

P Endangered PATAGONIA

SKIING CHILE'S RIO BAKER VALLEY, PART TWO

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Last month, Mohr and Johnson, along with Vermont friends Vicki Beaudoin and Craig Augustinsky, kicked off a month-long ski adventure through Chile's Rio Baker Valley, a wild region of Patagonia threatened by an industrial-scale, profit-driven hydroelectric development. They were there on assignment for Patagonia, Inc. and Backcountry Magazine, documenting their adventures in hopes that their images and stories would garner support for more appropriate energy developments in Patagonia. When we left them last month they were in their final days at Camp 1, with their sights on the second of three camps in this prized region of the world.

After nearly a week at Camp 1, we hauled our skis and packs across the Chacabuco Valley and into the adjacent Jeinimeni Reserve, where we had spotted a good location for Camp 2. During the move, we bumped into a friendly puestero (rancher) named Toto, one of the few in the valley still tending to sheep and cattle. Sporting a fine set of goat-hair pants, a leather jacket, and a wool cap, he invited us into his stone house for some freshly fried bread. We were impressed by his intricate familiarity with the local landscape, and felt refreshed to have connected with someone so intimately tied to the land. We asked Toto what he thought about ENDESA's plans.

"I don't like them one bit," he shared in clear Spanish. "People say there is not enough work

here, but I disagree. We need to protect the landscape and create more opportunity for tourism. That is a better plan. And we can keep the Baker." Toto pointed out an easy route across the valley, and into the mountains beyond. He wished us a safe trip and said he hoped to see us again.

The Jeinimeni Reserve lays claim to a large area of the Rio Baker watershed. It is home to countless species of plants and animals. It's the "Grand Tetons" of Patagonia and has unlimited backcountry hiking and skiing opportunities. With an incredible vantage point over the entire Chacabuco Valley, Camp 2 gave us the ultimate perspective on a recovering wild area that is well on its way to becoming the new Patagonia National Park. And as luck would have it, we scored our best powder day of the trip here.

It all started when we decided to adjust our Camp 2 location by moving our camp across an exposed alpine ridge. Snow and sleet borne from 40- to 60-mph winds tickled our cheeks. Before we knew it, we were on the ground, invigorated and laughing, knocked down by what we estimated to be 100-mph gusts. After re-establishing camp in a new band of lenga (beech trees), a cold and heavy rain set in, turning to snow just before sunset. To the rumble of a swollen stream, we drifted off to sleep.

Snow continued through the night and left behind a boot-deep blanket of snow in the mountains above. Socked in for most of the morning, we

savored the first rays of sun ushered in by the winds of the clearing storm. The wind filled in our tracks, and each run was as fresh as the one before. Somehow, we had appeased the snow gods.

All too soon, we reluctantly said goodbye to the Chacabuco, and set our sights on the opposite side of the Baker Valley and the Aysen Glacier Trail (AGT), 30 miles away. By no means a ski trail, the AGT is a new hut-to-hut trekking route that provides access to three major glaciers and the countless peaks that define the eastern edge of the Northern Patagonia Ice Sheet. Developed by the Coyhaique-based Patagonia Adventure Expeditions (PAEX), the AGT is fast becoming a staple in the region for adventure travelers interested in experiencing Patagonia's wilderness and frontier culture. Every year it represents a growing source of income for the local Chileans.

Most adventures on the AGT begin in the scenic village of Puerto Bertrand, the nacimiento (birthplace) of the Rio Baker, and home to Anita and Manuel Bayer's world-famous empanadas (pastry turnover). Our goal was to explore the front end of the AGT—the Soler Valley—and the glaciers and mountains at its head. After putting in an order of empanadas, we jumped into the wild and uncontaminated Baker, swam in its current, and drank from it.

It was in Bertrand that we also connected with Hector Soto, a 30-year-old puestero, a guide and horse-packer who supplements his livelihood with work along the AGT. Twenty-four hours later, he was strapping four pairs of skis and backpacks onto his horses, and we were heading up the Soler—where Soto also works on a small ranch. With Soto's help, we were able to save ourselves a few

days of lugging gear, increasing our time for the snow in the mountains.

Farther up the Soler, I pointed to a few potential ski lines. "You've come up here to ski, but not onto the Ice Sheet?" wondered Soto. I nodded in response. "Good thinking ..." and like a true Patagon, he added, "It's better to camp where you can have a fire."

Blue skies treated us to a spectacular day as we headed for the upper reaches of the Soler—and an old farm that once supported a family there. They called it Palomar or Dove's Nest. Arriving at the steep and towering mountainsides that cradled this upper nook of the Soler, Palomar seemed an appropriate name. Just above Palomar, the Northern Ice Sheet was visible and easily accessible. Its falling ice and crumbling seracs filled the air with thunder.

Taking advantage of a second bluebird day, Soto headed back down the Soler while we headed straight for snowline, 500 meters above Palomar. Halfway into our approach, we came face to face with a rare and endangered huemule deer. It seemed at ease with our presence, and quickly returned to feeding on the subtly sweet berries dotting the higher hillsides. Minutes later, a pair of condors circled in, and then another. Before long there were five Andean giants flying circles over our heads. High above Palomar, we spent an afternoon skiing against the spectacular backdrop of the Northern Patagonian Ice Sheet, the great Nef and Soler glaciers, and a lifetime of unexplored mountains.

Fierce winds and falling tree branches woke us in the night. It was the front edge of a potent spring storm that didn't budge for days. After three straight weeks in Patagonia without a solid day of rest, the storm was well timed, and we took advantage of the down time. Two days into the storm, we managed to pry ourselves away from our silly fireside banter and ski a bit. Encountering blizzard conditions and a rotten snowpack up high, we opted for a safe, but speedy, descent on the icy-but-edgable surface of the sprawling and beautiful Nef glacier.

The storm intensified, and Soto returned from several days of work down in the valley. Taking shelter in the only remaining cabin in Palomar, he passed around the mate, a mildly stimulating and highly nutritious herb tea that is a staple in Patagonia. While we shared the drink, he stoked the fire for a dinner of fire-roasted meat and potatoes. He appreciated our great respect for his homeland and culture and hoped we could convince more of our friends to experience the magic of this region themselves.

"Most Chileans in this region don't yet understand the benefits of tourism," Soto explained. "Nor do we understand the consequences of building huge dams on rivers like the Baker. We haven't yet made those mistakes. Out in the countryside ... vivimos en una burbuja ... we live in a bubble. The government, ENDESA ... They feed us information ... 'this will be good for Chile, this is clean energy', and most folks just go along for the ride."

"We have a tremendous opportunity here to protect something that is unique in the world ...

the Northern Ice Sheet, the Rio Baker, and the Lago General Carrera ... there's nothing else like it ... and people are just beginning to find out," Soto continued. "If Chile needs energy, it should develop local, clean energy projects that don't destroy the environment. This idea of cutting a 2,000-kilometer transmission line through the heart of Patagonia ... it's criminal!" Soto began to fiddle with his knife. A violent gust of wind shook the cabin. He looked up, wondering if the heavy wooden canogas that make up the roof would survive the night, and if tomorrow, we'd be able to cross the river.

"We need to protect the great places we have, like the Baker," concluded Soto. "Because it's all we have."

Brian Mohr and Emily Johnson can be reached through their website at www.emberphoto.com.

A multi-media show about this trip, and several others, will be featured in Mohr and Johnson's "Wild People, Wild Places" program. (Go to www.emberphoto.com for dates and locations.) A version of this story was originally published in Backcountry Magazine, February 2007.

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