

Ueli Leardi & Myrta Brügger



# Panamericana

From Alaska to Tierra del Fuego

Text: © Copyright by Ueli Leardi

Lecturer: Myrta Brügger

Cover design: © Copyright by Ueli Leardi

Contact : [info@underway.ch](mailto:info@underway.ch)

Website: [www.underway.ch](http://www.underway.ch)

# Content

The Route.....	1
The Plan.....	2
Goodbye and Start of the Trip.....	5
Eastern Canada.....	7
The Central Northern US.....	17
Western Canada.....	28
Alaska.....	42
Yukon and British Columbia.....	50
British Columbia.....	54
Vancouver and Vancouver Island.....	62
The Northwestern USA.....	70
North and Central California.....	79
Nevada and Utah.....	90
Colorado and Arizona.....	102
Southern California.....	114
Hawaii.....	118
Mexico's Baja California.....	133
Mexico's Northwest.....	150
Central Mexico.....	166
Mexico's Southwest.....	177
Guatemala.....	188
Belize.....	201

The Yucatan Peninsula .....	209
Chiapas .....	218
The Southeastern Mexico .....	227
Colombia .....	231
Ecuador.....	254
Galapagos Islands .....	260
The south of Ecuador.....	272
Peru .....	274
Bolivia .....	301
Northern Chile.....	313
The Northwestern Argentina .....	317
Central Chile.....	325
Patagonia Southbound .....	343
Antarctica .....	367
Patagonia Northbound.....	381
Argentina's North-East.....	392
Paraguay.....	407
Brazil's southeast.....	410
Brazil's Southwest.....	429
On the Way to Uruguay .....	446
The Last Stage.....	464

# The Route

## The Route

Start:	Halifax, Nova Scotia
End:	Montevideo, Uruguay
Side trips:	Hawaii, Galapagos and Antarctica
Duration:	From May 2016 until July 2018
Driven distance:	Approx. 100'000 Km
Countries visited:	14



# The Plan



## The Plan

Because of our cold and wet experience in Scandinavia in 2013 we thought more and more about how we could make our Land Cruiser "bad weather-compatible". Without pop-up roof, insulation and auxiliary heating and with windows that were not mosquito-protected and could not be left open when it rained, the camper was poorly suited to travel in inclement weather. The interior also lacked seating and a kitchen.

After the decision to change something to the better, we started thinking about what would be the best solution for us. Sell the Land Cruiser and buy something new, more suitable? Improving the Toyota as it was? Finally, we visited the Caravan fair in Bern, only to find out, that a vehicle we were looking for was not so easy to find. It should be consequently be set-up for two people. The vehicle should provide enough space and comfort, but still be compact and off-road capable. It should also have plenty of storage space and a high degree of autonomy with regard to fuel, water and electricity.

In the end there was only one way to satisfy all these requirements without great compromises: the existing vehicle, the Toyota Land Cruiser HZJ75, built in 1999, should form the basis and an Azalai camper cabin should be fitted. The contact with Pascal Pfister of Azalai Switzerland was tied at the fair in Bern and slowly a timetable for the costly upgrade became apparent. After a waiting period and the beginning of the work, it took another good four months until the camper was back in our hands.

So now we had the perfect motorhome, but only for just short vacation trips it was actually almost too good. Even before the decision for the conversion, we had been thinking about what options this would open up for us. We were still integrated in working life, but why continue to work until you drop, when you can live another lifestyle, too?

# The Plan



Upon reflection and comprehensive financial plans we decided to await Myrta's regular retirement, while Ueli wanted to withdraw from the labour force early. Due to his previous experience was clear that travelling with your own camper is much cheaper than living in Switzerland. We were also planning to increase our pensions by renting our two properties.

So now a timetable for retirement was made, the vehicle converted and financing of our future life secured long term. The question remained where the journey would lead. After evaluating some options, we decided to travel the Panamericana. This allegedly longest continuous route in the world runs from Alaska to southern Chile. If we wanted to travel from south to north, or the other way around, we had to define. We finally decided to start in the north, which offered some advantages from our point of view: In the early stage we would visit countries that offer linguistically for us no major barriers, because we both speak good English. In Canada and the US, it would also be easy to organize any improvements and additions to the vehicle and equipment if necessary. Finally, we did not see it as a disadvantage to travel the most expensive countries in the planned trip right at the beginning. For us this was not very relevant, because our budget would be based on a regular income either way.

It was clear from the beginning that we did not want to just follow the direct route of the Pan-American Highway, it should serve us merely as a common thread. Too many beautiful and interesting places are located

# The Plan

far away from it. Anyway, we had no intention of too much planning ahead before the trip. The best matching seasons for different countries and regions should determine our route, to take advantage of optimal climatic conditions was more important. Thus we only set the following two targets:

- We wanted to start in the spring in Eastern Canada, to be in Alaska in summer.
- For the following winter, the plan was to travel to Mexico.

Everything else we wanted to take as it happens.

Just over a year before the planned start we were left with enough time to get used our new rolling home. We naturally wanted to test the vehicle and the equipment extensively before we went on a long journey. First, we made a holiday trip to Morocco. There the function and suitability could well be tried and tested. Despite the ideal travel time in the spring, we were surprised by a heat wave with temperatures up to 48 °C, which presented the refrigerator on board and the insulation as well as the ventilation possibilities of the cabin a hard test. The stony tracks of the Atlas Mountains and the lonely stretches in the desert, the car put it away without difficulty. The conclusion from this test run was simple: Except for a few small things, the new camper passed the baptism of fire with flying colours. In the fall of the same year a shorter trip lead to Sardinia, but it also revealed no weaknesses. We and our car were ready to go!!



# Goodbye and Start of the Trip



## Goodbye and Start of the Trip

To travel in Alaska the climatic conditions in summer are the best. This in turn means, that you should start the journey as early as possible in spring. We had decided to ship the car to *Halifax* on the east coast of Canada. So the plan matured and we fixed our start to the May 2016.

The months before the tour were stressful, despite good preparation. We both had to resolve a few things, that is, selling a few belongings, give away or dispose of our possessions. Our apartments emptied increasingly even while we were still engaged in work and the last weeks we lived ever more spartan - a good acclimatisation for the simple life to come.

## Farewell Party

Before we drove the car to the port of Antwerp, we organized a farewell party. We invited our families, friends and colleagues, in a toast forward to a good success of the trip. We had built up a large flea market with the rest of our belongings, where our guests could take whatever they liked. The proceeds through voluntary contributions, we wanted to use for the planned Antarctic voyage. In the workshop of Myrta's employer, Reber Metallbau AG, operated by her brothers, we had enough space to accommodate everyone. We were overwhelmed by the many invitees who gave us the honour. Thanks to the generous support of Myrta's brothers and their wives, it gave us time to socialize with our guests.



# Goodbye and Start of the Trip

## The Camper is Going on its Journey

Finally it was time, we drove our camper to *Antwerp* to deliver it at the port. The handover was super easy. Thanks to the detailed information by *Seabridge*, which had organized the shipment for us, we knew exactly what we had to do. Within an hour it was all done and we were heading back to the city of Antwerp. After a stroll through the city we went to *Brussels* airport to fly back to Switzerland.



The last few days before our departure we lived with Markus and Monika Mösch and Myrta's daughter Alexandra and family. So we had again plenty of opportunities to say goodbye to the family. Finally Alexandra took us to the *Zurich Airport*, from where we flew to *Halifax* via *London*, there we would pick-up the camper and start our adventure.

# Eastern Canada



## Eastern Canada

### Halifax and Surrounding Areas

Spring had not yet arrived in *Halifax*, we already felt this after landing on the way into town. We hardly saw any sprouting plants and the trees were all still bare. Even though the sky was only slightly cloudy, cool temperatures and the fresh wind left us shiver.

For the first few days after arrival, we rented a car and an Airbnb room near the city centre. Since we already knew before arrival that the vessel with our car on board would arrive more likely on Wednesday and not already on Sunday. Therefore we had to adjust our plans. Either way, we had to stay longer than planned in *Halifax*.

With the rental car we went on a trip to *Peggy's Cove*, the place where in 1998, *Swissair 111* crashed into the sea just of the shore. A memorial on a small, natural piece of land outside of *Peggy's Cove* is reminiscent of the terrible event. The village itself consists of only a few houses and has a small fishing port. There was not much going on, because the season normally doesn't start in *Nova Scotia* before the beginning of June.



On a rainy day we visited the Maritime Museum. In addition to the general exhibits about local shipping history, two sections of the museum recall on significant events.

First, the sinking of the legendary *Titanic*, because *Halifax* was one of the nearest ports to the accident site. At the cemetery in *Halifax* victims of the *Titanic* disaster are buried, more than 100, mostly unidentified

# Eastern Canada

victims, found their last rest there.

Another tragic accident occurred in 1917 when a cargo ship collided with an ammunition ship in the middle the harbour. The enormous, resulting explosion ripped over 2,000 people to their deaths and devastated whole districts of the city.



Meanwhile, it became obvious that the arrival of the *Atlantic Conveyor* would be further delayed and that we could pick up the car earliest the following Monday in the port. Since the booked room was not that long available, we had to move out, but this proved to be a stroke of luck. Our new hosts were sympathetic to us right away and we felt soon at home. We were allowed to share kitchen and living room and were able to prepare our meals as we wanted. We enjoyed good stories and had interesting discussions. The two homeowners and Jim, another lodger, were well-informed and interesting people, who laid much emphasis on healthy eating.

On Saturday we visited on the advice of our hosts the Farmer Market at the eastern end of the waterfront. In a large hall we found a wide variety of stalls with local food, vegetables and crafts. Following a further suggestion, we also took a trip to *Prospect* at the nearby coast. Once there, we were greeted by dense fog. However, when we drove back to the city, the sky cleared and we could enjoy a walk in a suburban park in the sunshine and later a stroll along the waterfront. After a week of clouds and rain, the weather for the start our journey looked promising.

Finally on Monday, we went to the shipping company. There we met a number of mostly German traveller, which also had shipped their campers with *Seabridge* to *Halifax*. After we finished the paperwork at customs, and had picked up the necessary stamp, we went to the port to pick up the car. There was indeed a small traffic jam at the office, because certainly more than twenty owners, as we learned, as many as never before, wanted to collect their campers. After an hour our vehicle was released by customs. During the waiting period Ueli had removed the

## Eastern Canada

partition wall and attached the license plates, so that we could drive off as soon as the formalities were done.

First we went to refuel and then to the airport to return the rental car. Back at the hotel we stowed everything we had brought on the plane, in the car. After the first bulk buying of food was stored, we were ready to go.



We enjoyed to sleep again in a warm room, but were happy at the same time that we could finally start. After a week in *Halifax* we had seen the city and the few sights that it had to offer.

## Nova Scotia - Cape Breton

Now we were on the road - the beginning of a great journey. Yet we could not really believe it. It still felt like an ordinary "vacation" and it would probably take a few weeks, if not months before we would have "arrived".

We drove north, along the east coast. It soon became apparent that in this region the season had not yet started, because Info Centres, provincial parks, and museums and, above all, camping sites were still closed. The first night we stayed therefore somewhere in the forest in a very quiet place!

The first highlight of the *Cabot Trail* was a scenic route which took us all to the North Nova Scotia and *Cape Breton National Park*. Again, this park was still officially closed, but most of the trails were passable and we could use the campgrounds anyway. Since the sanitary facilities were not available yet, we could even stay for free.

A short walk took us out to the *Middle Head Peninsula*. Everywhere the squirrels were bickering and chasing each other high in the trees without even noticing us. At the end of the promontory large gulls were nesting

# Eastern Canada

in the rock niches. However, the biting wind in open areas made us seek shelter of the forest again quickly.



The northern tip of *Nova Scotia* is not part of the National Park, so fishing is permitted there and it enables the people in the small towns a living. Speaking to a few fishermen we learned, that the lobster season would begin in a few days. It lasts 8 weeks and ensures the men a large part of their annual income. The set several hundred lobster traps and with any luck they can earn a small fortune with the catch. However, the fishermen are only just getting \$ 5 per pound lobster while in restaurants in Europe, often twenty times as much must be paid.



Back in the national park, we made several small hikes in an ever changing landscape. Once through a swamp full of insect-eating plants, then again through dense forest to a waterfall. The longest route was the Skyline Trail, which led us up to the high plateau with a view to the beautiful cliff. Only the promised moose did not show up.

Our next destination was the *Bay of Fundy*, famous for the incredibly large tide differences that can measure up to 16 meters. When we arrived in *Truro*, the weather was warm and sunny. There we wanted to observe the phenomenon of *tidal bore*, a wave which is caused by the rising tide when it makes its way upstream. The tide, however, was not expected until late in the evening, therefore we lost the chance to see it.

We were looking for a place to stay on the coast, which turned out to be relatively difficult, because either it was not accessible or if there was a way out, certainly there was a house at the end of the road. Finally we

## Eastern Canada

found a nice, private campground, where we could camp next to a river. It was the first time warm enough to enjoy the sun outside until after six o'clock. However, once it disappeared behind the trees, it quickly became cool.

The next morning was grey and foggy and it was sometimes raining violently. Therefore, the drive along the coast fell literally into the water and the view was marred by the thick fog. In *Parrsboro* we visited the Geological Museum. In a revealing illustration it shows the emergence of life on our planet, because in that area innumerable fossils had been found, which tell the story of the last 300 million years.

Another stop we made in *Joggins*, where a 15 km long stretch of coast was declared a UNESCO heritage. Even today, one finds innumerable traces of long extinct animal and plant species. However, we did not last too long outside, because it poured again with rain, and we moved back into the warm, dry car quickly.



## New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario

*New Brunswick* received us with continued inclement weather. With such prospects, there was certainly a good idea to pay one of the coolest stores in North America a visit. Ueli had seen it in advance of the trip in researching the retail chain *Bass Pro Shop* and had already marked the *Moncton* branch as a target. This chain of stores sells, just like many others, anything to the lovers of popular outdoor activities. But *Bass Pro* is different than outside as well as inside the store, everything is fantastically decorated. However, we were amazed on, what was offered for hunting, fishing and camping. In the hunting department weapons, for example, all suitable camouflage clothing and every conceivable tool to process the prey was available, including weapons from gun to the hunting bow and arrow.

## Eastern Canada

Another stop we made in *Kouchibouguac National Park*. Although it was still officially closed, we were able to use the various trails that led through the varied landscapes. Since the park is by the sea, it was mainly the impressive coastal landscapes that inspired us. Based on the size of the existing parking, we assumed that in the summer months it must be extremely crowded. We were walking all alone and enjoyed the mystical atmosphere, caused by the foggy weather. In the interior of the marshes, dense pine forests and old trees can be seen, despite the fact, that many trees were felled in the area in the 19th century to produce masts for the British sailing ships.



Through a largely uninhabited landscape our route now led from *Miramichi* to the west. For almost 150 km there were neither towns, nor infrastructure. Most of the area has been designated as wilderness, while smaller areas were used for forestry. Both had the consequence that we barely could get off the road somewhere. However, as the weather was still unfriendly as before, we had no desire to stop in the woods.

