, a couple of which have tunnels to enable the skifield users to cross it in winter. There is work on one lane near the top and we have to wait behind a long string of traffic for a few minutes to get our turn on the open lane. Then the gradient gets easier as we whiz past Chilean immigration. Argentina and Chile have integrated customs so you do the leaving Chile formalities at the same time as entering Argentina and visa versa so only one stop is required. The old railway heads into a tunnel but for us in the next three or four kilometers the road is in an open sided avalanche tunnel so that it can remain open in winter. Then we head into Túnel Cristo Redentor and we are soon out the other side where we are through to Argentina.

On the Argentinean side the old railway was covered in parts by a series of what could best be described as long snow sheds. The different styles of construction indicate that these were built over many years. The more recent seem the sturdiest and over the years of disuse avalanches have taken out some sections. Others are being dismantled and the sturdy wooden beams recovered but there are other sections still standing falling slowly into disrepair. Down a bit we can get a glimpse out the bus window of a the famous Puente del Inca, a natural stone bridge. Here there are some hotels for the ski slopes here and a number of smaller shops catering to tourists. Up a side valley we get another glimpse of the snow covered Aconcagua. We go down quite a bit before arriving at Argentinian immigration.

Our fast trip then comes to a sudden stop. We had silently cheered as our minibus had passed a big bus coming up the other side as that put us ahead on them in the queue - which had grown behind us. Maybe we have arrived at lunch time but it seems so slow. Our driver knows the system and we are shepherded as a group to one of the booths for immigration formalities. The first delay is that there is only one person there - the Argentinian, the Chilean must be at lunch but he gets there in a few minutes. So firstly we hand our passport to the Chilean man who does his bit. He hands our passports back and we hand them in the next window about half a meter on to the Argentinian immigration. Now they work in the same booth side by side all but touching elbows but the passports have to come back out to us and in again. Immigration done we then have to wait for agriculture inspection. Now our previous entries into Argentina have been, shall we say, somewhat more relaxed but here it all has to seem to be done. We watch as the bus in front of us is processed. All the baggage is taken off and piled by the scanner belt. Then once it is all out it all goes through the scanner and is piled again. Then it is loaded back onto the bus. The fellow watching the X-rays does his bit for a short time and then is having a cigarette or texting - we note that there is a no smoking sign out where we are. In the meantime the passengers all stand by a long table with their hand luggage ready for inspection - but that isn't bothered with. Our driver comes around with a small plastic cup asking for tips for the baggage handlers who have to unload and then reload every bag. It is a reminder that we are back in Argentina.

Then it's our turn and with only 10 passengers things go more quickly. For some reason they want to check my backpack after X ray. Looking rather puzzled I ask what they are interested in as I unzip. He asks about fruit. I say no in a genuine 'why do you think I have fruit' voice and after a very cursory look that's it.

So we are back on the bus and roll out the door when the driver realizes that we are one short - one fellow went to buy a drink and something to eat at the small stalls outside the big processing building back on the other side where we entered and we moved on quickly so we wait a minute for him. Then we are off downhill racing along.

The scenery is very spectacular, all different colors of rocks, some snowy peaks. We make a short stop at Uspallata for fuel and toilet. Continuing on down the valley of the Rio Mendoza the scenery is less spectacular but with some highlight of colored rock formations. Even though the railway line has been closed for 30 years the old train track remains and it is washed out or covered by slips in places. It crosses the river numerous times sometimes on spectacular bridges and mostly seems to be on the opposite side to the road. There are several derelict crumbling railway stations with a few houses along the way. If the line were ever to be restored it would be a fantastic tourist train trip. The river is dirty from the recent rain but we see several rafting groups going down no doubt enjoying the extra flow that rain has brought. We reach Embalse Potrerillos, a new dam finished in 2003 that has created a large new lake. The train line disappears into the lake making any restoration of the line impossible from here. Apparently the river is often dirty and the silt is already raising concerns about just how soon it might fill the lake. There are some large new asphalt roads between us and the lake indicating a subdivision with lots overlooking the lake. The road ends at a cliff face, one day there will be a tunnel coming out connecting to the road below the dam but for now it remains a emphatic dead end at this sheer rock face. In the long term this may happen as this is Argentina's only significant mountain lake north of the Lake District but for now the subdivision looks like a folly. Maybe when better economic times return to Argentina it will become a popular place. The dam is in a narrow gorge and the road leaves the lake for a saddle well away from it and then it is a good straight downhill run to join Ruta 40 just south of Mendoza.

Some people have ridden this route by bike. They have my admiration. It's a long climb of a couple of hundred kilometers from Mendoza to the pass or an even stiffer climb coming up from Chile. It's dry and hot in summer or cold in winter. It is a very spectacular trip however.

