

Chile Early starts and prickly seating on the photographic trail of Patagonia’s apex predator

PAUL GAINS

A SMALL herd of maybe a dozen guanacos inched their way up the hillside paying scant attention to the handful of photographers standing nearby. An adult female acted as a sentry. Scanning the nearby mountain ridge for danger she was possibly distracted by her offspring, barely two months old, grazing with the herd. By the time she spotted the puma it was too late.

Exploding from her hiding place the cat raced towards its prey gathering up the distance at an astonishing rate. The guanacos sprinted for their lives. When they cut right to avoid running over a cliff the puma also altered course, running past us as if we were invisible.

A chulengo – young guanaco – stumbled. Although he got to his feet his misfortune meant he had become the principal target. A few seconds later the puma had closed the gap and sunk its retractable claws into the chulengo’s hind quarters, bringing him down. In nature some perish so others live. The chulengo would provide food for a week.

Witnessing a successful hunt is such a rare event that my guide, Rex Bryngelson, an American with 20 years of guiding experience in the Andes mountains, had only seen it once before.

While the puma dragged her prey behind some tall grass we checked our images and high-fived each other.

Pumas are native to the mountains of both North and South America but Patagonia is reputed to be the best place to see them. The rocky surface and relative absence of people provide them with a suitable habitat to live even though, according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, their numbers are in decline.

I had found Rex through an advertisement in a photography magazine and he had taken care of all the arrangements, including accommodation, ground transportation and, most significantly, acquiring the services of Roberto Donas, an expert tracker.

Roberto had driven us five hours from Punta Arenas, the southernmost city in Chile, to Estancia Laguna Amarga, a ranch catering to hikers, outdoor enthusiasts and photographers. Many of the private ranches in Patagonia participate in nature conservation. We slept in bunk beds, shared the toilets and showers and ate in a dining room which looked out at the famous rock towers, Torres Del Paine. Rex described it as rustic but it was more than adequate.

December is summer in the southern hemisphere so the sun rose at 5am and



Pumas are native to the mountains of North and South America. Seeing them in the wild in Patagonia means getting up at 4.30am but the experience of photographing them is incomparable

PHOTOGRAPH: PAUL GAINS

gave us 17 hours of daylight. Each morning at around 4.30am we silently loaded our gear into Roberto’s Mitsubishi SUV before setting off for five or six hours of puma tracking. Roberto made us coffee once we stopped and that jolted us alive. We also ate sandwiches prepared by the Estancia staff. Then it was back to the hunt for Patagonia’s apex predator.

We returned to the ranch late morning when the pumas normally enjoy a siesta to take a brief nap ourselves. I also used the quiet time to edit photos, recharge camera batteries and make notes. The staff prepared a hot lunch before we headed out for a second session in the late afternoon.

Of the nine sessions we experienced puma sightings during eight of them, which became a source of amusement. Rex, I suppose, had been hedging his bets when, in

his sales pitch, he’d emailed me to say, “We are almost guaranteed to see pumas.”

From the first day onwards we were in position to get images, any of which would have satisfied me before the trip. It must be said that Roberto deserves the credit for our success. He has been a professional tracker for 10 years and has earned the respect of his peers.

“I call him the Professor,” one told me. “He is a satellite of information.” His services are sought out by such esteemed media as National Geographic and the BBC programme Planet Earth.

Using high-powered binoculars Roberto would search the nearby mountains looking for signs of pumas. The guanacos offered clues. If he saw them staring in one direction for an extended period of time he would look for the object of their

focus. The top of the head or the flick of a tail confirmed the location of a puma. His perception was staggering. But I lost count of the number of times he pointed to a cat and said, “There, do you see it?” My response was typically: “No, where?”

Two other trackers were also out in the hills. The trio communicated by VHF radio to give each other’s clients the best opportunity to see the pumas. After all, the more success the better for business.

“If nature is safe we will have jobs for ever,” Roberto explained.

Each day we rotated the locations so as not to stress the pumas repeatedly. Some cats they described as shy while others were more tolerant of humans. And when Jorge, who has been compiling a catalogue of pumas in the area and giving them names, realised we had spooked a mother and

cub sitting on a hill one hundred metres away, he abruptly ended the session and we returned to our vehicles.