In *Grand Falls* we inserted a photo stop to visit the huge waterfalls, which are to be the second largest in North America after *Niagara Falls*. Then we looked for a place to stay and as it was Ueli's birthday, looked for a chance to eat out. We finally found, what else could it be, a still closed camping. B

However, the kind owner opened the toilet facility especially for us, so that we could stay anyway. Even a restaurant we found in the village, but decided to cook ourselves, after looking at the menu.

The next morning, we had a big surprise, because the landscape and our camper were blanketed in snow! Almost all the way down to the *St. Lawrence River*, the road was covered with snow. We followed the mighty river upstream direction *Quebec* on the highway. Only when the weather was clearing, we changed to the more scenic highway number 132 that leads through small villages, past many pretty houses.

## Eastern Canada

In *Levis* we headed for a campsite, from which we could take the ferry to the old town of *Quebec*. But because the campground wasn't only expensive, but also on a noisy street, we decided to take a room in a motel nearby. To our surprise, this was equipped with a large Jacuzzi tub. We enjoyed a hot bath, the evening in a warm room and fast internet. After all those days and nights in the cold and wet weather we enjoyed that luxury, and left it to the "real adventurers" to brave the cold and the rain.

The following morning, the weather should improve around noon according to the forecast, so we slept in comfortably before we drove via the old steel bridge to *Quebec*. At the *Old Port*, we left the car behind and explored the old town on foot. Even if only a small district of *Old Quebec* city has survived, we could well imagine how the city must have looked in the old days. We climbed up to the old citadel, from where we could enjoy a magnificent view over the city and the *St. Lawrence River*. Passing the *Chateau Frontenac* and other imposing buildings, we came back to the *Old Port*, where we visited the market hall. The huge range of local and international specialties, mainly from France, enticed to shop.



Now it was time again to leave civilization behind us. We headed west out of town and after a few kilometres dived back into the forests of Canada. A next highlight was the *Mauricie National Park*. The road through it is very popular, yet the park was still closed but should be open in the morning. We settled in a campground and started from there on a long hike. In addition to many small animals and birds we saw the first wild flowers that stretched their heads into the sun after a long winter. On a sun-warmed stone was, to our great surprise, a snake. The park offered a variety of outdoor activities such as hiking and biking trails in the summer and especially canoeing on the countless lakes.

Our plan was to drive westward to *Mt. Tremblant*, the next national park. For this purpose we chose the only one road through a so-called *Réserve*

# Eastern Canada



*Faunique*, the game reserve *Mastigouche*. The areas are primarily for controlled hunting and fishing, and offer many, very nice, small camping facilities. From there, we wanted to reach the entrance to the *Mt. Tremblant National Park* on the northeast. As this was still closed, we drove around the park on the north side, again through a wildlife park, the huge *Réserve faunique Rouge Matawin*. Yet these areas were hardly visited and we met only few other vehicles. Just before the exit of the *Réserve* we looked for a place to stay, beautifully situated on a lake. When we arrived just another camper was there, later in the evening another group came about. However, from the following day on, the place was fully booked, because the Canadians celebrated the first long weekend of the year, the former *Victoria Day*, nowadays *Patriots' Day*. We enjoyed the one night in this beautiful place, especially the spectacular views of the lake, which reflected the full moon after dusk. Birds, squirrels and even a large hare entertained us.

As it turned out, that even on this side of *Mt. Tremblant National Park*, many tracks were still closed and in addition the campsites would be fully booked. We gave up the plan of visiting and drove south towards *Ottawa* and the province of *Ontario*. In *Ottawa* a lot was going on, the warm weather and the long weekend had attracted thousands of visitors and so it was difficult for us to find a parking space. Close to the market we finally stopped in a no parking zone and strolled through the market. *Ottawa* offered in addition to the interesting old town, especially a variety of museums, which didn't lure us in the glorious weather. After a long walk we left the city again and drove down to the *St. Lawrence River*. A Parkway leads through the *1000 Islands National Park* by the



# Eastern Canada

most scenic routes. In the visitor centre, we obtained information about the history, flora and fauna of the area and were surprised to find that several species of turtles are native to the region. Despite the holidays, we found a camp spot in the first targeted campsite at the *Ivy Lea State Park*.

The next day we started the long drive to *Woodstock*, where we wanted to visit friends. Before we moved to the highway, we drove on country roads to the *St. Lawrence River* and later along the *Lake Ontario*. Small towns and well-kept old houses lined the road. With a ferry we crossed a large peninsula in order then to return to the shores of *Lake Ontario*.

We spent a very quiet and relaxing weekend with the Mapplebeck's. With perfect weather and pleasantly warm temperatures we enjoyed it, to sit outside in the evening and a barbecue in the garden. On the first working day following the *Victoria Day* we visited the E + H subsidiary in *Burlington* so that Ueli could again see his work colleagues. As Ueli's research had revealed in advance, in the immediate vicinity is the North American representative of *Runva* winches and we decided to have our steel winch rope replaced against a synthetic one there. The rope including hook and aluminium fairlead only cost 120 CHF and therefore less than half of the offers, which we found in Europe.

Our next and final stop in Canada for the moment, we enjoyed the *Niagara Falls*. In bright sunshine we visited the huge waterfalls. Although at this tourist attraction, as always, many people were travelling. We found just 100 meters away from the falls a parking space, how lucky. Ignoring all the tourist facilities, high-rise buildings and shops around the *Niagara Falls*, it remains an impressive natural spectacle.



Since we had decided to cross the *Great Plains* on the American side, it was now time to cross the border into the United States. We preferred this route, because it allowed us to visit the many beautiful sights in

## Eastern Canada

*South Dakota.* In addition, the route through the endless agricultural areas is a lot shorter than in Canada, and more forests and lakes of Canada, we will encounter definitely on the way to Alaska again.

# The Central Northern US



## The Central Northern US

### Through the Great Plains

The border formalities were carried out as expected with a seriousness of officials as if they would check in criminals. No smiles, no friendly word just work to the rule, yet always correct. While we were invited to a waiting room, our car should be inspected. We had clearly stated on the entry form that we carry food and had expected it would be confiscated and disposed of. The camper cabin but was obviously not searched und just the identity of the vehicle was checked. We paid 6 USD per person fees and got 180 days of stay stamped in the passport. Once all the formalities were done, the officials were much more friendly, interested in our car and our journey and even had some funny sayings in stock.

Since there was no great desired sights for us on the way to South Dakota, we wanted to bring the miles as quickly as possible behind us. The time saved, we wanted to use in the western states and provinces, a region that had more to offer than the barren agricultural areas. Moreover, since the summer season is short for the North, this was another reason for us to lose little time.



Only to overnight we always wanted to try to find a nice spot and be there early in the afternoon to relax after the long rides.

So our daily work for about a week was to unreel kilometres, to shop every few days and replenish diesel every about 1000 km. In the

# The Central Northern US

afternoon we were looking for a camping, whenever possible in a beautiful and quiet state park. For the Memorial Day Weekend we stayed at the *Pine Lake State Park*, because most of the attractive places were heavily populated due to the first long weekend in the US. So we tried not to already arrive during this weekend in the very popular area of the Badlands / Black Hills.



Finally, after about 2500 km we reached our first big target in the western United States.

## In the Badlands

The name “Badlands” have been nominated by the native people living in this area, as the land is not very attractive nor useful. This was already announced a fair bit before the National Park, because ever more often individual bald, heavily eroded clay formations sticking out of the heaving and green Prairie were along the road. The closer we got to the park, the bigger and more colourful the hills became.

At the entrance of the park, we purchased our first the year pass which allowed us access to all US national parks and monuments. The invested 80 USD, will pay for themselves soon, because even the individual entrance fee to Badlands National Park would cost 15 USD. In the Visitor Centre, we obtained information about the possibilities in the park and watched the displays and an informative movie.

Then we drove to the east entrance, a few kilometres away from the Visitor Centre, where the most impressive formations were to be found. On a short hike we came into the midst of the hills and canyons and



# The Central Northern US

experienced every few meters a changed landscape. A scenic road leads through the park, which guides the visitor to at all particularly interesting places. Viewing platforms to take pictures and short hikes are made available. We enjoyed the many flowers and animals. We observed vultures, coloured small birds, various squirrels and prairie dogs, and even little wild bunny.



In the more western part of the park erosion landscape slowly disappeared into Prairie. We encountered a small herd Bighorn Sheep and everywhere huge colonies of prairie dogs. These behaved like our marmots, when danger threatened, the guards whistled loudly and all disappeared into their burrows. Not far from the road, we saw few bison graze. When we arrived at the Sage Creek Campground, we also found bison and prairie dog colonies nearby. Since the camp wasn't fenced, the bison actually walked close by feeding on the green grass.



# The Central Northern US

## In the Black Hills

In *Rapid City*, we filled up our supplies and then drove directly into the *Black Hills National Forest* northwest of the city. After some searching and an involuntary trip into a dead end, we found a beautiful place to stay. Campfires were not allowed here, which did not surprise us, because of the strong wind and dry soil.



The following day we drove the short distance to *Mt. Rushmore National Monument*. We had the annual pass for the National Parks, but here it was of no use, because the admission was free, even without a passport. The parking lot, however, was operated by a private company, and it cost a whopping 11 USD!

The 18m high, carved heads of the former presidents Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln, are blasted from the granite rocks and are very impressive. On a short walk, we were able to approach the sculptures closer although, to get even closer was not possible. In an interesting exhibition the history of the monument was presented, impressive and detailed.



In the adjacent *Custer State Park* we drove on the narrow *Iron Mountain Highway*. On the tour through the park we saw a part of the resident 1,300 bison, many mothers with their still red-brown youngsters who were grazing comfortably not far from the road. In *Centre Lake Campground* we stayed for the night.

The following day we drove on the *Needles Highway*, known for its sleek and high granite pillars. In order to experience the landscape even

# The Central Northern US

better, we started hiking to *Harney Peak*. On this four-hour round trip we reached the highest point between the *Rocky Mountains* and the *Pyrenees* in Spain. The trail led right through the impressive rock formations, but also through large areas in which the trees in the thousands lying criss-crossed on the ground and only a few of them were standing. Via the *Sylvan Lake* we came back to our car.



We had planned to visit the *Jewel Caves* nearby. The visit of these caves was only possible with a guided tour, but since all the next schedules were already booked, we had to give up that plan. Only a few kilometres north in the National Forest we found a beautiful wild place to stay. No sooner had we set up camp, we were visited by a large herd of cattle. The mother cows and their calves stared at us curiously from all sides, but as soon as we made a movement, galloped away fearful. During the night we heard repeatedly howling coyotes, but to see we got none.

## Grand Teton National Park

To get from the Black Hills in this national park, we had to pass the plains of *Wyoming*. The landscape was now at least more interesting than in the *Great Plains* of the Midwest. In *Casper* we inserted a service break to do the laundry and wash ourselves, as well as checking e-mails and Facebook. For the Toyota we bought two new tires, because the two front ones, were pretty wicked, which had repeatedly led to strong vibration in the steering.

As we drove west, soon the first snowy mountains came into view. We descended to Jackson Hole more than 3000m.



# The Central Northern US

The *Grand Teton National Park* offers many hiking trails along with the magnificent landscape. We enjoyed this to the fullest and started in the early morning with magnificent conditions around the *Phelps Lake*. Meanwhile spring had also arrived here at about 2000m above sea level, the trees and bushes were evident in delicate light green, and the first wildflowers formed coloured swab. After the hike we slowly moved northward through the park.



In the *Signal Mt Campground* the simple sites were already fully booked at lunch time, so we went to *Colter Bay* where we were luckier.

Directly from the campsite we hiked the next day to *Hermitage Point*. This route was recommended to us as plenty of wildlife have been observed. In fact, we have already seen a river otter in the distance, shortly after taking off. At the *Heron Pond*, we met a group of pelicans, alongside the many Canada geese, which we did not expect in this landscape.



The highlight was our first black bear. We heard very close to a loud crack and spied through the undergrowth a bear in a maximum of 20 meters. He ran some time parallel to us through the thicket then ran away without being seen anymore. We were not completely comfortable



# The Central Northern US

with that, knowing the animal is still nearby and we covered some distance. From a safe distance we saw him finally disappear in the open.

## Yellowstone National Park

This most famous national park in the United States is beautiful, but has a very big problem, namely the incredible number of visitors. In early June, so before the start of the school holidays, without a reservation months in advance it was hardly possible to find a campsite. Some of the camps were inexplicably still closed and very few offered first come first served services. We wanted to stay in the *Norris Campground* and since we knew the situation, we started already at 5 AM to arrive before eight o'clock at the campground. There we queued, hoping that enough sites would become available after all the waiting. After two hours we were actually lucky and were able to check in.

On the first tour through the park we passed through the *Canyon*, the *Yellowstone Lake*, on to the *Old Faithful* and back to *Norris*. The waterfalls at the entrance to the *Yellowstone Canyon* are most impressive. In the plains at the upper course of the river we saw countless bison, some of them were determined to wander on the road, leading to a large traffic jam immediately. A first area of thermal activity was right on the lake with a magnificent backdrop of snowy mountains. In all colours the bacteria shimmered around the many hot springs, which, however, carried crystal clear or grey and cloudy waters from underground.



The famous geyser, *Old Faithful*, attracted many visitors, because it spits its water 50m regularly and punctually as a Swiss watch into the air. We were lucky to watch the spectacle without any waiting. In the vicinity many more springs and geysers could be admired. Here, you could literally feel how close to the liquid mass of the Earth you are, it splashed and growled everywhere and the air smelled pungent sulphur. A visit to the *Old Faithful Inn* was a must do for us. This hotel is almost as old

# The Central Northern US

as the park itself, built entirely of wood trunks. The spacious and comfortable lobby is dominated by a huge fireplace.



The next day we left the car parked and walked to the nearby *Norris Geyser Basin*. This varied area offered all known forms of thermal elements, such as hot springs, which sprung coloured or boiling out of the ground, bubbling mud pools and geysers especially. The *Steamboat Geyser* shoots its water over 100m high, higher than any other on earth, but only every few years, the chances to see it is therefore quite small.



The last day in *Yellowstone* we spent in the north eastern corner of the park. Over a pass, with nearly 3000 masl, we got to the *Tower Fall* where the water fell between eroded rock towers into the depth. Not quite as impressive as the *Yellowstone Falls*, but well worth seeing.

We had been recommended a hike in the *Specimen Ridge*, were, in a largely unspoilt area, petrified trees can be found. The 2.5 km long route was very steep and without really developed trails and it cost us much sweat. However, the effort was worth it, because everywhere in the landscape, the impressive fossilized trees were scattered and could be seen from very close without any barriers. On the way, we met a large herd of bison, mostly cows some with very young calves. We knew that we should not dare to get to close, because the mothers watched the surrounding very suspicious and would not hesitate to attack to protect the calf.