So we arrive in Mendoza about 6. We haven't arranged a place to stay so start walking. I've forgotten how much walking you do as a backpacker. We are used to small towns and bikes now. It's a warm evening and central Mendoza is a very pretty city with trees down both sides of the street. We strike out at the first couple of places but the second rings another hostel in their chain and they have a room so after 20 minutes more walk we end up with a room - but for only one night. Things are busy this weekend, apparently because of the annual three day harvest festival and there are plenty of visitors in town. We head out and have a meal on the main pedestrian mall. A young fellow sits at the next table and clearly isn't a local - we strike up a bit of conversation. He is Swiss, his family own a vineyard in Switzerland. He has finished his study and has come here to work on the grape harvest for practical experience. He tells us that this is the beginning of the annual grape harvest festival so that is why things are a bit busy.

Later it's hot in our room, we are trying to get to sleep wondering if we will have a bed tomorrow or will we have to head back to Chile on a late bus.

Mendoza in the Rain

www.pppg.pictures/Mendoza.htm

I don't know much about art, I have a scientific brain. My theory about art is that if you like it you like it and if not you don't like it and you shouldn't have to be told whether you should like or appreciate it or not. So with a chance to see a Picasso exhibition with 60 of his works, all free, I wondered what I would think. Well he certainly had talent. Some of his talent was knocking off a few rough sketches and selling them. On the other hand there was something about even these sketches that demonstrated more talent than most people have. I would have been happy to have them on my wall - well most of them. He also had a talent for a drawing a bit of porn in the days before the Internet is full of the real thing - did he get his models to pose in the act or was it from "imagination".

We woke a bit before 8, it's quite dark this morning. Rain was predicted last night but never happened and this morning the sky looks ominous. We finish breakfast just as the rain starts. Before long there is thunder and lightning and the heavens open. The street outside seems to become a river. We stay in our room until checkout time at 10. We then go down and continue to look at possible places to stay on the Internet not wanting to venture out until the rain stops. It has eased to a few drops towards 11 so we head out leaving our bags in storage.

We head towards the bus station where there are quite a few places. We soon came to one hotel that seems to have a flash entrance but go in anyway. They have one room and it's at the same price as we paid in the hostel. The only thing is that it has no outside window - not uncommon in these places, the window that it has opens into a big hall area that probably once didn't have a roof. We take it even though at this stage we are not sure if it's available two nights. We then head out to the pedestrian mall for a drink and croissant before picking up our bags and return to our new abode. Light drizzle turns to light rain but the sun is trying hard and it soon clears off.

Back out to lunch in the same place we ate last night because the steaks there looked so good. But we are disappointed as what they serve us is as tough as Chilean beef. Then we go up the couple of blocks to the main Plaza where the Picasso exhibition is and spend a bit over an hour there.

We've done a lot of walking so it's back to the hotel for an afternoon sleep. Later it's out for a light meal of empanadas and a glass of the local red wine - very smooth.

Touring around Mendoza

Today we decided that we would take the bus tour of Mendoza. The circuit takes two hours and with the ticket you can get on and off the bus for 24 hours from when you first get on - so you can spread your usage over parts of 2 days if you want. We hadn't realized the effect being Sunday would be on patronage....

We were up not long after our usual time and out for breakfast a bit later than yesterday, we were in no rush. It was after 10 when we walked to the city center and found out a bit about the bus at the information center just across San Martin from the pedestrian mall. Then Alison wanted a coffee so we went to one of the many places along the street. At a few minutes to 11 we headed down to the main stop there to catch the bus. The queue was long, we had to buy tickets. I went over to the ticket office but by the time I had bought the tickets it had gone and anyway there were people left and we wouldn't have got on. The circuit takes the bus past the west side of the main Plaza about 15 minutes past the hour so we raced up there to join a new queue, the bus arrived as we approached the stop. It was still pretty full with not much room. Somehow we were the first ones not to get on, not helped by some blonde calling her 'friends' from the back of the queue to get passed up before we realized what was happening. So we walked back to the main stop determined to get on. I parked myself at one end of the queuing area and Alison placed herself further along where she saw people get on last time a few meters away. A Range Rover turned up and parked on the bus stop, a man got out and took a couple of big plastic bags of bread rolls off to a restaurant and didn't return - at least while we were there. My Chilean friend from the ticket office was there with some friends. The bus rolled in and the Range Rover was to my advantage - I was at the front of the queue because the bus couldn't go forward enough. So I called Alison forward and after the previous occupants were disgorged we were first on the 12:00 bus.

Off we went. We had been planning to get off and back on along the route but as it was an hour between buses we decided nothing interested us that much. The route winds up through the main park to the top of a hill from where there are views across Mendoza and around. You then realize that while the central city of Mendoza is green and affluent the area around it is dry pampas and not all of Mendoza is rich. We stayed on the bus and saw a place for lunch outside the tourism area. We eventually got off at the second to last stop that was closest to the bus station to where we walked.

