

Reconnecting with nature on the

BASE TORRES TREK

T HE WIND WAS HOWLING ALL NIGHT.

Strong gusts, some more than 100 kph, were smashing against my window.

They were so fierce and so loud that I actually awoke from my sound sleep.

I suppose that's typical here in Patagonia. Sitting at the edge of the world, this southern region is known to have extreme and unpredictable weather. With little warning, it can bounce from winter to summer to a full-blown thunderstorm in just one single day.

JENNY TOLEP

When morning came, the wind was wild as ever. Booming thuds echoed across my room and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried. Today was the day I was trekking to the base of the Towers in Torres del Paine National Park - the famous South American route that almost every hiker aspires to do. The trek is challenging, yet rewarding with a trail passing through forests, over streams, up boulders and to the park's most notable viewpoint of the Paine Towers. This beautiful massif is the pride and glory of Torres del Paine, formed by glacial erosion that began at least 12 million years ago. Erosion broke down lifted sedimentary layers of earth and left three granite, tower-like figures, representing both a geological phenomenon and a picture-perfect viewpoint.

At breakfast I eagerly swallowed spoonfuls of granola and listened to our expert trekking guide talk about the upcoming excursion. "It's going to be the toughest trekking day of the season," he chuckled, pointing outside to the strong thrum of wind and spouts of rain. My stomach was jittering -- I was both nervous and very excited. The conditions seemed rough, but my trekking group was enthusiastic and I knew I was in good hands. With an excursion arranged by local tour operator Cascada Expediciones, everything was set -- nutritious snacks and sandwiches, hiking poles and a certified guide to lead the way.

The trail began at the footsteps of my hotel EcoCamp Patagonia, which is located about 12 km from the base of the Towers. As we'd needed to hike there and back, we estimated it would take roughly 8 hours in total to complete the 24 km journey. With water bottles filled, trail snacks packed and warm layers on, we were finally ready to embark on the adventure. We set off, our guide confidently leading the way and six of us strutting behind. It was a diverse group -- three Americans, a guy from the Netherlands, a Brazilian and our Chilean guide. I've always been passionate about traveling and this is one reason why. Meeting people from all around the



With luck, you can encounter this picturesque view of the Paine Towers on a perfect, clear day / Cascada Expediciones

world and learning about new cultures is such an eye-opening experience. You realize how big the world really is and better learn how you fit into it.

We kept to a steady pace along the muddy trail, wandering up into the hills. I traveled with ease until we eventually reached an area called the "Windy

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Pass." As soon as we approached it, I understood exactly why the pass has this name. It's a point in the trail where you are very exposed to the natural elements: wind, hail, rain -- you name it. This part of the trail can be very challenging on rough, windy days. I started to push through the pass while bursts of wind and light hail beat strongly against my cheeks. With our

heads turned down, we hiked swiftly along the ledge until we reached an area with more coverage.

After the "Windy Pass," we continued, dripping deep in rain water. But even through the wetness, we encountered so much natural beauty along the way. Small waterfalls were nestled within the tall, rocky mountains and distant trees formed a watercolor montage with deep shades of yellow, orange, red and green. We passed over wooden bridges, looking over the roaring river into an immense distance that felt infinite. We were so small in a place that was so big and endless.

Soon the open vastness turned into thick forest and we were surrounded by countless autumn trees. April is definitely the best month to visit the park. The trees are rainbow and it really adds something special to the landscape. This part of the trail was peaceful and surreal -- almost like a fairytale, walking amongst hundreds of tall, mossy giants and listening to the sounds of water flowing and wind

humming. I looked all around and really took in the breathtaking scenery. These are the moments that remind me why I love the outdoors.

We wandered for some time and eventually reached the last part of the forest, where our group stopped for a short break. After a quick trail snack, our guide prepared us for what was next. We were about to begin the most challenging part of the hike which was entirely uphill. It was long, steep path and made up of just rocky steps and boulders. I knew this part was coming and I was dreading it -- uphill is the worst.

Without hesitation, we started moving upwards, now catching up with several other hiking groups. Going up this rocky section is the only way to reach the park's famous viewpoint and therefore most people are determined to complete the challenge. My face was wet with both sweat and rain, but I kept moving.

Some people climbed quickly to the top and others choose to do it slowly. I've done quite a few treks in my lifetime, ranging from the Lost City Trek in jungles of Colombia to a three day trek from Kalaw to Inle Lake in Myanmar. One thing I have learned from these experiences is to stick to your own pace.

I used to speed walk on treks to make sure I wasn't the last one lagging along in the group. But over time I've learned to listen to my own body and keep a pace that feels good to me. So I took my time, one foot in front of the other until I finally reached the base.

Unfortunately, we were only able to see a faint shadow of the Towers due to the rain and dark clouds. I would have loved to see the picturesque viewpoint on a sunny day, but I was still very proud to have made it. Treks are more about the journey than the destination anyways. We were now at the halfway point and my group sat at the base for a while, resting our legs and enjoying the quiet moment.

Before we knew it, the weather took a turn for the worst and it was time to start backtracking the way we came. We still had about 12 km to go. This second part of the hike can easily be summarized in a single word -- rain. It was full on, non-stop raining for at least three hours. I swear it didn't slow down for a single second. Even with five layers of thick, warm clothing, including my waterproof jacket, every single part of my body was completely and utterly soaked. With rain beating against our backs, we didn't stop once. We just walked and walked until finally reaching

the end. A hot shower never felt so good.

Even with a cloudy sky, strong winds and endless rain, hiking to the base in Torres del Paine is a really special experience. It's a chance to completely disconnect -- something that is almost unheard of nowadays. We live in a modern world that both seeks and demands constant connection. It's almost a social expectation to have our phones charged, to answer our emails and to respond to our text messages. I love being in nature because I don't look at my phone, I don't think about my "to-do" lists and I don't worry about anything other than the path in front of me. Instead of listening to Spotify, I listen to Mother Nature's music: the birds chirping, the water trickling and the wind blowing. It's a magical rarity and these experiences really allow you to fully appreciate nature.

For me, coming to Patagonia was both a beautiful experience in nature and a numbing reminder of all the struggles we are facing in 2019. In addition to the base of the Towers, I spent five additional days exploring and hiking different parts of the national park. Every place I saw was packed with so much natural beauty, all which has faced constant and devastating risks. Climate change and irresponsible tourism has caused forest fires, erosion to the soil and a beautiful glacier to retreat. Taking care of these spaces is crucial to ensuring a sustainable future with pristine nature.

We have so much at stake and sometimes it's hard to see that. But when you come to places as wild and free as Patagonia, you remember what makes our planet so special: the icy glaciers, the diverse wildlife, the lush forests and the wide, open spaces. Trekking always reminds me of this and lets me fall in love with nature all over again.

The trail is challenging before and after the base viewpoint. Rocky steps and boulders are the only way to the top / Jenny Tolep



Jenny is a writer from the United States. Three years ago, she moved to Chile in search of adventure and quickly fell in love with the country's natural beauty and unique travel opportunities. She now resides in Santiago, Chile's capital city.