Another highlight we visited, were the sinter terraces of *Mammoth Hot Springs*. Along the way we got stuck twice in a traffic jam, both times the cause was a black bear that was loitering in sight distance to the road.

# The Central Northern US

Ranger tried to bring order to the chaos, but with little success, because everyone wanted to shoot his picture, without regard to the other visitors. We wondered what it looks like in high season.

Arriving at the *Mammoth Hot Springs*, we saw from far the bright white or brown, yellow and orange sinter terraces covered with bacteria like carpets. The non-active and dry places, however, were rather grey and unattractive. Also this natural spectacle attracted, like all other hotspots, many visitors and there was shortage of parking spaces. It was time for us to get back to less visited areas.



## Glacier National Park

A few hundred kilometres north of the *Yellowstone Park*, we arrived at the *Glacier National Park* on the American and the *Waterton Lake National Park* on the Canadian side. We reached the National Park from the West. We soon found out that the famous and beautiful scenic *Going to the Sun Highway* was still closed. Before mid-June, the road over the *Logan Pass* is usually not open, depending on snow conditions remains closed even until July.

The advantage of this fact was that there is not so much going on in the park. Finding a campsite was not a problem, although some were still not operating. The day we arrived, the weather still showed the beautiful side, even if it was not warm at all. However, the evening and all the next day surprised with rainy weather and temperatures fell during the day to below 15 ° C. Unfortunately, the clouds hung so low, that the mountains that make up the backdrop to the *McDonald Lake*, were not to be seen. Nevertheless we started to take a short tour along the *Going to the Sun* route to *Avalanche*, the preliminary endpoint, as long as the road was blocked. Except for a few waterfalls and some views of the lake, due to the overcast weather, little more was to see.

# The Central Northern US

The day after we moved to the east side of the park and camped at the *Two Medicine Campground*. Before we set up camp, we took a long walk around the lake with the same name. We had hoped to see wildlife, but except bear dung and the footprint of a mountain lion we only saw a few birds. On the other hand, we were rewarded with spectacular views and many beautiful wildflowers. Since we were back in the camp quite early, we set up a warm bush shower and enjoyed it, despite the cool temperatures and the cold wind.



For dinner we tried to make a potato gratin in the camp oven, which was a great success. In addition we had some lamb chops from the grill. We especially enjoyed the meat since lamb is difficult to find in the US supermarkets, as it is not often available.

The very next day we moved our household a few kilometres further, to *Many Glacier*. Although the many glaciers that gave the area the name are now history, but the landscape is still impressive enough. The day fell once again into the water and we spent most of it in our small rolling home. To our great excitement, we saw a moose cow with her calf when they emerged unexpectedly in the middle of the campsite. Leisurely the two walked through the area and plucked relish leaves from the trees. However, the Ranger warned us not to get too close, because if Mama Moose gets the impression that her baby is in danger, she may panic and go after the people quickly. For us it was a good opportunity to see the animals up close.

The following morning the weather was promising and lured us early out of bed. Shortly after eight o'clock we were on route to *Grinnell Lake*. Passing the *Swiftcurrent* and *Josephine Lake* we came closer and closer to the mountains. Although it was still quite cold and the wind did not help to make the temperatures more bearable until we entered the forest, where there was no wind. Again, we had little luck with wildlife viewing, the landscape, however, was all the more impressive.

# The Central Northern US

We spent the afternoon in the sun, it pleasantly warmed up, despite milky clouds.

# Western Canada



## Western Canada

### Waterton Lake National Park

This national park is adjacent to *Glacier National Park* on the US American side. Around the *Waterton Lake* is an impressive setting of a plurality of peaks in a row, most of them 2000 or 3000 m in height. Like the most famous *Lake Louise*, on the *Waterton Lake* there is another imposing hotel overlooking a lake, the *Prince of Wales*. Otherwise, the small town of *Waterton* offered only the usual tourist facilities.



On the way to camp we saw along the road our first black bear with two cubs. The three bears patrolled the hill overlooking the road and Mama Bear turned every stone, looking for something edible. One of the curious youngster stood on its hind legs and looked down curiously at us humans.

We still had had not much luck with the weather and therefore only stayed one night. The beautiful *Red Rock Canyon*, which is accessible via a spur road, one that is definitely worth a visit. The red rocks, which gave the canyon the name, appeared almost unnatural and provided wonderful photo opportunities. Directly from the campground we started a short walk to *Crandell Lake*, however, we were wet once more by the time we got back to the car. We cancelled the planned hike to *Lake Bertha*, because the next morning the mountains were overcast and the next rain front was approaching. We had hardly gone out from the

# Western Canada

mountains, when the clouds loosened up and the temperatures rose again pleasantly.



## On Alberta's Forest Trunk Road North

In *Coleman* we started on the *Forest Trunk Road*, a well-developed gravel road which leads several hundred kilometres across Alberta. Some of the regions were designated as *Provincial Recreation Areas*, where you can find simple but beautiful campsites. For about 17 CAD, we received generous plots, usually an outhouse and sometimes even water. Also wild camping was possible, often in beautiful places directly by a stream. On the weekend, we saw dozens of locals even with their big caravans and campers at the beautiful places.

Landscape this route was more charming than travelling further east through the *Prairie*. The route leads through the foothills of the *Rockies* mostly in the forest. However, caution is necessary on weekdays, because the gravel road will be primarily used by logging trucks, carrying timber from the forests.

After about 80 km along this path, we turned to the *Forest Road 532* to the east, to return back to the main road, because we had to go to *Calgary* the next day. We found a beautiful camp about 16 km before reaching the paved road. In the colourful flower meadow directly by a stream has



## Western Canada

often been used by people, because there were two fires places. Our neighbours, a colony ground squirrels, crawled out of their caves, but disappeared again underground at the slightest movement on our part.

### Banff and Jasper National Park

Before we reached the two national parks, we stayed in a provincial park camping. Once again, we were received with a shower from above. The weather has been like this for a long time, always unstable. In the town of Banff, we informed ourselves about the possibilities offered in the park. The camping situation was luckily still quite relaxed, only sites equipped with the Hook-Ups were mostly fully booked, but this did not bother us because we did not need electricity.

On the *Bow Valley Parkway*, we drove north. Although we were in the national park, we noticed that we didn't spot any wildlife as we did in the previously visited parks. However, why this was so, wasn't clear. Once in *Lake Louise Village*, we booked our pitch for the evening and then drove up to the *Moraine Lake*. The parking lot was pretty full and the number of visitors correspondingly large. Once at the top, we understood why - the view over the glassy surface of the turquoise lake and the mountains beyond was phenomenal. A brief dry period was enough to shoot the obligatory photos and admire the surroundings, then it started to rain again.

After a few kilometres we reached *Lake Louise* and we had the hiking boots already tied as the next downpour came started. As quickly as it had come, the nightmare was over again and we could start our hike. Along the lake, we wandered towards the mountains and left soon a large part of the other visitors behind us. Although the view on the glacier was denied due to the low clouds, the walk through the magnificent forests, that always gave the free view of the lake, was worth. At the turning point of our tour it started to rain again and



## Western Canada

despite raincoat our pant legs were soaked within a short period. Since we already had covered more than half of the way, we continued to walk along the High Trail and arrived at the *Mirror Lake*.

Other day we always followed the *Icefields Parkway* to *Jasper*. Many beautiful views of the mountains and small detours made the trip varied. Suddenly there were several vehicles with activated hazard warning lights on the road. We already suspected that there was something to see. The attraction was actually a large herd of *Bighorn Sheep* that were licking salt on the roadside that was left from the snow evictions of last winter.



Arriving at the *Columbia Icefield*, we were quite shocked to see how the *Athabasca Glacier* had regressed over the years. Marks on the way to the ice showed how far the glacier retreated per year and how little left of it. When we both visited the area over 30 years ago, the glacier was still close to the highway, while now a walk of half an hour was needed to reach the edge of the glacier.



Despite the decline in ice, we were able to admire more, deep-reaching valley glacier on the onward journey. We followed the high valley, which has been getting wider and the *Athabasca River* became ever more powerful. Another trip took us deep into a side valley to the *Angel*



## Western Canada

*Glacier.* It flows over an edge in a wild mountain landscape, similar to the high alpine areas in Switzerland. Numerous icebergs were drifting on the lake below the glaciers, and many flower-filled meadows clearly showed that spring had found its way here.

The next day we started with a trip to *Maligne Lake*. We started early and it paid off, because we reached the lake before the great mass of visitors arrived and we could end our short hike dry feet before rain started again. In the lower part of the valley, the *Maligne River* forced its way through a narrow canyon. The marked trails follow this canyon on both sides, and are connected by a bridge, so that a round trip was possible. Again and again we had an insight into the deep trenches and cracks that had formed the river while the water itself often not visible, but only the noise and thunder could be heard deep down.

Since the weather had not really improved, we decided to drive to the *Miette Hotsprings* to enjoy a hot bath. In the magnificent, 40 ° warm water, the rain for once could not bother us.



## Friends and Full Service

We had received an invitation from Ueli's work mate Steve and his family to visit them in *Edmonton*. Our schedule fit perfectly on a weekend, so they also had time to enjoy the day together with us. William, the son of Steve, plays soccer and ball hockey, a type of floor hockey, which is played with Ice hockey sticks. Friday evening we accompanied the family to a friendly match between the coaches and the boys and the subsequent eating pizza in the park. As the coach team had too few players to form a team, they also incorporated their wives, and finally even Ueli into the team. Despite dedicated kicking on both sides a penalty shoot-out had to decide the winning team. We enjoyed the company of the boys and their parents.

## Western Canada

Saturday morning was service time. Myrta was cleaning the car interior completely and washed our clothes in parallel, while Ueli with the help of Steve installed a protection for headlamps and windscreen, which should minimize the risk of damage to the coming gravel roads. In the afternoon, a ball hockey game with William was announced. The game would decide which team could play the final on Sunday. With all the families we cheered his team and Williams team won superior to 7: 0. This day flew by in a flash and it was getting late and when we were back home, it was decided instead of cooking dinner to organize a BBQ in the garden. With gorgeous hot temperatures and animated conversations with our hosts, we let the day end.

Sunday we left things easy. It was not until the afternoon when our hosts went with William to the final game, and we started cooking the displaced dinner. We prepared a Greek salad, moussaka and a fine raspberry dessert. The whole family tasted our menu and they enjoyed it, not least because they didn't have to cook themselves. With a bottle of red wine and many anecdotes and stories this warm evening ended on the terrace.



After having congratulated Caroline to her Birthday the next day, we said goodbye to her and William and drove into town. We wanted to find someone who could help us with starting issues we had in the past whenever we wanted to start the engine in cold weather. At *4wheelauto* we were greeted by the owner himself. He listened to our concerns and gave very competent information about the possible solutions to the problem. His mechanic took care immediately to our car and found after a short time that the ambient temperature sensor was broken. To my great surprise, they even had the necessary spare parts in stock and an hour later we were back on the road. We can recommend this company in good conscience, because the people know the Land Cruisers quite well.

## Western Canada

Next, we went to the office of Endress + Hauser, the former employer of Ueli, to say goodbye to Steve and get a factory tour. The generously designed building had only recently been completed and occupied. The new training facility was still under construction and it would take some time before it was completed.

The weather forecast for the next day looked pretty good, so we decided to get back on the way north. Before, we wanted to stock up our supplies, because the further north we will get, the more modest and more expensive the offer will be. In glorious sunshine we drove back on the same road we had come to Edmonton. The fine weather now gave the landscape a very different look. In *Hinton* we turned north on Highway 40, who had landscape wise more to offer than the shortest route between *Edmonton* and *Grande Prairie*.

## On the Alaska Highway to Watson Lake

The first major city that we reached in British Columbia was *Dawson Creek*, which simultaneously is the starting point of the Alaska Highway, a road built in World War II by the US army. Meanwhile, this has been reinforced to a good paved road, but still leads through largely pristine wilderness of the north.

Of course, we didn't miss the opportunity to take the obligatory picture at the start marker of *Alcan*. Above all, we were happy to find the Swiss Bakery which offers their baked goods next to the Visitor Centre. A woman who emigrated from Gränichen was running the business for 16 years, and received us in the broadest Aargau dialect. We could not resist the temptation and stocked up with a wonderful crusty bread and nut pastry.

Just north of town, we stayed at the *Kiskatinaw Provincial Park*, where the only remaining wooden bridge of the *Alaska Highway* led across the *Kiskatinaw River*. The next day we followed the route towards *Fort Nelson*. Along the way, especially in *Fort St. John*, it was obvious that the oil and gas industry was stuck in a deep crisis. All vehicles and the equipment, which are supposed operating on the surrounding oil fields, were parked. The rest of the way to *Fort Nelson* was still characterized by agriculture and facilities of the oil producer. After that, the landscape became increasingly wild and fewer signs of civilization were visible.

## Western Canada

After a long day's drive we stayed at the *Tetsa Regional Park*, a beautiful and well-tended campsite.

Moving forward, we could always watch bears along the road, the freshly grown clover attracted them. Some bears disappeared when we stopped, while others even didn't get bothered by our presence. One last time we crossed the northern most part of the Rocky Mountains, an area with impressive mountain landscapes, mighty rivers and impressive lakes.



In *Liard Hot Springs* we had our next stop and since we arrived just after noon, had no problems finding a place to stay. We had therefore plenty of time to enjoy an extensive bath in the hot springs. While the water was a soaring 52° C at the source, it cooled down in the beautiful and naturally landscaped pools to a pleasant bathing temperature. After a sunny day a storm came up in the evening, and arrived exactly when Ueli had put the outdoor kitchen in operation. So it left us no other choice, but finishing the dinner inside the car.

Later in the evening, when the weather had calmed down, Myrta proposed to take a walk through the swamp below the sources in hopes to see a moose. There was actually one of these most powerful animals next to the boardwalk and grazed on the nutritious water plants. The moose wasn't disturbed by our presence and stomped with his long legs through the marshy plain and posed for photos in close proximity.



On the route to *Watson Lake* we sometimes got the impression to be on the road in a safari park, as we always saw bears or wood bison on the roadside along the road. A whole herd of about thirty bison grazing

# Western Canada

peacefully, but when we stopped, the cows with calves always remained vigilant and were watching us suspiciously. Wood bison are slightly smaller and less bulky compared with their counterparts from the Prairie, which makes their movement in the dense forests easier.

*Watson Lake* is known for its forest of road signs and other panels that were installed by the visitors from all over the world. We tried to find a particular panel in the vast amount of signs, one Ueli had hung here on his first visit, but unfortunately without success. The huge display was launched in 1942 by a homesick soldier during the construction of the highway and now includes more than 72,000 panels. While we strolled between the signs, we met surprisingly, the Moser family again. Together we set-up camp in the expensive and also ugly, but practical RV Park next to the Visitor Centre. Since we needed a shower before we dived again in the bush for a few days, we had, despite all the negative aspects, to take this opportunity.