At the bus station we set about buying tickets for tomorrow. Chi-Ar who we came over on were shut, Nevada who sold us the ticket we came over on only had a 9am bus. Our local friend on the bus over from Santiago had told us that the early buses were not good ones to take - something about a long time through customs. So we settled on another company with small buses that left at 12:30, that seemed a relaxed time to leave and as we had our room booked in Santiago it wouldn't matter if we were a bit late - a good thing as it turned out. I had forgotten that I needed my passport - well it may be an international border but it's hardly like flying into New Zealand. That was OK however as long as I got there in plenty of time in the morning so that they could put my details into the system.

So we popped back via our hotel for fresh camera batteries and then walked up across the Plaza and along Peru Street a few streets to the Parrilla restaurant that we had spotted from the bus. It was 3 by the time we got there and most people were finishing but we ordered the mixed traditional parrilla that came with salad. There was some suspicion that it included stomach bits and we knew it always comes with blood sausage but it had Tire - a strip on flank meat cut across the bones with the rib bones still on I had tried to get but failed back at Villa Angostura. We had to have a glass of the local red malbec of course being our last day in Argentina.

It was after 4 when we finished and decided to head to the local park where there were supposed to be some activities as part of the week of the harvest festival. There were only a few BBQ's selling stuff but it was still cold by local standards after the rain this morning. There were only a few people there and even less customers. As a few spots of rain came on we realized that the city tour bus was soon due so we waited and hopped on it to get back to the center.

Back to our hotel we rested up a bit and popped out later towards the bus station for some fruit and a

sandwich for our evening meal. The local TV channel was playing the concert back in the park that was part of the blessing at the opening of the harvest festival. The local harvest queen was selected, all around town we had seen photos of all the contestants, one from each of the local wine growing areas. Even the Pope had sent a message or so we read in the paper the next day - well he is Argentinian remember. The locals may have been set to party all night with a holiday tomorrow but we weren't.

Smugglers and Mad Bus Drivers

Mendoza Santiago

www.pppg.pictures/MendozaSantiago.htm

We were up a bit after 8, there being no rush today and yesterday we seemed a bit early for breakfast so we checked the Internet. Alison had taken a shower earlier and so it was a bit before 9 that we went to breakfast. This is a small place and our lady seemed to have distractions, someone sorting out a room and then phone calls so I went back and had my shower. Finally after nearly half an hour our plate of croissant and rolls had come out, they don't have much of a breakfast here. When I came back the food had arrived with apologies that the young helper was supposed to do it. So it was edging 10 when we were back in our room for final pack. The cleaner was hovering to do our room (10 checkout) so we felt rushed out of our room for no fault of our own. Our bus wasn't until 12:30 and they were happy enough to keep our bags for a bit. So we went out and walked a bit and had coffee and chocolate with a hot croissant with ham and cheese on the main strip of restaurants before moving on. We walked and noticed lots of shops shut. One money changer had said something about things being shut due to the harvest festival. As we headed back towards the hotel we found a small store where Alison bought some Mate to take home.

Back at the hotel we picked up our bags and as we neared the bus station we went to buy some sandwiches and drink at the small store where I had got a sandwich last night. Embarrassingly we didn't have enough pesos left for our pile and had to put one back as we pooled our few tatty notes. They have two peso notes here from the days before they were inflated away to almost nothingness and they have all become very tatty unlike the bigger value notes which are of course newer. We now had 14 pesos left. Passing another of the food places nearing the bus station we noted we could have a pancho for 14 pesos. At the bus station I checked in with my passport and we took a seat - we were there with nearly an hour to spare. I went back and bought a pancho with my 14 pesos not knowing what I was getting - it was a hot dog in a roll. I had to pay at one shop across the walkway and then take the ticket back to the man making them, all very confusing.

So eventually our bus comes in, it's not a mini bus like the one that we came over on but a small bus - we had 31 on it and there were a couple of spare seats. People started getting on and so did we. Sitting there we watched as a group of four were splitting up a whole lot of goods between them into their baggage, cigarettes, household cleaner, medicines and other stuff. We never realized that there was such a difference in prices between the two countries that a "shopping" trip to Mendoza was so worthwhile. Thankfully they weren't coming on our bus. It wasn't until we made it to Chilean customs later in the afternoon that we realized the preponderance of getting all this sort of stuff back into Chile.

As usual we leave late and head out on the four lane Ruta 40 for a few kilometers before turning off towards the Andes. Just as we leave the flat we are behind a huge line of traffic. Our "mini" bus isn't as powerful as it could be but our driver soon showed his stuff with passing maneuvers that go to the edge of dangerous, a portent of what is to come. The road winds and climbs and it still takes well over half an hour before we clear the last of the line, a small van going along at less than the limit. Somewhere I spot a real loaded touring cyclist heading Mendoza way, we speculate that he has come down Argentina and not across the pass but who knows. With the fresh snow on the tops he is probably looking for somewhere warmer.