One morning as we drove across the bumpy terrain Roberto announced we were going to look for a mother with four cubs. A normal litter is two or three. Again we hiked uphill for quite a distance and approached the location. We were in luck. The mother was lying down while her cubs played next to her.

ROBERTO signalled for us to remain in a spot 50 metres away. All five pumas looked at us but since we kept our distance they relaxed. Hours passed. We watched the cubs playing while their mother slept. Then Jorge, who had wandered away from us, reported on the radio, “Hermanita is coming!” The approach of this enormous female puma caused panic among the cubs and they ran uphill away from their mother.

Everyone lost sight of Hermanita until suddenly her head appeared above the mountaintop. This frightened the cubs again and they ran downhill past their mother and towards us. Because I was so focused on the impending confrontation of the two adult females I had lost track of the two cubs once they passed. Rex said, “Paul, look to your left.”

The two cubs were sitting less than 10 feet away. Remarkably, they were comfortable enough with us to seek our protection. Meanwhile, Hermanita walked around marking her territory by urinating and scratching the ground. The mother rolled over on her back in a subservient position. Once Hermanita had established the hierarchy and left the scene the mother went looking for her cubs.

Although it was summer the weather changed frequently. My backpack contained extra layers, a down jacket, a waterproof jacket and trousers and gloves. Many times the infamous Patagonian winds picked up and the temperature dropped substantially for a short period. At moments like these we would sit down on rocks or on the ground itself, careful to avoid the painful sting of golden barrel cactus which grows everywhere. The locals call it “mother-in-law cushion”. But with a view of the Torres Del Paine and other Andean monuments, who could complain?

While the pumas were our primary objective we also encountered grey foxes, European hares and an assortment of birds native to the Andes. A few times we looked up to see Andean condors soaring past us through the valley, their massive wingspans approaching 10 feet. For the relatively short time I was in Patagonia the compilation of wildlife experiences was mind blowing and I could not imagine having a better run of luck.

Travel notes

Rex Bryngelson runs puma photography trips in the autumn (April in Patagonia) and spring (June-August). Visit patagoniaphoto.com. He also runs a fly-fishing lodge – visit chilepatagonia.com.

CHECKOUT



A WINTER WEEKEND IN DUBLIN

I’m on a pub crawl with a big difference. Having returned to Dublin for the first time in a decade, I’m determined to see the Irish city at its best. I enlisted the help of MakeMyDay, a new company that specialises in original and engaging tours.

Promising a cliché-free experience, they set me up for a morning with a local historian, learning all about Dublin’s complicated past and the urban legends that surround Trinity College. In the afternoon, I went kayaking along the Liffey with a band of musicians who would stop and play old songs under each bridge.

Then, it was time to meet pub guide Shane. Joined by a group of visiting Americans, we set off out of the city and into the Dublin Mountains. The word ‘mountains’ is a tad misleading (more hills, than the Himalayas), but the narrow and twisting country lanes are a revelation. I didn’t expect to experience such a true sense of rural Ireland so close to the capital. Shane shakes his head. “Most people come to Dublin and barely venture away from Temple Bar, you have to leave the city behind.”

Over the next few hours, we visit three wonderful and very different drinking dens, including Johnnie Fox’s. Back in the city after one drink too many, it’s a quick hop over the famous Ha’penny Bridge to my hotel, the Morrison, located right on the river. Its 145 minimalist rooms celebrate local culture by reproducing lyrics from famous Irish bands and singers on the wall.

Before bidding farewell, there is just time for a walking tour, but not your average one. MakeMyDay arranged for two born-and-bred Dubliners, James and Anthony, but they aren’t professional tour guides. Instead, they take me on an eye-opening stroll around The Liberties, one of the city’s most working class and colourful neighbourhoods. Not typically a place most visitors would consider but James and Anthony are full of love, passion and defence of their patch.

I can’t help but smile. It’s always the people that make a place. You just have to know where to find them. *Tours from MakeMyDay (020 8895 6828; makemyday.travel). Rooms at the Morrison Hotel are from £143 (morrisonhotel.ie). For more information, visit ireland.com*

HARRY GREEN