We had hoped that we could celebrate Canada Day in Watson Lake, together with the local population. However, we were disappointed to find out that the events to mark the occasion already started in the morning at eleven o'clock and at three o'clock everything was already over and that it was just a harmless entertainment for families and children. There was neither a parade nor a party or fireworks. We learned that the practical-minded local authorities spend the money, which the government provides for the Canada Day fireworks, on the occasion of Halloween. In contrast to July, November evenings are dark and the people can profit much more from the spectacle.

## Campbell Hwy, Silver and Dawson City

As an alternative to the *Alaska Highway*, the 580 km long *Campbell Highway* is offered from *Watson Lake*. This little-used gravel road, is leading as a well-developed route through largely pristine wilderness. The first night spent a few meters from the road, on a lake. The

## Western Canada

waterfront and the moist soil brought an army of mosquitoes, but thanks insect repellent we were able to keep their distance. The track led mostly through forests, so that we could rarely enjoy the view of the impressive mountain scenery. Along the route, a total of nine Government Camp Grounds are established, one was more beautiful than the other. Shortly before *Ross River*, one of two small villages along the route we took a short detour along the *Canol Road* south to the *Lapie Canyon*. Over millions of years here the *Lapie River* had cut deep into the rock and formed an impressive gorge. Back on the main route we were lucky to see a rare black fox close up. The animal was on the roadside looking for food and made not a very fit impression. This was probably the reason that we got to see him at all. *Ross River*, a sleepy village, was about 10km off the *Campbell Highway*, with little attraction for which it would have been worthwhile to make a stop, except that one of the two gas stations located along the route can be found here.

Another stop we made in *Faro*, which is also a few kilometres away from the main route. According to our information, we should have been able to observe a special type of mountain sheep there. Unfortunately, it turned out that the animals had apparently already moved to the summer pastures. After all, the trip lead us on a small 4x4 route, but it ended at a bridge that was more than doggy and forced us to return the same way back.



At the *Little Salmon Lake* we found a beautiful campsite on the shore. Where the lake has the name from, remained incomprehensible to us, because after all, it was over 50 km long and several kilometres wide, We could see dark clouds around the lake bestowed heavy rains to areas, while our place remained dry all afternoon. To our delight, we received a visit from a curious fox and a Porcupine, it just walked across the campsite. In the lake an otter poked his head out of the water and delighted us with its swimming skills and then he started, to our great

# Western Canada

pleasure, playing a trick on a duck by appearing repeatedly in its vicinity.

The next day we wanted to bring the remaining kilometres to the end of *Campbell Highway* behind us, but just before its meeting with the *Klondike Highway* we turned off into the *French Lake Road*. This narrow, bumpy track partly led again through a wilderness that is rarely visited by people. Near the *Five Finger Rapids*, one of the major obstacles to the gold miners, which navigated down the *Yukon River*, we finally met the main road to *Dawson City*.



The course of the route was still very interesting and worth seeing. We left the main road once again to make a side trip to *Keno*. Also, this area experienced its economic peak at the end of the 19th century. Not gold but silver deposits were the catalyst. At *Five Mile Lake*, we stayed a night before we left to see the surrounding mines. It is a relatively warm lake, attracting the locals from the nearby *Mayo*, but for us it was definitely too cold for swimming. We contented ourselves with a walk around the lake, which pointed out to us that it is, despite its name, by far not five miles long.

To get to *Keno*, we chose the less travelled gravel road along the *Duncan Creek*. In the village itself was not much to see from the former run for silver, but some relics from this period still remain preserved for posterity. Before we visited the Mining Museum, we drove up to the *Signal Summit*, well 700 meters above the valley floor, which allowed a panoramic view of the barren wilderness and the high mountains, but also to the many disused mines.

After a journey of about 100 km via *Stewart Crossing*, until shortly before *Dawson City*, we stayed again overnight before we visited the gold mining town.

*Dawson City*, the small town was founded in 1896. At the start of the Klondike gold rush, at the end of the 19th century it was one of the

## Western Canada

largest cities in North America, with around 40,000 inhabitants. The gold deposits attracted adventurers from around the world, all hoping to get rich here. However, not all survived the rigors of the arduous journey on foot through the *White Pass* or *Chilkoot Trail* and few actually came to wealth. Many of the buildings from that period have now been restored and new buildings must be built the same manner to obtain the cityscape. The visitor really feels transported back to the *Dawson City* of the days of the gold rush. For convenience we setup camp in the only camp in the city centre, although not particularly beautiful, and also a bit cramped and noisy, yet close to the action.

At ten o'clock in the evening we went, still in full daylight, to the city and the casino *Diamond Tooth Gertie's*. However, we were not going to play roulette, but wanted to see the announced Cancan show. Thanks to a witty presented and authentic-looking show in the beautiful Wild West atmosphere we felt like the miners of yesteryear.



## On the Dempster Highway to the Arctic Circle

The weather forecast for the next three days was outstanding, and we wanted to take the opportunity to drive on the *Dempster Highway* to *Inuvik*. After we had completed the food shopping and filled up our tanks, we were ready to attack the 1500 km north and back.

From the beginning, the landscape was varied along the gravel road and increasingly mountainous. In the *Tombstone Territorial Park* we had a brief stopover to gather information. Since the predicted fair weather had not yet arrived, we intended to explore the area on the way back in hopefully better weather. The road rose slowly to a first pass and the

## Western Canada

trees gave way to an open tundra. Despite black rain clouds that gave the landscape a dramatic note, it stayed dry.

We drove up to the *Engineer Creek Government Campground*, which revealed itself as a mosquito-infested forest. The pitches were indeed laid out nicely as always, but hard to enjoy without being eaten by mosquitoes. In addition, the whole place sank in black mud after previous rains.

Even the next morning no blue sky awaited us as announced, but still changing cloudy skies, with some showers. Nevertheless, we enjoyed the beautiful drive across the plateau up to *Eagle Plains*, the first supply station after 370km, which many used to refuel, especially motorcyclists. A few dozen kilometres later we reached the *Arctic Circle*. The vast mountains laid overcast and gloomy in front of us, so we wanted to save the souvenir photo with the marking plate for the return trip.

*Richardson Range*, the last mountain before the landscape is permanently flat, we got to the border with the Northwest Territories. A black wall of clouds waiting for us and two Canadians on their motorcycles, which we found there. Soon after, it started to pour and the visibility was severely limited by dense fog. After all, the rain washed the worst of the mud immediately from the car. We drove to the ferry across the *Peel River* to find out that they had ceased operations due to flooding until further notice. In addition to the many logs floating in the river, the problem was that the ferry could not get close enough to shore to load the vehicles. We decided to return back a few kilometres and to stay there overnight. However, there were not many overnight options, therefore we finally spent the night in a gravel yard along with several parked trucks. That far north it didn't get dark, despite the overcast sky.

While we were having breakfast, the drivers of the trucks were transported by shuttle to their vehicles and set out soon after on the way to a road construction site. We drove back to the ferry to find out that the water level was indeed dropped slightly overnight, but not nearly enough to make a crossing possible. Officially we didn't receive from anyone a forecast how long the interruption would take, but it was several days they mentioned. As long as it was raining again and again in the catchment area of the *Peel River*, the situation would not relax anyway. So much for the promising weather forecast, which had

## Western Canada

motivated us a few days earlier to drive the route. Obviously, the weather did not listen to the forecasts. In view of the situation, we decided to turn around and consoled ourselves with it.

On the way back through the *Richardson Range*, the weather was surprisingly quite friendly and we enjoyed the view of the surrounding mountain ranges from our overnight stay at one of the microwave antennas high above the valley. Even before we arrived back at the Arctic Circle, we crossed two motorcyclists who stopped at the roadside. On one machine, the chain was broken and the rider had no spare part nor other means to repair it. Not a good place for such a breakdown, some 450 km from *Dawson City* and 800 km from *Whitehorse*!!



We were able to actually shoot our Arctic Circle photo at slightly better conditions. We were spared from rain all day, although black clouds piled around us again. In the evening we went again up to an antenna, because we had already noted, that without vegetation and in open landscape there were much less of the ubiquitous mosquitoes. We enjoyed a sunny and rather warm evening with a wonderful view of the *Ogilvie Mountains*. As at the *Little Salmon Lake*, a few days ago, we were watching two storm cells dropping their cargo of rain and it delighted us with a wonderful rainbow from a safe distance. There were lightnings all around our place all night, it thundered and the mountains vanished behind the walls of rain, yet we stayed dry all night.

The following day was again characterized by changeable weather. Mostly we were spared, but two heavy showers transformed the track within a short time period in a muddy slush and the camper was covered with dark brown mud. We actually had planned a stop in *Tombstone Park*, but when we got there, the next storm was already brewing, so we reluctantly gave up that plan and drove straight back to *Dawson City*. There we enjoyed the sun and warm 25 degrees.

# Alaska



## Alaska

### In Alaska

From *Dawson City* it was not far to the border with Alaska on the *Top of the World Highway*. Crossing the border into the United States took place smoothly and was completed within a few minutes. The customs officer did not even condescend from his house, but stamped our passports and wishing us a good trip.

After crossing the hitherto good paved road it changed into a dirt road. In *Chicken*, a small former mining town, we visited a dredge, an old excavator with which the gold-bearing rocks had been dug out of the water. The place where only a few people live, is now with its many relics from the gold rush an open air museum.

Before *Tok* we reached again the well paved Alaska Highway, and we followed it all the way to *Fairbanks*. The big city presented itself as the last possibility to procure everything necessary, especially fresh produce, because from there it was wilderness in all directions where vegetables and fruits are limited and when to get it at all, it would be in poor quality and at great expense.



# Alaska

## On the Dalton Highway to the Arctic Ocean

The weather was fantastic! At least two beautiful days with temperatures up to 30 ° C were forecasted. We dropped the scheduled service and another rest day in *Fairbanks*, because with this weather we wanted to take the opportunity to tackle the *Dalton Highway*. We filled our diesel tanks one last time at reasonable prices, because we knew that on the way north fuel was more expensive and ultimately would cost more than double in *Deadhorse*. A paradoxical situation when you consider that the whole crude oil was originally exploited there.

The first 150 km to the north we drove the *Elliott Highway* until we reached the actual start of the *Dalton Highway* which, after about 650 km reaches *Deadhorse*, an oil-producing site a few kilometres from the Arctic Sea. Shortly after we were out on the *Dalton*, we feared that something was wrong with the engine of our Land Cruiser, because sometimes Ueli had to shift down into second gear to make it up the hills. However, in the end we came to the simple conclusion that on the one hand, the road was very steep and with the 270 liters of diesel, 120 liters of water and all the food for a week on board we must be very heavy. So we had to accept the fact that our Land Cruiser with a weight of 3.5 t, in spite of the installed turbo, was not a rocket.

After about an hour on the road, we came across a scene of the accident. A pickup truck had driven off the road on a straight stretch and landed in the ditch on the roof. Although there were already some people on site, no one had previously provided the injured driver first aid. Myrta put a dressing on the man's obviously broken and heavily bleeding finger while Ueli unceremoniously put the vehicle back on its feet with the help of the winch. After the arrival of a trained nurse who took care of the injured and promised to wait on site for police and ambulance, and we continued our journey.

Next on the *Dalton Highway*, which runs always parallel and within view of the Trans Alaska oil pipeline, we reached at 100 km the *Yukon River*,

# Alaska

which had grown mightily since *Dawson*. Our overnight stay a little off the road, at the *60 Mile Campground*, was not particularly beautiful, but offered as a special feature an artesian well. This conveyed by natural pressure ice cold and wonderfully tasting drinking water to the surface, which was available free for all.

After a short time, we found ourselves for the second time on the Arctic Circle. To our great joy we met at the marking panel Marie-France and Hervé who were traveling with their Toyota Hilux Azalai. We had met the French couple a few weeks earlier and were very happy about the reunion. The landscape was now increasingly mountainous, because we went through the *Brooks Range*. Before the actual pass over the mountains we had a stop in *Coldfoot*, a small town that serves mainly as a stopping place for the truck driver on the *Dalton Highway*. Beside a private, small airfield, *Coldfoot* has a beautifully furnished and informative visitor centre with an exhibition and interesting information about the region.



The crossing of the *Brooks Range* was one of the highlights on the route. The road climbed to over 1400 masl, and reached on the *Atigun Pass* the highest point. We had planned to stay at the pass in the assumption to best observe the midnight sun, but found out that high mountains impeded the view to the north. Therefore, we drove down to the plain and stayed there at the *Galbraith Lake*. The weather allowed to experience a night without sunset, with the effect that our solar system supplied power even after midnight.

We had now definitely reached the tundra, as no trees grow north of the *Brooks Range*. Along the *Sag River* we finally arrived in *Deadhorse*, the northernmost, approachable place in the Americas. To see the Arctic Ocean, located a few kilometres north, the only choice is to join a tour, because the roads further north are only open to the oil companies. In the afternoon, fortunately we found place in one of the tour buses,

# Alaska

which was advantageous because a bad weather front was already approaching. When we arrived at 14:00 the mercury was at 27 ° C and when the tour finished around 17:30, the temperature had dropped to 7 ° C!

Before the tour started, we had time to do a little sightseeing tour of *Deadhorse*. Container hotels, oil drill towers, workshops and warehouses coined the place that had neither a real centre nor facilities for outside visitors, everything only served the purpose of oil production. The bus took us finally to the *Prudhoe Bay*, and thus to the northernmost point of our trip. On the way we saw caribou (reindeer) and geese grazing on the barren meadows, obviously without being disturbed by the oil-producing operation. Once at sea, some of the people went further into the swimwear and jumped for the so-called Arctic Ocean baptism into the icy waters. As if that alone were not hard enough, a storm swept over the beach, which was so strong, that it took us almost from the feet.

Back at the car we decided to immediately take the same way back, because as we saw, in *Deadhorse* was hardly a quiet place with infrastructure for camping. We drove about 50km south. It took us two hours including waiting time at two construction sites. However, we found a peaceful and idyllic place right on the *Sag River* where we could spend the night.

After it had been raining at night again, we expected the next sustained period of bad weather and but were surprised when the morning showed only a light cloud cover. The rest of the way back we enjoyed in good conditions. We were amazed how different the landscape appeared in the north-south direction compared with what seen driving north.

After crossing the pass heavy transports were announced by a pilot car. A short time later we crossed several trucks that really used the whole road width for the cargo that they brought to the north. Throughout the trip we met otherwise mainly tankers which tons of fuel, to keep the plants in *Deadhorse* running. The cargo was probably in large parts from crude oil, which was originally exploited in *Deadhorse*, transported to the refinery in the south via pipeline and ship and finally was brought back by truck to its origins. After all this effort, it was not surprising that diesel up there was more than twice as expensive as in *Fairbanks*. We

# Alaska

were certainly glad that we were able to stash away enough fuel, to do the return trip without refuelling.