After a couple of hours we stop at Uspallata at the same fuel place we stopped coming over. We are told five minutes but that really means fifteen. Back on the road we make a quick stop to drop our passenger list at the police station as we pass through "town". Uspallata is in a large irrigated valley floor and as we pass over the river we see families setting up the fires for a BBQ on it's banks - this really must be a holiday day here. We are soon in the dry barren valley that marks the last 80 kilometers or so to the pass. Not long after we are actually passed by a big bus that left after us. This is frustration because it means they will be in the immigration queue before us. It spurs our driver to put his foot to the floor and we swing around corners for a while. He doesn't have the horsepower of the big boys and we slowly fall back and the big bus passes a long truck. There are not many passing opportunities so we fall back more especially when we have to stop for a police checkpoint and the truck takes a few minutes to be cleared before it is our turn. Argentina still has these

checks close to the border.

Soon we are on the last stretch to the border and we whiz past the Argentinian border station and soon into the tunnel. In this last section I'm again busy snapping photos of the old railway covered by its remaining "sheds" for want of a better word. For many kilometers the railway had a shed built over it to protect it from winter snows. Slowly falling to bits or damaged by avalanches it hasn't been taken down although I think some bits have gone since we last came this way 23 years ago.

Out into Chile we go, there is a short tunnel and longer stretch of covered road to protect from snow and avalanches we soon arrive at the Chilean border post. There are two buses already inside and we park outside for our turn next. After a while we are shepherded as a group to the immigration windows for buses. It's drizzling a bit here now and it's cold close to the snowy peaks and we need to put our jackets on, very glad we did as we were to be standing around a while. We still have quite a wait before our turn and we mill around but we all have to be back on the bus as it drives the few meters into the building. We all then have to file off the bus into a room with our hand baggage and are lined up at two rows of tables with our stuff in front of us. Baggage handlers with a trolley start taking the baggage off the bus onto a long conveyor. This looks far more efficient than the Argentinian system. Our Agriculture forms are collected, a girl behind us had declared some cheese and is allowed to keep it. Someone has cigarettes but within the allowed limit. A dog comes along and sniffs our bags and picks hers and that's OK then the dog picks another bag. A young man has an apple he hasn't declared so it's taken. Another dog passed - must be trained for something else but doesn't pick up anything.

Then the baggage starts rolling through the X ray and our big delay starts. Some bags are picked out and the search begins and they all turn out to belong to one woman. This woman has four or five bags and stuffed through her clothes are cigarettes and big packets of Mate and cooking oils and some medicines. All other processing stops while her stuff is processed, pack by pack cigarettes are extracted from amongst her clothes. It's all picked up and then piled up again. They ask to see her hand luggage and more comes out. In the end she is allowed to keep her limit and some cooking oil and other bits but a huge pile is confiscated and put in a large plastic bag and then it is taped up. We all stand watching this and nothing else is happening. Before we went in there were a couple of buses behind us so who knows how many are waiting now. I would have thought it would have made sense to process her on the side and continue processing the rest of us but no, it seems Chile is not as efficient as I thought or perhaps they are making a point. The whole world has to wait. So then the rest of the baggage is Xrayed without finding anything and then we have to file from our tables and put our hand luggage through the X ray as well. This all goes smoothly and finally we are on the bus again. We start to roll but there is one last check point just after we leave the building and for some reason to do with our smuggler we are held up again for five minutes or so while our ticket man disappears.

We haven't been on the road a few minutes before we come to the queue for the road works on the switchbacks down. It isn't long and thankfully we have only been there a couple of minutes before the first cars come up so in the end it's not a huge delay in the context of the day. Off we go and our driver is keen to make up time passing cars and trucks on the short straight sections between the switchbacks. Many of these trucks are very long and he passed some cars and then to pass the truck in front but hasn't sufficient space. He pulls up hoping a gap will open for him with the last car behind the truck letting us in. He misjudges a little and there is a crash as his right hand mirror (that sticks out) crunches into the rear of the truck. The truck had been slowing for the hairpin ahead as far as I could tell but bits dropped off and the mirror mount now pokes out the side of the bus. We don't stop - the truck driver probably never knew anything happened. We carry on down the driver's passion to pass only spurred on and to be fair he could see well ahead that nothing was coming for our next passing maneuver.

We don't actually stop until well down the valley where there is a police checkpoint where the passenger list is dropped off again. Our driver and ticket man set about trying to straighten the mirror mount. The remaining cowl is broken off and the mop handle they had on board is used to straighten things a bit but not enough so they walk over to the Carabineros who are watching and from behind the building and they come

back with a broken wooden post with which they start to give the mount a few good whacks until they are satisfied. About ten minutes later we are on the road again.

Now you eventually learn it's the questions that you don't ask and what is not said that count here. The other bus company said "Directo" ours did not. So when we get near to the city of Los Andes we head off the motor way and through the city for a couple of drop offs, crawling through what is now the rush hour traffic. Leaving town it's a bumpy road before we hit the main Ruta 5 highway again. The sun is setting and for some reason we leave the motor way but in the end maybe this is a shortcut as we race along a good road before rejoining Ruta 5 maybe 15 minutes later. Eventually we are into the city and leave the motorway for the rat running of the small streets to get to the bus terminal. Again as we are about to enter it almost seems grid locked as a bus can't go in and has to back a bit as others leave. Eventually in a bay we are off and away quickly as we had taken our bags on board we don't have to wait for luggage unloading.

It's getting dark as we walk to the subway and our few stops. We pass the ferretaria hoping we may see a bigger box sitting outside for our stuff but eventually see one a few doors from the hostel. We take it in but it's no bigger than the one we have that we want to upgrade. Quickly to our room and out for a meal as it's been a long day. While we had thought of a day in Valparaiso tomorrow we decided a less frenetic day is in order.

So our weekend in Mendoza all added to the experiences of traveling. One girl Alison talked to at Chilean immigration had done the trip for the scenery only and that was one of our reasons. The scenery is certainly spectacular. Mendoza is a pretty city and there are many ways to spend your tourist dollars. Many cyclists we met here do their trip on a tight budget but not all. If you have the time and money a trip between Santiago and Mendoza is very scenic. The colors in the mountains are best if you are on a bus without seriously tinted windows. Chi-Ar and Nevada run the mini buses, O'Higgins we returned on has small buses and many companies run big double decker buses. Some of the Mini buses are old but we had a good one. Try and avoid Fridays and Mondays. I'm not sure about the advice we got about not going on the early bus, after all you get the best daylight that way. These small bus companies advertise a range of times for leaving but you have to be there to know which they are actually leaving on. In the end we are glad we made the trip.

I was on the same side of the bus this time and got some photos out the window - it was quite tinted so colors of the rocks were lost. The light not good most of the trip as it was cloudy and there was drizzle at the top of the pass.

Santiago Again

www.pppg.pictures/SantiagoAgain.htm

Alison wanted to do a walking tour of the city and I wasn't that interested so I spent the morning writing the journal and deciding what to do about packing our stuff. I finally had a chance to weigh the bike boxes and with them coming in at 22kg each there seemed no need to think about taking weight out. As a result our two existing boxes of everything will just do with lots of tape so I went to the supermarket to get a new roll as the one we got in Los Angeles was not as sticky as it should be. It was this morning that I discovered that pre-pay mobile credit last only 3 months here and as we are a couple of days beyond our 3 months mine had expired. Alison had topped up so could send me a message but I couldn't receive it unless I topped up but for one message I wasn't going to bother.

After Alison got back we went out for a late lunch to a place that she had spotted near the University where her tour had ended. She wanted to do some shopping so we each made our own way back to the Hostel. I was going to take the Metro but found an Icecream shop and bought a huge icecream and ate it while I walked up and around Cerro Santa Lucia which is a steep rocky hill about 20 meters high to the east of the CBD of Santiago. On the top is a large building a bit like a castle that was once a prison. I then had just had a westward walk through the CBD on a street mostly closed to cars to get back to the hostel. Later in the evening we didn't want a meal but I went out to get a snack and on a corner a couple of blocks from the hostel on the way to the supermarket there was a man cooking and selling sopaipillas so I bought a couple. We tried for an early night for our early departure in the morning.

Up early in the morning for a taxi to the airport we flew off to Lima and Iquitos in the Peruvian upper Amazon for five days of Jungle adventure at a lodge a few kilometers downriver from the city. That story is not included here.

Lima To Santiago

Due to the cheapness of the flight we are on out of Lima it is a full 767, we take off a bit after midnight for a four hour flight. Because of the two hour time difference it's well after 5 when we arrive in Santiago. By the time we are through a long immigration queue and collect our checked in bag and then get the bus into town it's getting light. From the bus station to the hotel isn't far but we don't even consider walking with the Metro so convenient. We get down to the station but 3 trains pass all so full at this hour that new people can hardly get on. The fourth comes close behind the third and by those rules of trains and buses it has plenty of space. We get to the hostel about 7:30 and as you might reasonably expect the room we booked isn't available until later but we have the option of upgrading to a room con baño and moving in straight away. So it's easy to luxury for our last night of our holiday, no going out to the toilet or shower!