On the way up we had seen a nice bush camp at a river crossing on a gravel bar. Firewood in abundance made it easy for us to cook our stuffed peppers in the camp oven. Even the weather held, but low clouds, strong wind and cold temperatures promised nothing good. Early the next morning we heard the first drops fall and it should not stop raining until we arrived in Fairbanks and the day after.

## The Eskimo and Indian Olympics in Fairbanks

Ueli had already visited this event during his first visit to *Fairbanks* in the 1980's and had good memories. So we wanted to include the event in our program. The days until the start of the Olympics, we planned to spend at the *Chena Hotsprings*, few kilometres outside the city. The weather was still rainy and cold, so a relaxing bath in the hot springs was just right. After an hour we arrived at the resort and enjoyed to soak our bones in 40 ° C warm water in the natural pool, framed by large granite blocks. In the evening we let ourselves indulge in the attached restaurant. Although we appreciated it not having to cook yourself, we found the menu was very much for the American taste and we have a more varied cuisine from our kitchen aboard.

Back in Fairbanks we had some tinkering to do. In very heavy rain our rear door had sometimes been leaking and as the *Dalton Highway* is by rain transformed into a muddy track, no clean rain water penetrated this time, but a dirty, brown broth. So we got the necessary seals at the hardware store and Ueli assembled everything in the camp.

The following day the opening of the World Eskimo and Indian Olympics took place. The title of the event sounded like a huge event,

# Alaska

but because all participants came exclusively from Alaska, both the number of athletes and the audience, were rather small.

During the first day several knockouts were held. Some of the sports shown were derived from capabilities which are required by a hunter to be successful, others were in our view just bizarre. A special triple jump should remember jumping from ice floe to ice floe, something the Inuits definitely need. Whether leapfrogging from a kneeling position or grabbing a hanging leather ball with one hand while balancing on the other hand, and doing this without the feet and legs touching the floor, is needed in everyday life, was not so obvious.

The official opening ceremony took place on the evening of the first competition day. Beside the presentation of the athletes this mainly included the honouring of war veterans. After every soldier had been presented with name, rank and time served, they were rewarded by the audience with standing ovations. For us this honouring of service 50 years earlier during the Vietnam War, appeared rather outdated and exaggerated.

One of the highlights of the performances was certainly the Blanket Tossing. Thirty strong men from the audience catapulted a young girl with a big leather cloth up to 10 meters into the air and caught her again. The performances by various dance groups in traditional clothes, which were evaluated by a jury, were beautiful to look at. Of course, the election of the Miss Inuit from the ten pretty, also traditionally dressed young women could not be missing.



## Southwestern Alaska

We broke once again camp to go to the *Denali National Park*, which lies about halfway between *Fairbanks* and *Anchorage*. The park was established in 1917 as *Mount McKinley National Park* and received in 1980

# Alaska

the native name *Denali*. As the name suggests, the highest mountain in North America, *Mount McKinley* or *Denali* is located in the centre of the protected area. Still, the weather did not bode well and when we arrived shortly after noon at the Visitor Centre, we found that for the next few days all campsites were fully booked. The buses, the only way to get deeper into the park, were largely occupied too. This would have meant that we had to look for an expensive and not very inviting private camping several kilometres away.

The weather just didn't want to change to the better and the forecasts were anything but rosy. Major attractions in *Anchorage* were therefore not tempting. After all, we found a well-equipped campground with shower near the city. Contrary to all predictions, the weather next day was not bad, it stayed dry all day, and the cloud cover was quite high. We took the opportunity and went to the airport for seaplanes, where hundreds of these machines were moored around a lake and started and landed by the minute. The relatively clear view made a trip to the *Turnagain Arm* possible which offered a beautiful view of the surrounding mountains. A short walk along a stream in which we observed the first ascending salmon, brought us closer to the impressive *Byron Glacier*.

Furthermore, benefiting from the dry weather, we drove out to *Hope*, where we were very lucky to get the last camping pitch. Another hike on the southern shore of *Turnagain Arm* led us through a varied forest, offering beautiful views of the inlet. There was low tide at this inlet which is influenced by large tidal differences and therefore at this time wide areas were dry.

The hike to *Exit Glacier* the next day, we fortunately also brought behind us in dry weather. As soon as we arrived back at the car, the rain pelted the roof again.



# Alaska

In *Seward*, we were fortunate to observe a group of sea otters from the shore. The cute animals moved swiftly in the water or settled comfortably on their back, drifting along. The joy of this glorious game viewing was unfortunately marred somewhat by an accident. Ueli had placed the camera on the hood to use the binoculars in order to see the animals better. As we left, it rumbled suddenly, and we saw the camera slide off the hood and rumble on the road. The result was, that the lens was totalled, but luckily the camera remained intact.

We didn't want to be discouraged by the wet weather and drove next day to the *Kenai Peninsula*. However, the rain became more intense the closer we got to the West Coast and the forecast for the next 7 days promised no change. We definitely had enough! Now, after 10 days we turned Alaska our back and headed towards Canada, hoping for better weather.

In the evening at the camp, we had a pleasant surprise when a young couple approached our car. We did not know them, and assumed that it were once again some curious people who wanted to know more about our camper. However, it turned out that it was Simone and Peter, Swiss compatriots from the canton of Lucerne, who gave us two magnificent, freshly caught salmon fillets, because they could just not eat all they caught that day. We just came to quickly thank them, because they were in a hurry and were gone in a minute.

We drove back to Anchorage, where we were able to get us a replacement for the destroyed lens before we headed for the Canadian border.

In the *Tetlin Wildlife Refuge* we arrived at a beautiful bush campsite on *Deadman Lake*. In the evening we listened to a presentation of an old Indian lady who let us share her life story. Her father had died young, she grew up with her mother and siblings in the wilderness, and experienced, under the most primitive conditions, the life and survival. This way of life guaranteed that the traditions, language and culture of their people are passed on and thus remain intact. To ensure that this knowledge is not lost, the now 70 year old lady is teaching youth and children and presents informative evening events to interested people.

# Yukon and British Columbia



## Yukon and British Columbia

### On the Alaska Highway Through Yukon

Crossing the border to Canada went as always, very relaxed. Somehow we felt again very welcome, a feeling that did not happen so easy at the entries into the United States.

The Alaska Highway was in very good condition on the Canadian side, although repeatedly extended construction sites made slowed us down a bit. The traffic control through the construction sites was organized by so-called flagman. At each end of the construction, a worker with a stop sign regulated the traffic. While waiting, we often had a chat with the people, as they were pleased with the change, because they stood there for hours alone, a rather boring job indeed. On the way through the construction site we were guided by a pilot car to ensure that no one came up with the idea to go too fast.

The landscape was very diverse in this area, because in the southwest the four-thousand metre high *Saint Elias Mountains* rise and the road followed lakes and rivers, thus wonderful sweeping views opened. At the *Kluane Lake* we found a beautiful camping spot right on the pebbly beach. We sought the protection of the existing bushes, because the wind was blowing strong and quite cool over the lake. The views of the water and the mountains opposite was incomparable. After we had settled and sat at the aperitif, we were taken by surprise when Simon and Petra, who had also chosen the shores of *Kluane Lake* as a place to stay. Finally we



## Yukon and British Columbia

could return the favour to the two for their gift of salmon a few days ago. We got to know each other better over a bottle of wine and spent a long, exciting evening with lots of stories by the fire and later when the wind got stronger and stronger we moved in our camper.

We drove into *Whitehorse*, the only significant town along our route, to replenish our supplies. To our pleasant surprise, we met Marie-France and Hervé, the two French travellers, with their Hilux Azalai again at the petrol station. They had travelled the *Dempster Highway* since our last meeting at the Arctic Circle and had made it to *Inuvik*, but, also had little luck with the weather.

We wanted to make some ground good on Dani and Cel, the former neighbours of Ueli in Pfeffingen, because we knew that the two were now not far ahead of us. We drove on to the *Emerald Lake* and looked for a pretty bush camp, only a few meters from the shore.

### Sidetripp to Skagway and Haines

An absolute must is the stop at the *Carcross Desert*. The dune field is the result of nearby glacial sediment which formed what is believed to be the smallest desert in the world. Strong and constant winds that sweep from *Lake Bennett* over the sandy fields, prevent the spread of vegetation. The sight and the walking of sand dunes surrounded by pine forests was a very special experience. Along *Lake Bennet* and over the *White Pass* we reached the Canadian border post, because our destination, *Skagway*, is back on US soil. The landscape, though only just located at 1000masl, was now barren and high alpine. Before we reached the US border post, we actually met almost in no man's land, Dani and Cel. There was a warm reunion, because since our farewell party in Pratteln we have only been in contact via Whatsapp, but had so far not met. We wanted to celebrate the meeting accordingly, so we drove together to the *Salt Flats Camping*, a few kilometres outside of *Skagway*.

We had given the two a cheese fondue voucher at their farewell party before the trip, and now was the chance to redeem it. A fondue was definitely the appropriate menu in the still relatively cool weather. Lacking a proper fondue pot and stove, we did not have that much luxury, we heated the cheese mixture in a normal camping pan on a backpacker stove, which didn't reduce the enjoyment of the fondue in

# Yukon and British Columbia

any way. The white wine and the bread we had purchased the day before, knowing we would meet the two soon. Funny was, that our Swiss dinner took place 1<sup>st</sup> of August, the Swiss national day.



The small town of *Skagway* played an important role in the Klondike Gold Rush, because through this port, a large part of the adventurer from *Seattle* landed. Here began the arduous walk over the *Chilkoot Pass* into the Yukon. The *Royal Canadian Mounted Police* checked everyone who wanted to make his way to the goldfields if he carried the prescribed amount of reserves to prevent people starving on the trip. This meant that everyone had to climb several times fully loaded the steep mountain pass until he had carried the necessary amount of food to *Lake Bennet*. Many of the hopeful men already failed at this hurdle.

At the port of *Skagway* we asked for a ferry crossing towards *Haines*, since we had not had a chance to get a place in the opposite direction. This time it worked and we were able to book a crossing for the next day. Since *Cel* and *Dani* were planning the same way we had come in to go back, our paths already parted again.

Around noon we arrived at the port and were able to drive delay on board with a little. The small ferry was travelling with over thirty knots through the narrow fjord, so that *Skagway* and the four cruise ships, which were currently in the harbour, quickly disappeared from our view.



Soon the port of *Haines* came into sight and after an hour we had again solid ground under the feet. Along a wide river, the road meandered towards the mountains and the Canadian border station. The young

## Yukon and British Columbia

officer who was on duty at customs clearance was more interested in our car and our travel plans as of what we had to declare. Entering Canada was definitely relaxed and easy, which made the country all the more likeable.

We spent the night at the One Million Dollar pass where we didn't find a single dollar bill, despite the promising name. Shortly after the start the next day we made a detour to an abandoned trading post from the gold rush times. There was not much left to see from *Dalton Post*, but we discovered a beautiful camp spot right on the river, but we had no use since we had driven only few kilometres so far. In the immediate vicinity we discovered three bald eagles on a tree, waiting for the salmon that swam up the river to their spawning grounds at this time of year. In *Haines Junction* we met again the *Alaska Highway* and arrived soon after again in *Whitehorse*. This time we made a cleaning service stop in town to do laundry and wash the car, do food shopping and fill the diesel tanks.

# British Columbia



## British Columbia

### On the Alaska and the Cassiar Highway

In *Teslin* we checked in the small general store if we could find a smaller pack of eggs here. For us, the shopping in the supermarket was often difficult because everything was offered mainly in large packs and we had neither need nor room for these huge amounts of food. However, the smallest pack eggs was a box of twelve units here. Conveniently, but as a complete surprise, we met Cel and Dani again and could leave them half of our eggs.

Over the longest bridge of the *Alaska Highway* we drove across the border with the *Yukon Territories*. At *Morley Lake*, we stayed in one of the many recreation areas. These small and simple, but always very well-kept and well-located campsites can be used for free and have the advantage that they were not accessible to the "buses", as we called the monstrously large motorhomes and caravans, as they simply have not enough place and they don't have the "essential" facilities such as electricity, water and sewage connections available to them.

Soon we reached the turnoff on the *Cassiar Highway*. This is a far less busy alternative route to the *Alaska Highway* leading through almost untouched landscapes. At *French Creek* we settled down again after only a short leg and enjoyed the afternoon with our friends, Cel and Dani, who had joined us for a few days.



# British Columbia

Myrta had captured a digestive disorder, which led us to the *Boya Lake*, just a 30 km drive down the road, to camp again and insert one or two rest days. Cel and Dani wanted to continue, and we agreed that we would meet again in *Hayder*. We let pass the first day quietly and without much activity. Since we ran out of bread, we tried our baking skills for the first time using the newly acquired Coleman oven. Soon the air was fragrant like in a bakery, and the result, a fine, crispy bread.

On the second day Myrta felt already much better and we went on a short hike along the lake shore in fine, warm weather. Our camping neighbours offered us to use their canoe for a trip. The calm lake with its crystal clear water, which shone in all shades of blue, was ideally suited to be explored by boat. We enjoyed the tour on the water very much, although the paddling was unusual and quite tiring for us. After dinner we walked again along the lake, because we had heard that beavers were active in a narrow watercourse. We indeed discovered two of the shy, nocturnal animals at dusk.



Our neighbours reported that they had observed the *Aurora Borealis* in the past two nights. Of course, we hoped to be lucky to see this phenomenon as well and looked every now and then to the sky. Normally, these light phenomena are much further north to see, especially in winter. However, exceptionally strong solar activity can cause the lights to occur in the summer and further south. Unfortunately we missed it, because that night was nothing to see.

After another short stage southward, again we found another, beautiful camp spot in a provincial park on *Lake Kinaskan* to spend the night. The selected pitch even had a direct access to the sandy beach at the lake. For us as explained wimps the water was definitely too cold for bathing, while other campers didn't mind and enjoyed the refreshment. As often when we showed up with our Swiss license plates, we were met by other Swiss. Here it was Werner and Hanni from Oberwil BL, who had for

# British Columbia

years a caravan stationed in Canada and regularly travelled for two months through Canada and Alaska.



## A trip to Stewart and Hayder

In *Meziadin Junction* we drove straight towards *Stewart*. Just off the road and almost at sea level, we were able to admire the lower part of the imposing *Bear Glacier*, which extended his huge glacier cap over the ridge. Although the weather was not all sunshine and roses, but showed after all, its friendly side. We decided to drive pass *Hayder* up to the *Salmon Glacier*. A 30 km gravel road leads from sea level up to 1500 masl where we enjoyed a magnificent view of the huge glacier that flows down the valley from high up in the mountains and then divides into two branches. The original plan to stay at the viewpoint we rejected quickly, for the many mosquitoes that made life difficult for us and also the weather deteriorated rapidly again.