Alison is ready for a sleep but I'm not yet so I go upstairs to a comfy couch to load some photos to the journal but then fall asleep myself during loading the 3rd lot. Later we head out for lunch and see a place on the corner of our block that is some sort of club place that offers lunch so we go in as we can't be bothered going further. Then it is time to go out to find some tape. I got some clear sellotape for our boxes from the supermarket but we haven't seen the brown stronger stuff. On the suggestion of the hostel we stop at the hardware store where we got the boxes nearly two weeks ago and ask and it turns out that they keep it under the counter. We get a couple of rolls and then take the metro down to the old railway station. We walk through markets around there as we head back towards the hostel. At Av Brasil head up to Plaza Brasil where there is an icecream shop that Alison has her eye on. We get an icecream each and then head back to the hostel for another sleep. About 8 we head out to find something to eat. We get some fried breads and an empanada from a street corner stand a couple of blocks from the hostel and that's enough after our big lunch. We need an early night. We may have had a cheap flight from Lima and saved a night's accommodation but we haven't been good for much today.

Santiago Yet Again

Our last day

We are up by 8 and after breakfast we tape up all the boxes for one last time. We have to vacate our room and put all our boxes in the store room for the day. We are a bit late for the beginning of the walking tour of Santiago that Alison wants to do again so we set out to catch up with it at the presidential palace. We get there and there is a sort of parade. Ceremonial dressed troops and horses and a band come out and after getting into formation they set off around streets. It is the second day of the term of the new president so there are various ceremonies happening. When the tour arrives we walk with it for an hour but leave them just after midday and head down to Barrio Brasil for lunch – I have chicken and vege and Alison pork. With soup and lemon pie it is an expensive version of the set lunch menu but this is our last day and we have ended up with plenty of cash Chilean pesos. Back to the hostel and we sit in the TV area and have a sleep on the couches for the rest of the afternoon – we are not really over our overnight flight yet.

We are a bit tired to be bothered to make the most of our last day and hours of our trip. We have booked our shuttle and it arrives a bit early. The driver wants to be paid in advance – it's all to do with some airport rules that he is not really an authorized airport taxi and nothing more dodgy and he only wants 15,000 pesos, the normal price – I'm confused – we were told 25,000 when we booked yesterday for a shuttle that would take our bikes but we are pleasantly surprised. The boxes only just fit in the back – it's a good job we don't have bigger boxes as I remember the hassle getting our original ones in from Valdivia airport all that time ago. At the airport there's a short queue for our flight checkin but as we arrive one of the counter staff leaves so the queue starts to grow and it's only as we finish that she is replaced. We are told to watch for a gate change – after our Valdivia experience when we arrived here all those months ago we will be watching.

We are in the departure lounge but Chile hasn't finished with me yet. I had decided that for something to eat I'd have a subway. I don't have a subway often, usually when I'm out of town and today I felt like a subway with salad bits, that type of sandwich is the sort of thing I've missed on this trip. I get to be the only person left in the queue. The woman in front of me is asked if she wants lettuce, a little she responds. That is the right answer as they only have a little lettuce left. So I get asked if I want lettuce because I will have to wait. I say yes, after all I'm not going anywhere for a while. Seven minutes I'm told – why seven exactly I don't know. A woman turns up and is given a list of bits that this subway counter has run out of – there is another at the other end of the departure gates. I wait maybe ten minutes before she returns with various ingredients that have been requested. I ask myself if they knew they were running out of the ingredients why they didn't restock a bit earlier but then I guess you don't always have to be the sharpest to work at subway. So we are all go again. The woman restarts my roll. Then it comes time to add lettuce – do you want lettuce she asks – yes! I don't add the obvious of well I've been waiting for 10 minutes for the lettuce, do you think I have now changed my mind after waiting so long! In the meantime Alison had been relaxing at the bar with a final pisco sour and an empanada.

Our gate has a Lima flight leaving from it but after it has gone we and others start assembling there. Below the ground crew are there and the cargo containers are all lined up. Our boarding time is approaching but there is still no plane. The cabin and flight crew turns up but there is still no plane. They wait a while, the captain makes a phone call and then ominously they depart and there is an announcement that our plane has been delayed. There are a few more announcements and some people drift away. Some people go to the desk asking about connecting flight and I go up and am told there will be a new announcement.

Then we are told our gate has changed and we will be boarding from gate 18. So off we all go. Most people start to queue at the gate, why we ask, the crew haven't even made it here, some stayed around but most went off and they take a while to get here. We are among the few to sit for the next half an hour or so. Finally the first-class and those with children are boarded. Our turn comes and as we walk down the ramp there is a hand check of our luggage. We were checked on entry to the departure lounge but it is only a few days after the mysterious disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 so I guess they are being super cautious. Somehow Alison has the end of a bottle of sunblock we used today and it wasn't packed in our

boxes. It is declared too big and confiscated.

We are finally in our seats on the plane a bit before midnight, no upgrade for us this time. On the plane and we get an apology for the maintenance issue and it's about half past midnight before we finally take off ending our time in Chile. It's sad to be leaving but in a way good to be going home.

Leaving Santiago for Auckland - the day that shouldn't have an entry.

A journal likes an entry for every day, this day doesn't deserve an entry. Had we left Santiago on time we wouldn't have been anywhere but on a plane for part of the middle of the night of this day. Crossing the dateline the wrong way means we lose a day during the night. Well we were on the plane before midnight – just but it was after midnight that we actually took off from Santiago. At least a long night gives a bit of a chance for more sleep I suppose. Somewhere high above the Pacific Ocean one day turned into the next.

Three Months Have Flown By and We Must Fly Home

Auckland Christchurch

Traveling with a bicycle always adds a bit of extra tension to life when passing through airports and coming into New Zealand is no exception. We hadn't allowed for much slack in the time for our domestic connection so we were hoping to get through the system as quickly as possible. So it was with a bit of relief that as we had breakfast on the plane it seemed that we had made up a bit of time on our delay. The captain announced that we would only be about half an hour late giving us 2 hours to get through immigration, customs and agriculture and get to the domestic terminal.

Being down the back of the plane is always frustrating as you watch the minutes tick by disembarking but for such a large plane it didn't seem as bad as usual – no doubt two aisles helped. I stopped to change our residual Chilean Pesos while Alison went on to get our duty free allowance. I caught up just in time to have to pull out my credit card of course. Coming into Auckland immigration is now easy if you are an Australian or New Zealander with an E passport – just put your passport in a couple of machines and let the camera identify you and off you go – no human interaction - but you don't get a stamp in the passport any more.

Whatever the stress about getting off the plane you still have to wait for your baggage to get off the plane. Our bikes were waiting as oversize would often be last on and first off. We had to wait for our boxes though. Then to the dreaded agriculture check – would they be officious about the tent – New Zealand is fastidious about dirt being an agricultural country. At the initial check all those bits of food we have like Alison's favorite Chilean Cappuccino biscuits are cleared as innocuous but we are sent off to the manual check for the tent and bikes. I describe to the inspector how I have washed and dried the tent and pegs and as I start to open the box the inspector decides he doesn't need to check it after all so that's a relief and will save time. He does however need to check the bike boxes but is satisfied they are clean with a bit of a look, maybe if he could see under the mudguards he might have thought differently but they weren't muddy.

So we are free in New Zealand with a few minutes to make our 1 hour limit to check in for domestic flights at the international terminal. Although we have a few minutes to check in before the hour we are told that's not enough, we need to be there more than an hour ahead of time, not an hour and a little bit. Then our ticket doesn't seem to be recognized and we are not listed on the flight. We are then eventually found on the next flight, It seems someone has shifted our booking. That's a relief as we now have an extra 20 minutes and can check in. But wait there is more. The normal limit is one bag on Air New Zealand domestic flights - we have the bikes of course. We protest that we have traveled all the way on our one ticket with the bikes. If we had bought separate tickets for our domestic flight the one bag limit would apply but we made sure that we had the international flights and domestic connections on the same ticket so the woman rings someone higher up the chain. Yes it is cleared that the two bags are allowed. Finally all is going well and our baggage tickets and boarding passes are printed and we take them over to the oversize checkin and then we are off on the 15-minute walk to the domestic terminal with plenty of time to spare. We would have been on time for the earlier flight that we had been booked on but just. Finally on the plane and it isn't full. We speculate it's an extra flight added to get people up from Christchurch on its return for a Bruno Mars concert tonight. Our original flight is still boarding but we would have been pushing it to get our baggage over and checked in so maybe whoever shifted us to the later flight did us a favor but it was a bit stressful there for a few minutes.

It's a dull morning as we land in Christchurch. Walking out of the Terminal and looking for a shuttle to get us home we see a couple of touring cyclists roll into the terminal in the distance. I wonder if they are a couple that asked us on warmshowers (the cyclist equivalent of couch surfing) for some help but obviously we couldn't help, a later email confirms it was them.

So then we are home. Back to reality. I suppose it's just like any long or even short trip. Lots to catch up on while unpacking and washing. What a lot of stuff we have at home. After the same shirt almost every day and living in a few clothes for a few months it takes a bit to adjust.

Afterword

Do you think we are crazy setting out to cycle the Carretera Austral? We aren't exactly spring chickens anymore. Do you think Andre the Brazilian we met who walked it pushing his trolley is crazy. Do you think those who cycle from Alaska to Ushuaia are crazy? Perhaps you think all long distance touring cyclists are crazy. There's something in the human spirit that seeks adventure, challenge, the epic voyage that Andre was seeking. There's not much chance for those people who seek such challenges in their lives to find it now in a way our ancestors did. Even the challenge of Pinochet's Carretera of old is gone being subsumed by asphalt. We only got a taste of that old Carretera in a few short kilometers. It will take a while before it's all under asphalt, north of Coyhaique is projected by 2017, but it's mostly widened and "improved" and what isn't soon will be. The challenge will be less but maybe in so doing it will be more accessible, is that good or bad? There are so many things to see and do down here and you can't begrudge the benefits that tourism will bring to those who live here.