In the valley, on the *Salmon River*, we found a suitable place to stay. We were barely set-up and started cooking, when Dani and Cel reappeared. Cel had wanted a fresh salmon for her birthday dinner, and Dani simply caught a magnificent salmon that day. The fish was large enough to leave two nice portions for us too. After dinner we went to together to the shore of *Fish Creek* where we wanted to watch bears at their salmon feast from the observation deck. In fact, the shallow river was full of salmon, which had found their spawning ground here. By nature, the life of the fish ends after they had taken care of the offspring, thus a lot

## British Columbia

of the dying and already dead salmon laid in the water. Flocks of gulls, attracted by the abundance of food, fought over the best pieces. Most bear sightings had been made in the preceding days after nine o'clock in the evening, according to information. Today the grizzlies did not seem to be hungry, so we went back to our camp around nine-thirty.

In the morning the clouds were once again really low and at night it had rained again and again, thus, there was no reason to stay any longer in the area. The border formalities were limited this time on a passport control at the Canadian border post, the American side was not even occupied. In *Stewart* we purchased in a small supermarket milk and bread. The owner of the store, a Swiss who lived in the village for many years, told us that the population of *Stewart* had gone down continuously from 2200 to today's 500 inhabitants since the 1980s, after the timber industry had shrunk considerably.

## Through the Northern Chilcotin Region

For the onward journey it was planned to take the ferry from *Prince Rupert* to the *Vancouver Island* and omit the two regions *Chilcotin* and *Cariboo*. This connection is, however, very busy, so without a reservation months in advance slim chances exist to get a place. So we had to once again adapt our travel plans to the actual situation.

From *Stewart* we therefore drove on the *Cassiar Highway* further south. In *Cranberry Junction* we turned off into the woods to drive on a lesser-known route through *New Aiyanihsh*. A great many First Nations people, the official designation for the native, live in this area. Much of this once proud and independent people has gone. The majority of people living in poverty and without great prospects. In a provincial park along the route we inspected the traces of a volcanic eruption of the 18th century.

In *Ross Wood* lives the Swiss family Schönbächler, famous through a Swiss TV program. They became well known in Switzerland, especially since the episode with the crash of the small boy Richi falling off the tractor. At the general store, we were approached by a local. He asked us if we would like some vegetables, and as our fridge was pretty empty, we gladly accepted the offer and followed him. He lives a few kilometres outside the town in a simple hut in the wilderness, along with four playful and trusting husky dogs. In his vegetable garden he dug up

# British Columbia

some potatoes and supplied us with snow peas, zucchini and some other vegetables. After entertaining conversations over coffee, we said goodbye to Alex and moved on.

*Prince Rupert* is considered the wettest city throughout Canada, so we were not surprised that the weather deteriorated again. As expected, the ferry was fully booked for the coming days and we did not want to wait in this rainy city for several days on a standby place with little chance to get on the ferry. In addition, in this weather, the ferry crossing along the picturesque coast would not really be worth it, at least in the northern part, the weather was forecasted to be foggy and accompanied by rain.

Before we definitely drove on, we visited the former salmon cannery, which had been converted into a museum. The buildings and the remaining machinery and equipment gave us a good impression of this once important industry. Until the 1990s more than 200 factories, processed salmon in the area. Tons of the fish were caught in summer on their way to their spawning grounds. As pictures in the factory displayed, the fish were cut into tranches with skin and bones but without head and tail, then packed in cans and preserved.



On our way inland we made a stop in *Hazelton*. There, the local Indians had re-built a traditional village and offered the visitors an interesting insight to the original system of the former way of life of the indigenous people.



To stay, we always found beautiful and also free camping sites, including the one on *Bobtail Lake*, which had been originally set up by the forest service and is today maintained by the organization *BC*

# British Columbia

*Recreation and Trails.* In *Vanderhoof* we filled up the fridge and diesel tanks and took the direct route to *Quesnel* under the wheels. Through endless forests, past countless lakes, we crossed the northern *Chilcotin Plateau*.

## Barkerville and the Cariboo

Beyond *Quesnel* we reached *Barkerville*. This old gold mining town was booming mid-19th century, when gold was found in this area. The place was inhabited until 1979 with people who were trying to extract even the last grains of gold. After that the village was abandoned and became, like many others, a ghost town. The government of British Columbia changed *Barkerville* later in a provincial park and then elevated the place to a National Historic Site. House after house has been restored and furnished with contemporary furniture. In some of the historic buildings, the existing shops and businesses of the old days were reintroduced, others can be visited as museums. To better experience the place, various activities were represented by actors. Among other things, we attended a Chinese lesson in the old schoolhouse, because many of the former inhabitants were Chinese, which was easy recognisable by the many Chinese labels in the various businesses. Also, a water powered pump was not just on display, but its history was presented by actors in a funny and informative way.



After visiting Barkerville we retreated back into the wild. The lake where we stayed this time was also a relic of the gold rush. The ore was dug up with a dredge in search of the precious metal. The skeletal remains of the machine are still visible at the bottom of crystal clear lake. A trip to the *Ghost Lake* brought us to *Likely*, where we wanted to visit another, this time real, ghost town. In *Quesnel Forks*, which housed more than 2,000 prospectors from 1860 to 1862, we visited some of the rudimentary restored log cabins of the former occupants, however, of particular interest was the relatively large cemetery, and located outside the

## British Columbia

village. The name on the grave crosses made clear, from how many countries the prospectors had come.

On *Quesnel Lake*, we found another wonderful overnight stay, were we enjoyed, once again, a rest day. The flat, kilometre long gravel beach along the lake invited to relaxing walks and at 23 ° C air temperature it was not too cold, for a refreshing dip. We met nice people here, and we keep especially the three older men from *Quesnel* in good memory. They had come to fish, but after 8 hours on the lake came back with empty hands, but quite drunk and we had incredibly fun evening together. Other neighbours were Joseph and Gaby, a pair from Bavaria. They come to BC since twenty years to explore the area off the beaten track in their camper that is stationed there.



## Southern Chilcotin

Via *Horsefly* we arrived in *Williams Lake*, the nearest major town, where we stocked up with the most necessary, and supplemented especially our wine stock, before continuing the journey across the southern part of the *Chilcotin Plateau*. Walter, one of the fishermen, had recommended a route which leads from *Big Bar Creek* to *Lillooet*. In order to follow this advice, we therefore drove via *Alkali Lake* down into the valley of the *Fraser River*. Here, the environment changed abruptly its appearance from previously green coniferous forests to steppe, dry eroded landscape. Surprisingly, we observed here on a group of *Dallsheep*, animals which are otherwise likely to be found in the mountains above the tree line. At *Little Big Bar Lake* we set-up camp and got to know James, a loner, who was still planning his future, likely in a solitary log cabin far away from civilization. Good stories with this modern adventurer around the campfire were thus ensured.

# British Columbia

Next day we went steep down to the *Fraser River* down to where we needed to flush out the not really stressed ferry operator from its rest, to take us across the river. Once on the other side, the slope rose first 1000m in height and so steep that we needed 4x4, crawling up in 1st gear. The route through dense pine forests offered repeatedly the view of the deep down flowing *Fraser*.



Shortly before the end of the road we passed simple huts that were inhabited by Indians, who were fishing salmon the traditional way, and dried it in the hot wind. Rather than change to the main road near *Lillooet*, we turned to the west and drove over the *Mission Pass* into the valley of *Lake Andersen*. Once again, the track led extremely steep up and on the other side just as steeply back down to the lake. Again we had to overcome 1000 meters, which were often only driveable in the first or second gear. The route along the lake followed a power line, because BC Hydro operates a large hydroelectric plant in this valley, and transports the produced energy from here to civilization. Directly along the lake shore led a railway line, which was used for the supply of the power plant, the road, however, who went far above, was an adventurous roller coaster that definitely, requires a robust, versatile vehicle, if possible with all-wheel drive. After nearly two hours of driving with countless curves and ups and downs we had another asphalt road under the wheels.



We stayed in a disused Forest Campground before it went to Vancouver the next morning.

# Vancouver and Vancouver Island



## Vancouver and Vancouver Island

### Vancouver

We wanted to stay in *Porteau Cove Provincial Park* outside the city before we plunged into the bustle of the big city. Unfortunately, this camp was, like many others on seashores and lakes, already fully booked at lunch time. Therefore we had no other choice than to go directly to West Vancouver to get a pitch at the *Capilano River RV Park*. This was right next to the *Lions Gate Bridge* and was therefore a good base to get to the city centre.

The next day we walked directly from the campsite across the *Lions Gate Bridge* to the *Stanley Park* and visited the 4 km<sup>2</sup> peninsula on foot. Only one or two kilometres from the city centre we wandered through quiet, old forests and had always a fantastic view of the opposite Skyline of Vancouver or a sea view. The park also houses a large collection of totem poles, impressive witnesses of the craft skills of the natives. Near the aquarium, we refreshed ourselves at one of the food stalls and continued the hike across the peninsula to the *Third Beach*. Many people spent their Saturday afternoon on the wide sandy beach or used the riverside path for bike rides or walks. We finished our visit at the *Prospect Point*, from where we crossed the *Lions Gate Bridge*, dating back to the 1938, again and returned to the camp. The imposing construction with a total length of 1823m and a height of 111m, was completely renovated in 2001 and connects Vancouver with the districts of North and West Vancouver.



## Vancouver and Vancouver Island

For Sunday we had purchased day passes for unlimited use of public transport. We got off the bus in the *Georgia Street* and walked to the *Canada Place* where in the 1980 years the world exhibition took place. The facilities of that time are today used for shops and entertainment. On the way towards the port, the moored cruise ships added to the otherwise already impressive skyline to a majestic image.

With another bus ride across the city centre we arrived to *Granville Island*. This shopping and cultural district is situated on a peninsula and a lively weekend business prevailed. Countless shops and restaurants invited to stay and the great market hall offered all kinds of regional and international delicacies. For once, we regretted that the space in the refrigerator and the storage facilities in our little camper did not allow for large purchases!! Street musicians and artists were performing on the many plazas, hoping for generous donations for their performances, while the children played in a specially set up building or fulfilled their desires in the many toy stores.

In *Gastown*, one of the oldest neighbourhoods in the city, we enjoyed a fine beer on the street terrace of a traditional pub, near the old steam clock, the symbol of this quarter. Here, we came to talk with a funny guy. He was dressed as a cowboy, carrying a colt in his belt, not loaded as he promised with a smile. He makes his living with posing for a tip for photos. In a long, entertaining conversation, we discussed with him about God, the world and Mr. Trump ...



On the way to the Chinatown we crossed probably the quirkiest neighbourhood of Vancouver. We met hundreds of people that, with their appearance or behaviour, don't really fit into the "normal" society. The unusual party was made up of drug addicts and alcoholics, punks and alternatives transvestites and other eccentrics of all ages. With a bit queasy feelings, but totally unharmed, if not to say ignored, we passed the people sitting on the roadside and finally entered Chinatown. Apart from a few shops with the typical offerings of all possible and impossible

# Vancouver and Vancouver Island

things in screaming colours, not much of the original charm was left of this Chinatown. We wanted to visit this area primarily to taste the authentic Chinese cuisine again. In order to find a suitable restaurant, Myrta spoke to a Chinese passers-by to ask for a recommendation. The man, apparently a Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong Chinese, did not understand Myrta's questions in Mandarin. In English it worked better and so we ended up at a place where we were the only non-Chinese and Myrta could finally use here Chinese to the great astonishment of the waitress. The food was not quite as good as in China itself, but definitely tasty and fresh.

## Vancouver Island

From *Horseshoe Bay* we took the car ferry to *Vancouver Island*. Without reservation didn't get a ticket for the first possible crossing. After waiting 50 minutes, we got a spot and arrived 90 minutes later, in *Nanaimo*. The ride itself was quite entertaining, as always either the mainland or the islands were in sight. For entertainment on board, a biologist explained the flora and fauna of the region in a lecture. We arrived on the island in late afternoon and therefore didn't want to drive too far. The *Rathtreavor Provincial Park*, beautifully location directly on the beach, was sold out, as the locals still had holidays and they preferred spending time on the water.

On the way to *Port Alberni* we visited the *Cathedral Grove*, a forest with huge and ancient trees, especially cedar and Douglas fir. On the road we met a surprising high number of people, what was rather unusual, but the walking trail in the forest we had to ourselves, hiking is obviously not one of the favourite pastimes of most Canadians.



On the planned route through the forest to the north, we were stopped in front of a closed gate after a few kilometres. We asked a guy from a security patrol about alternative routes. Unfortunately, he told us, that because of increased risk of forest fires all forest roads were closed to

## Vancouver and Vancouver Island

private traffic at the moment. In a further conversation with Hardy, it turned out that he originally came from Freiburg in Germany and so to speak, was therefore an ex-neighbour of us. He is also a nature lover and had lots of good advice for us for the region ahead of us. In any case, we were left with no choice but to go back the same way, so we decided to spend another night in the *Englishman River Falls* campground.

Along coast we slowly made our way north. Our destination was the home of Lorene and Lorne in *Campbell River*. We had met the two in *Glacier National Park* and they had invited us to spend a few days at their home. Along the route we went again down to the sea, to explore the countless beaches, and chipped drift wood offered wonderful photo opportunities. The unique landscape with high, snow-capped peaks on the opposite side of the sea, showed us all the beauty of the Canadian nature.

In the evening we finally arrived at our friend's home and were most warmly welcomed. For dinner, there was self-caught salmon and too much wine, so we spent a fun and enjoyable evening together.

## Whales and Other Sea Creatures

We enjoyed another day with our new friends. With Lorne's motor boat we motored out into the *Georgia Strait*. The sea was smooth as glass and the weather sunny and warm, we couldn't have had it any better. Our first stop was to the *Mitlenatch Island*, a small island, which is recognized as an animal sanctuary. Lorne throttled the engine and from start we saw a few seals basking on the rocks. Slowly we chugged along the cliffs and watched cormorants, waiting for fish and countless gulls that flew screaming above us. The highlight of the trip were definitely the many sea lions that we observed in groups on the rocks. Again and again, power struggles were fought to confirm the order of precedence among the powerful males, while the Titans with a loud roar showed their



## Vancouver and Vancouver Island

dominance. We remained a long time in the vicinity of the animals that were not disturbed at all by our presence.

We were already on the way to the east, as Lorne heard on the radio channel of the Whale Watching Companies that around the *Mitlenatch Island Orcas*, killer whales, had been sighted. Without delay, we turned around and saw at once one of the commercial boats and the blowing of some whales. The powerful, black and white animals moved slowly northwards and we could follow them effortlessly with the necessary distance. Six orcas we counted, of which at least one appeared to be a cub. For a long time they let us watch, then they dived suddenly and disappeared. What a wonderful experience.

On a small private island, which belongs to a friend of the two, we put a rest and enjoyed a relaxing aperitif with self-caught and -smoked salmon on the terrace of the holiday cottage. In the clear, waist-deep water off the island, Lorene and Myrta gathered some fresh oysters for a fine dinner. Truly a little paradise which, as Lorne told with relish, many nice parties were celebrated in the past.



On the way back we drove through a narrow channel in a picturesque natural harbour, and admired the beautiful boats and holiday homes. The whole area around *Campbell River* with its many islands and narrow channels, that are accessible only by boat, is a delightful area for boat trips.