Development may bring new challenges like extending the Carretera along the west of the Patagonian ice sheet and then even on the new road to Puerto Williams, Ushuaia no longer the end of the road. If the hydro dams go ahead then maybe there will be a pylon route inland from the Hornopiren ferry along valleys and over passes, a road will be needed to access that and maybe that will be a new challenge to ride. We didn't ride all the Carretera Austral. We skipped around the coast road on our second day and circumstances had us skip a few days worth on the bus and our plans to come back to it were thwarted by the weather. To get technical no one rides all the Carretera Austral. There is the section south of Hornopiren that is a dead end - for now at least - that no one rides. Then at the south end it seems that the branch to the Rio Pascua has been designated Ruta 7 - but the sign at Lago O'Higgins still says that there is the end of the Carretera Austral. There is a certain feeling of unfinished business not having done the section from Puyuhuapi to Coyhaique but the alternative to end our trip offered different challenges and scenery so maybe it's all worked out. It has been one of the worst summers in years according to locals - but then it was one of the driest before midsummer which we benefited from.

You can't ride the Carretera Austral without weather - wet weather. Rain caused us to skip a section - but we got a feel of it from the bus window - not the same but we got the idea. We were delayed several times by rain, our schedule did have accommodation for that - but not quite enough. From beginning to end there was one thing and only one thing that we wanted out of the weather it was a good day to pass Lago Desierto to see Fitz Roy - and we got that so in spite of the rest of the weather we got what we wanted most.

But of course while the Carretera Austral was the inception for this adventure it ended up only being about half of it. Beginning and ending in the Lake district gave us plenty of challenges and memories. In the end two thirds the 2400 kilometers of our trip was on gravel roads. Not just gravel road but some really terrible gravel roads to ride on. Some bits were less than roads and while we have huffed and puffed pushing our bikes up steep hills, our feet hardly gripping on volcanic scoria, sweat pouring off us it is those bits that give us some of the best memories. Then one night in three was spent in our tent, unexpectedly cold for a summer of tenting. By some standards, especially of those younger than us, the distance covered was not a lot for three months but for us it was never a trip that was to be just about the biking.

I'm not sure what I thought the trip would be like. Of course we had an idea of the rigors of cycling and camping but we had backpacked through Chile and the rest of South America twenty years previously. We were reminded of how that works a few times when we bused some bits. You see what you can out the bus window as you are transported from place to place. You see the towns but not a lot in between. I guess I expected to see more of the in between and so it was but what I didn't expect was the greater interaction and experiences that we had with the local people we met along the way.

The memories are not all about the cold or of trying to bike forward and being blown to a stop by the Patagonian winds. Somehow those memories fade, perhaps that's how we survive to think we want to do it again. Of course we remember the scenery, lakes, rivers, snow covered mountains, even the road along the sea in parts but what we remember most are those times we met and enjoyed the hospitality of the Chilean

people. It is those unexpected small experiences that we had, the Chilean Sunday Picnic in Puerto Montt, the Rodeo and Asado in O'Higgins or the country fair in Curarrehue that we remember as an insight into the people and places we visited. Somehow for a cycling trip the cycling memories come second to all the other memories.

If you had told me 5 years ago that I would be writing this having ridden a bike down southern Chile and around Patagonia I would have thought you crazy. My bicycle had sat in the shed with only a few outings for years. To cycle to do some shopping was an achievement, then a 20 kilometers ride around town, then 40. After a short summer of riding we did a 100 kilometers ride/race in 3 hours 45min - and I was stiff and saddle sore. We finished the Carretera with a day of 100 kilometers, several thousand meters of climbing, eight hours in the saddle after ten hours on the road with a loaded bike. Maybe we were a bit stiff the next day but we could have carried on if needed. If you think your body is not up to it, well it's as much in your head as in your body and you have to start somewhere, where it ends is up to you.

I want to come back - back maybe in a camioneta and explore the side trips in a way that you can't on a bike without so much more time. Maybe with a driver so that I can ride the best bits and skip the rest. There is more than one way to see the Patagonia but Patagonia and the Carretera Austral are more than just the scenery. Maybe because we are a couple and a bit older we have had a few chances to enjoy vignettes of the Chilean experience in a way that most cyclists and tourists don't. Not only is it wonderful scenery down here but the Chileans are a hospitable and friendly people. There's still more to see and experience for another day.

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I would not have been able to write this book without Alison, it was her journey also. On the road she would do the shopping when we reached town enabling me to write the online journal from which this book evolved. I'm not a great typist and her proof checking was invaluable both then and for this book. She took many of the photos that accompany this book. She was also able to remind me of details that I had missed or forgotten and contributed them to this book.

We had many readers of our online journal, some were friends and family back home but many, if not most, were unknown to us. The occasional message from especially strangers was a great incentive to keep writing both as we were traveling and completing this book.

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