As the weather continued to be bright sunshine, the next day we went on a hike to the *Ripp Rocks*. These rocks were in the narrowest part of the navigation channel and has been fatal for quite a few ships in the past, until it was decided to blast the rocks away. With the largest non-nuclear explosion on earth, hundreds of thousands of cubic meters of rock have been removed at a stroke, thus creating a safe channel.

The trail led us through thick forest of huge Douglas firs and cedars up to a lookout point above the *Ripp Rocks*. The view to the *Quadra Island*

## Vancouver and Vancouver Island

and up to *Campbell River* was terrific. As we have seen from above, a strong wind made it a hard day for the boats on the water. If we had our boat trip with this swell, it would probably not have been as enjoyable as on the day before. The luck with wildlife viewing remained with us, because from high up we sighted a humpback whale. Again and again he came up for air and delighted us with an elegant tail wagging when diving. On the way back we stopped at the *Painter's Lodge*, a beautiful hotel with a sunny patio. After the walk we really enjoyed the cool beer, respectively the fine white wine.



We finished this wonderful day together with a fine dinner. For starters, there were the self-collected oysters, raw for Ueli, grilled for others, then a fine Moroccan tagine, which we conjured from our supplies on the table. Probably the most well received were the *Caipirinhas*, which we proffered the two friends. We enjoyed this last night in their house. We grew very fond of Lorene and Lorne in a short time, and they really made us feel so welcome. We hope to meet both the following winter in Mexico where they planned to spend their holidays.

## Southwest Coast of Vancouver Island

Due to the weather we had decided not to go to the north of Vancouver Island, for the whole following week rain was forecasted, while the forecast for the south of the island looked much better. So we drove once more to *Port Alberni* and from there on forest roads towards the coast. On the route to *Port Renfrew* there was an amazing amount of traffic and the ever raising dust did not make the trip very enjoyable. Also the scenery offered no big highlights because either the road led through clear-cut forest or only trees were to see left and right. Only at the *Lake Cowichan* the view was again impressive. Although some well-located campsites invited to stay, we decided to keep going for a while and stayed overnight at *Lizard Lake*, shortly before *Port Renfrew*.

## Vancouver and Vancouver Island

A short trip to the *Botanical Beach* turned out to be very worthwhile. On the hike through the rain forest, we arrived at the coast. In the bays, which partially lined with black rocks and formed a fine gravel beach, were tons of driftwood. Exploring the many small ponds, which are left at low tide, was very interesting. Mussels and crabs, but also colourful sea anemones and starfish busied the clear waters.



After *Jordan River*, the coast was again heavier inhabited, and the closer we got to *Victoria*, the denser and hectic the traffic was. Therefore, we enjoyed the peace in *Goldstream Provincial Park*.

## Victoria

Before we went into the city, we visited the *Fort Rodd*. The fortifications were built late 19th century to defend this part the west coast against invaders. But above all, these were used in the Second World War, when the invasion of the Japanese army was feared. Fortunately, however, the guns never had to be fired in an emergency.

In the city we found the carpark near the ferry terminal, and explored the centre on foot, as most attractions are located around the *Inner Harbour*. *Victoria* is well known for its many flowers and parks. In the port, old sailing ships lay next to huge luxury yachts and behind is the old parliament building. Here, too, not much was left of *Chinatown*, the oldest in Canada, only the pompous entrance gate remained.

Along *Government Street*, a fashionable shopping district, we went back and looked at the totem poles next to the *BC Museum*. The exhibition also showed new sculptures, made according to ancient traditions, alongside old ones, collected from former Indian settlements. Around *Laurel Point* runs a nice walk, which ends at the *Fisherman's Wharf*. We couldn't see a large fishing fleet in the harbour, but we found a sizable collection of houseboats. The floating homes, imaginative built in all shapes and

# Vancouver and Vancouver Island

colours, house a community of alternative people and artists who have settled there and are a popular crowd puller.



In the evening we went to a nice bar and treated ourselves with a fine, locally brewed beer. For dinner, we chose an Indian restaurant, which offered a generous buffet so we could try out the whole range of wonderful food. Ueli discovered in the bar a bottle of Apérol and asked the waiter what drinks they mix with it. Since the position of a professional bartender was not occupied, no one really knew what to begin with. We explained them the recipe for an Apérol Spritz and tried it immediately to ensure they were preparing it correctly. We got to talking with two guys who advised us to change the side of the road and stop off for a drink in the bar, *The Guild*, where one of the two usually worked but had his day off. So we met at this bar again and spent a nice evening together, tried a few cocktails and some local beers and got easily rid of our remaining *Canada Dollars*. Back at the car, we parked it directly on ferry waiting area, where we spent the night more awake than asleep because we were just not used anymore to the noise level of a busy town.



# The Northwestern USA



## The Northwestern USA

### The Olympic Peninsula

At five o'clock in the morning the alarm clock rang, because the ferry was to leave at 6:10. Before we could go on board, the US immigration office checked our papers. We had the plan to extend or renew our permit for the US, as we had determined that the remaining weeks would probably not be enough. As it turned out, that this was something the boss had decide personally but it was too early for him to be at work, so we had no other choice but to wait until he showed up. After he had arrived and granted us one month extension, the computer system went on strike. We were informed that we go either without extending on board or would wait until the system is up and running again but would miss the ferry. We chose the second option because we thought that it could be more complicated at the border on the US side to get an extension.

At 10:30 we could finally boarded another ferry with a proper extension in our passports. When we arrived in *Port Angeles*, our car was searched for food. Except for a few apples and citrus fruits, which have been confiscated, everything else was fine. In rainy weather, we organized the most important things in *Port Angeles*, like diesel refuelling, which was here cheaper again, compared with Canada, but still more expensive than in all other US states so far, buy groceries and wine. With the low-hanging cloud cover, it made no sense to drive up to *Hurricane Ridge* in the *Olympic National Park*. We therefore stayed at *Lake Crescent* and found a spot to camp at the *Fairholme Campground*, which is beautifully situated in the middle of a dense forest.

Our next stop, was once again part of the *Olympic National Park*, but this time on the coast. Since Labour Day was celebrated this weekend, we

# The Northwestern USA

were prepared for overcrowded camps, but were pleasantly surprised that the crowd was limited, probably not least because of the unpleasant weather. So we found another spot in the *Mora Campground* without problems. We spent the afternoon at *Rialto Beach*, about 4 km from the camp. We hiked several kilometres along the beach, which was covered with tons of driftwood. Around the many rocky islets jutting out of the sandy soil, countless rock pools, in which the various marine animals were waiting for the next high tide, formed. What fascinated us most, were the fishing pelicans.



The next day we drove inland to explore the *Hoh Rain Forest*, a protected area, where the few remaining intact areas with temperate rainforest are preserved. Thanks to the damp and mild climate, the forest is home for an amazing variety of plants, including giant hemlock and various species of maple. Everything is overgrown with moss and lichen, so that hardly any daylight penetrates down to the ground, which in turn is covered by lush ferns. After the walk through the shady, cool forests we enjoyed it even more to get some warm sunshine.



We followed the coast further south, where a narrow strip along the shore was declared national park on the whole route. Fishermen, surfers, hikers and even some intrepid swimmers shared the beaches. At *Ruby Beach*, another, beautiful stretch of coast with driftwood and rock pools, we made again a stop. Despite countless other visitors, the wide beach was not crowded, and after a 500m walk we were virtually alone.

On *Quinault Lake*, we got hold of one of the last free camp sites. After we had the benefit of some dry hours, the weather worsened again rapidly

# The Northwestern USA



in the evening and we had to again retreat into our little home, while the drops pelted our roof.

We then no longer followed the US Highway 101, but drove on a small secondary road to the coast. From *Moclips* it was even possible to drive directly on the beach. It was fun to follow the firm, sandy shore and drove a several kilometres long stretch from *Ocean City* to *Ocean Shores* on the beach.

## Up to Mount Rainier National Park

We left the coast towards *Mount Rainier National Park* further inland. The eponymous mountain is a 4000m high, still active volcano, which has, however, not erupted for quite some time. When we arrived in the national park, the mountains were not visible, because once again low-lying clouds and rainy weather prevented the view. So we spent the day at the foot of the volcano, took a short hike through the rain forest, which confirmed the reason of its name and settled in *Cougar Rock Campground*.

On the following day, clouds were still hanging low and fog was laid over the landscape, but at least now and then a blue hole blinked through the otherwise grey sky. We drove up to *Paradise* to about 1600masl with the hope to break through the clouds. Although this did not really happen, the weather improved visibly and on our hike on the *Skyline Trail* we could finally see the summit of *Mount Rainier* for a few brief moments. On the very varied trail we enjoyed many small natural wonders, such as the rich flowering meadows of the summer, the brave



# The Northwestern USA

and lively chipmunks, who entertained us with their tricks and especially the huge, fat marmots that we observed at close range.

In the *Stevens Canyon*, we came back to lower altitudes. In the *Grove of the Patriarchs* another short walk took us to a wooded area where some exceptionally large and up to a thousand-year-old trees are growing. Cedar and Douglas fir, up to 100m high with mighty, several meters thick trunks. It was difficult to imagine the impressive size of the trees, the best way was to see one of the giants lying on the ground.

In *Ohanapecosh Campground* we found a pleasant place just after it became quite sunny and a bit warmer in the valley.

The decision whether we wanted to drive up to *Sunrise*, we postponed until next morning. It started foggy and cloudy, but the further north we came, the greater the gaps in the fog were. So we decided to take the detour and were not disappointed. At an altitude of about 1800m, the clouds opened up and when we arrived at *Sunrise*, the mighty, glaciated *Mount Rainier* was in full size before us. We laced the walking boots and made our first steep climb to the *Frozen Lake*. There we met a nice couple from Northern California again, we had met them a few days earlier. We continued our journey together and enjoyed, to be for once in the company with others. We extended our hike a bit and climbed the *Burroughs Mountain*. Although a strong and icy wind blew there, the view was phenomenal. The descent in the lee of the mountain was pleasant again and offered again and again vistas of the mountain with its numerous glaciers. Deep down, we saw a turquoise lake in the valley of the *White River*. Through open coniferous forest with lots of wild parsley, we arrived back at the car. All around, low clouds still hung over the surrounding mountains, while above us we enjoyed a great, bright blue sky.



# The Northwestern USA

## Among Peers

For more than a year earlier Ueli has been in contact with a Land Cruiser fan from Seattle. Alan, a member of a local Toyota Land Cruiser club, had invited us to attend one of their events, as many of the people were interested in our camper. As we approached Seattle, it became clear, that the club would have an evening event mid-September. With an extra circle in north eastern Washington we planned our route to arrive in time in Seattle.

In the *Golden Gardens Park* in Seattle we met the club members for an informal picnic. Myrta prepared to a bowl of potato salad, as a contribution to the planned buffet. Gradually, the people arrived, all owners of Land Cruisers, mostly older vehicles, including the earliest generation Land Cruiser, some very nice 40 models and beautifully trimmed 80s. Even a 70, although a short wheelbase, was there. Our 75er Camper created quite a stir, because this model had never been imported into the United States. Only one club member possessed an old BJ75, which, as it turned out, was originally from the canton of Baselland.



On this occasion we met *Tor*, a Norwegian who has long lived in the US. He runs a very successful garage, which specializes in the restoration and maintenance of Land Cruisers. After the last service in *Campbell River* at a Nissan Garage we never had a good feeling and therefore we made an appointment for the next morning to have our car checked again by professionals.

The evening was very entertaining and interesting especially for Ueli. Talks about cars be it Landcruiser or other, is generally not so great for ladies. Fortunately, the location of the picnic area was chosen beautiful, so that all were in some way happy.

## The Northwestern USA

We stayed in a parking lot in *Everett* near *Torfab*, the garage of *Tor* to be on site when the shop opened. Promptly at 8:00 we were met at the entrance and the boys immediately set to work. If you consider that the workshop is usually fully booked for weeks, we appreciated their willingness to work spontaneous on our car. Big surprises luckily didn't appear, but the two rear wheel bearings were about to give up. One of the bearings was almost dry and the other had water accumulated. This finding surprised us very much, because the bearings had been serviced by a specialized Land Cruiser garage in Switzerland just before our departure!!



## The Volcano Mount St. Helens

We had laid out our route to Oregon such, that we would pass *Mount St. Helens* on the east side. Through never-ending forests we drove to the lookout *Windy Ridge*, a few kilometres away from the crater. The name actually honoured the place because a strong wind was almost blowing us from the flat summit.

The volcano erupted in 1980, and the top 400 meters of the mighty mountain was literally blown away. A few days before the outbreak it was observed that an area of 1.5 by 2.5 km on the northern flank had ballooned several meters. Despite this warning, the force of the explosion, also for the experts, came as a complete surprise. 87 people, including scientists and photographers who wanted to document the outbreak, were killed. North of the mountain, trees were flattened to the ground within 10 km and in up to 25 km distance the hot gases singed the trees so badly that they were dying of it.

Even today, the traces and the extent of the devastation are still clearly visible. In the wake of the explosion healthy tree populations survived in close proximity to the volcano while facing mountain slopes are

# The Northwestern USA

largely bare, or littered with dead tree skeletons. Also, the traces of the huge mud slide, triggered by the eruption, are still evident. Among other things, the *Spirit Lake* was dammed with the mud masses directly below the site of the outbreak and enlarged it in fact massive. To prevent dangerous breaking of the water masses and thus prevent further disasters, a 1.5 km long relief tunnel had to be drilled.



## The Oregon Coast

After visiting *Mt. St. Helens* we crossed the *Columbia River*, which forms the border with Oregon. In the shadow of *Mount Hood*, another dormant volcano, we stayed and enjoyed next day a cloudless view on the mountain. After *Portland*, we drove towards the coast. Unfortunately the weather worsened again overnight and when we reached the coast near *Tillamook*, we had heavy fog and drizzle all morning. In order to use the time we visited the local cheese factory. However, one should not expect a Swiss style cheese factory. It was interesting to see that the actual production hardly requires any personnel while in the department where the cheese blocks vacuumed packaged in plastic bags, the staff almost trampled their own feet.

Since it made no sense to continue along the coast in fog and rain, we moved into the nearby State Park Campground for the night and spent the afternoon reading. A pleasant surprise offered a hummingbird, which despite the nasty weather, collected nectar from flowers of the bushes just outside our window.

The following day, it had at least stopped raining and the fog had somewhat cleared. In *Pacific City*, a small surf contest took place on the beach. It was interesting to see that a large number of participants were rather older semester. Along the coastal route we added several intermediate stops, despite the still cloudy weather and enjoyed the

# The Northwestern USA

views on the coast. Often the fog enchanted the landscape and created a mystical atmosphere. At *Yaquina Head* we visited the lighthouse, completed in 1873, which is the highest in Oregon with its 28.3m. From the observation deck we were able to sight two grey whales in the distance. While a majority of these animals pass the Oregon coast only in spring and late autumn, there are some who spend the whole summer here. A special experience offered *Cobble Beach*, where fist-sized, pitch-black lava stones caused a pandemonium when the surf withdrew from the beach and the stones were carried out by the current. In another bay we could see Harlequin ducks and Harbour Seals.

At *Seal Rock* low tide prevailed during our visit so we could poke around in the rock pools. Beautiful coloured anemones and some large, rust-coloured starfish added a splash of colours to the wonderful black lava rocks. Huge mussel beds and numerous crabs invited to collect, but this was only permitted with the appropriate authorization.



The *Heceta Lighthouse*, wowed us through the stunning location on the coast and also the fog contributed some to the special atmosphere in the countryside. A big surprise was waiting for us in a small nature reserve, of which we had read that carnivorous plants will grow there. In fact, we saw thousands of them in a forest clearing. A veritable army of mosquitoes exterminating chasms stretched towards us. In *North Bend*, we discovered a small shop that offered local fish products. We stocked with smoked oysters and tuna and changed our evening menu plan short term because we could buy freshly caught tuna loins.

We had stayed at the *Sunset Bay State Park* and headed first out to *Cape Arago*. Once there, we already heard the yelling of sea lions and discovered on some small rocky islands not far from the shore a colony with hundreds of the large animals which can be easily weight up to three tons. Harbour Seals lived in the neighbourhood and in the spring we could even have seen elephant seals as well.

# The Northwestern USA

The closer we got to the California border, the more often we encountered cliffs, some with heavily eroded, rocky offshore islands. Some of these islands shaped arches and bridges and formed, together with the mighty conifers forest, a magnificent backdrop.

We left the Oregon coast in bright sunshine. We had experienced this region in the past few days with a good mix of weather conditions.



## North and Central California

# North and Central California



## Redwood National Park

Shortly after the California border, we arrived in the *Redwood National Park*. A large area of the remaining, mighty Coastal Redwood was gradually protected in state and national parks. A great luck, considering that only just 5% are left of the once vast forests. Campsites in this region are all operated by the California State Parks and cost a proud USD 35 and the hot shower are not even included. Despite of everything, we had chosen *Millcreek Campground* for the first night. After all, the camping pitches were created in the middle of a redwood forest and are very beautiful.

The next day we drove first to the coast, where we hiked through the redwood forests. Even before we could start walking, we saw once again a disaster in terms of camera: it dropped when Ueli was getting out of the car and, of course, hit the only rock near. The result was again a defective lens, while this time, luckily, the camera remained intact again. We started along the trail and the farther we got away from the beach, the more we saw of the Coastal Redwoods. In this area, they grow not to a record height, but are still very impressive. In general, these natural, pristine forests were always memorable experiences. Not only had the standing tree giants fascinated us, but also the dead trees lying on the ground. Their nutrients ensure the livelihoods for other plants and young trees. Highlight of our hike was the crossing of the fern canyon, just before we reached the coast again. The vertical walls of this small ravine are overgrown with ferns and look like hanging gardens.

A bumpy gravel road led us back to the centre of the park. The *Elk Meadows* lived up to their name, because we could close watch this greatest of all deer in North America. Among other things, we witnessed

## North and Central California

a stately deer chasing a young challenger to flight. The time of our visit, the animals were in the heat and therefore particularly aggressive.



Another short walk took us through the *Lady Bird Johnson Forest*, named after the former First Lady, where some of the largest specimens of coastal redwoods stand. The highest of the trees measures 115m and has a diameter of several meters. With a special permit, which we were able to get in the Visitor Centre for free, we drove on a dirt road that led down to the vicinity of *Redwood Creek*. From the parking lot a path leads 300 meters elevation down to the river and back up again. But we were rewarded for the efforts with the sight of a little yet very beautiful collection of mighty trees which grow here individually or in groups. Many of the giants had burn scars caused by wildfires that happened hundreds or even a thousand years ago.

After a long day we had to find a place to stay, so we left the national park via a dirt road, the Bald Hills Road. Since it had become quite cold in the mountains, we drove down into the valley as far as *Hoopa* and stayed in a simple campground operated by an Indian community.

## Lassen Volcanic National Park

Along the *Trinity River* we headed for *Redding*. Many of the Recreation Areas along the reservoirs would offer camping opportunities in this area, but without boat and with the cool temperatures that was unattractive to us. East of *Redding*, the road climbed back to almost 2000m above sea level until the *Lassen Volcanic National Park* was reached. On *Manzanita Lake* we stayed in a campground of the same name and right from there started a short hike around the lake. The weather was luckily for once on our side and let us have a look at the highest mountain in the park, *Lassen Peak*, which was far down wrapped in clouds when we arrived but cleared up soon after.

## North and Central California

We followed the only road through the park. The morning it was very cold and as the road climbed up, the temperatures dropped even lower, until at last the sun provided some warmth. Shortly after the pass at about 2500 m above sea we left the car parked and hiked to *Bumpass Hell*, a geothermal zone, which paid the surnamed hell credit. Bubbling hot springs, hissing, stinking of sulphur plumes and hot rivulet shaped the landscape that hardly allowed any plant to grow. At each step, we realized how thin the earth's crust had to be at these places, no wonder, we walked on the caldera of an ancient volcano. Hundreds of years ago, *Lassen Peak* erupted the last time and the traces of it were still clearly visible.



## Mono Lake

Through endless forests we got to *Lake Tahoe*. The area around this lake is very popular, in summer for swimming and boating, in winter for skiing. As we reached this destination on a weekend, the hell had broken loose. All turn-outs and viewpoints were hopelessly overcrowded and traffic moved temporarily at walking pace through the countryside. After continuing the trip over the pass we came down at about 2000m above sea level to a dry, almost desert-like environment. The Highway 295 led past a viewpoint that offered an incredible view of the *Mono Lake* deep below. In the almost barren landscape the blue lake seemed almost extra-terrestrial. During a brief stop on the western shore of the lake, we got a first impression of the sculptures that are typical of Mono Lake. They are of limestone and created by the high mineral content of the water. Since the day was already somewhat advanced, we drove on the *Tioga Road* into the valley and to the *Aspen Campground*. The place was well populated, not least because of the weekend, so we got one of the last pitches.

## North and Central California

After a cool night we went back to the *Mono Lake* and visited on the south shore the most impressive limestone formations which shone even more impressive and more intense in the clear morning light. Since the inflows to the lake have been excessively used for irrigation, the water level has been lowered so that the formations, originally below the water, are now visible. To ensure that the lake doesn't completely dry out, counter measures were implemented and the water usage has been limited. The *Mono Lake* has no outlet and due to the high summer temperatures a lot of water evaporates, which means that the salt content of the water is extremely high.



## Yosemite National Park

Just like the *Yellowstone Park*, the *Yosemite Park* is struggling with incredibly large number of visitors. Even in the off-season, as now at the end of September, it was almost impossible to get a campsite without prior reservation. Furthermore at this time, the first campgrounds were already closed for the winter season, thus the availability was further limited. We had made a reservation via the Internet a few days earlier for the *Toulomne Meadows* and in the *Yosemite Valley*. Another night in between we spent in the *Porcupine Flats*.

We drove up to the *Tioga Pass*, which is well over 3000m above sea level. Despite the altitude, the temperature reached a pleasant 20°C. After we had set up camp around noon, we hiked up to *Elizabeth Lake*, which lies at the foot of impressive mountains. As we climbed up, we clearly



## North and Central California

noticed that the air was a bit thinner than usual. After a break, which Ueli used to cool his overheated feet, we went back the same way we had come.

The next morning we parked our car at the starting point to another hike. This led us first up at the *Dog Lake*, whose surface was as smooth as glass. Some ducks and a few screaming Blue Jays were, beside ourselves, the only ones who "disturbed" the peaceful scene. On the way back we went up to *Lebert Dome*, one of the many smooth glaciers polished granite tops. However Myrta gave up a few meters short of the summit, as the trail was exposed in the final meters of the route. The way over the steep and smooth granite hump to the summit was unmarked. Once on the top, one was rewarded with a beautiful view of the *Toulomne Meadow* and the peaks of the *High Sierra*. Back at the car we drove along the Tioga Road and stopped at *Tanaya Lake* and many other vantage points to enjoy the scenery. At *Porcupine Flat Campground* we got hold of one of pitches and enjoyed the afternoon in the warm sun. In the evening we got new neighbours and were amazed that they were travellers with a Range Rover with Zurich license plates. Nick and his girlfriend had started in April in Switzerland and driven via Russia and Mongolia to Vladivostok. There they had shipped to South Korea and travelled the country to then send the car on to Seattle. They had two months left in the US before they had to return back to Switzerland from Florida.



The road leads about two thousand meters of altitude down to the *Yosemite Valley*, the main attraction of the park. About 4 million people, 700,000 of them camp in the valley, visit the centre of the park every year. No wonder, even at the end of September a lot was still going on. Driving along the valley floor, we visited some of the famous sights. Among other things, we admired the climbers in the vertical face of El Capitan with the binoculars. After we set up our campsite, we hiked to *Mirror Lake*. Unfortunately, in the summer, this lake is, like many of the famous waterfalls, dry, leaving only a sandy bed. Nevertheless, the hike

## North and Central California

was worth it, because the trail passes just below the vertical face of Half Dome.



The hike to the Nevada Falls next day was a little more strenuous. It soon became apparent that we were by far not the only ones who had this plan for this very popular tour. Fortunately, however, we left many of the hikers behind us, the more we worked our way up the valley. Although the *Vernal* and *Nevada Falls* were not very impressive in autumn, the scenery was amazing and made up for the sweaty climb. 600 meters had to be overcome before we reached the highest point above the *Nevada falls*. On the *John Muir Trail*, it went downhill again, much less steep and with a lot fewer steps than on the *Mist Trail* leading upwards.



We left the Yosemite Park southward, toward the next climax, *Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Park*.

## Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Park

One night only we spent at lower altitudes, where temperatures did not fall too low, even after sunset. After the thermometer rose up to 36 ° C in day time, we were happy to stay at over 2000m above sea level with pleasant temperatures.

On a short walk through *the General Grant Grove* we saw the first, fairly large sequoias. Despite the trees not being ranked among the record holders, they were very impressive. Before we drove on to the *Sequoia National Park*, it was once more 1000m down to the *Kings Canyon*. In the

## North and Central California

rain shadow of the mountains and a few hundred meters below, the dense forest with its large trees transformed in a desert-like, quite barren landscape. Suddenly, yuccas and cacti were dominant. It was only when we reached the bottom of the canyon and regained some height along the *Kings River*, coniferous forest grew again. We made a couple of short hikes to explore the beautiful area and then settled in the only open campground. The *Kings River*, a crystal clear stream that springs from the *High Sierra*, offers many beautiful spots for a break.

Once in *Sequoia Park*, a longer hike led us to the *Sugar Bowl*. This area is the largest, never deforested area in which still many of the gigantic big Sequoias stand. Along a mountain chain, we climbed about 200m and reached the most impressive of the groves, the *Sugar Bowl*. The true size of the densely packed, mighty trees was barely comprehensible, and only somewhat evident when a person was standing in front of a tree, looking like an ant. Along a sunny and therefore dry slope we went down and just as we reached the bottom of the valley, we faced more of the giant trees.

We did not want to leave without having seen the biggest tree of our planet, the famous *General Sherman Tree Park*. With 84m, it is not quite as high as his relatives on the coast, but with a circumference of 30m it has a trunk volume unmatched by any other tree on earth. One last short hike took us along a meadow. At the edge of it the Sequoias found perfect conditions and especially large specimens grow. Individual trees which had grown too close to the soft soil of the wet meadow, could not anchor enough and were eventually blown over by a storm. Some of them have been laying on the ground for centuries, because the Sequoia wood not only resists fire excellently, but decays very slowly.



On a narrow, very winding road we finally left the National Park and drove 2,000 meters lower down to the agricultural zone where fruit orchards, especially citrus fruits, dominate the landscape. Already when starting the engine of the Land Cruiser in the morning, the starter battery

## North and Central California

had let us down and we had to bridge with the camper battery. Since the starter battery was only just a year old, we hoped that it had been an unexplained individual failure. However, when we tried to drive off again after shopping, it went on strike again. Although it was a Sunday, we had no difficulty to get a new battery in close proximity, after a stress test revealed that ours was indeed dead. Although exactly the same size was not in stock, however, the next smaller battery fitted to some extent to the intended location. A generous 5-year warranty was promised, but this wouldn't help us much, because we did not expect that the battery would fail within the next few weeks, while we were still on the road in the US.

## Over the High Sierra back to the Desert Again

We stayed in a National Forest campground in the transition area between the agricultural areas and the foothills of the Sierra. The next morning we headed to the *Sherman Pass*, the first possible crossing south of *Tioga Pass Road* in the *Yosemite National Park*. To over 3000m the narrow road winds up through a dry and diminutive forest, which again brought forth strong and large conifers in altitudes of about 2000m. We took the opportunity to collect firewood for the coming days in the desert. From the pass we could for the first time take a view of *Mount Whitney*, the highest peak in the southern 48 states of America. The landscape on the east side of the Sierra became drier and the vegetation more sparse. On the way we gave a hitchhiking couple a ride. They had finished the northern 1500 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail, a long distance hike from the Canadian to the Mexican border. Their adventurous experiences on this often lonely and isolated trail impressed us very much.

Together with the two we visited the *Fossil Falls*, a now dry waterfall in a lava field. Over the millennia, the water has eaten deep in the hard rock while today is hardly enough rain to bring the river to flow. In *Lone Pine* we dropped the two hikers and went on to one of the BLM camping areas in the *Alabama Hills*. To our surprise, a crystal-clear stream flowed through the middle of the camp, were otherwise the landscape was all rocky with a few bushes. The rock formations in the area we explored

## North and Central California

the next day on foot and by car. In a small area, we explored ever new sculptures, arches and valleys shaped by erosion, always with the backdrop of the High Sierra with its 4 and 5 thousand meter high peaks.

After we had admired both the tallest and the mightiest trees in the world in recent weeks, we saw the oldest specimens at our next stop. In more than 3000masl *Bristlecone Pines*, a long-lived pine species, occupied a small niche of the last ice age and grow in a rocky and inhospitable mountain world which can hardly grow other plants. The oldest trees here are estimated to be more than 4,700 years old. Many of the pine trees seemed dead and to be completely bare at first glance, but on closer inspection we discovered the few remaining green boughs as proof that the tree is still alive. Even dead trunks remain lying in the countryside for centuries, because as slowly as the trees grow, as slow is rotting their wood.



## Death Valley National Park

So to speak, through the back door we came in *Death Valley National Park* and arrived on the dusty track through the *Eureka Valley* at its northern border. Even outside the park, the landscape was already very impressive. Rocks in all colours and shapes created a landscape, often without vegetation, yet nevertheless very attractive. The temperature had increased continuously from cool 10 degrees in the mountains, and when we got to our camp for the night at about 30 degrees, we appreciated the shade. Even for sleeping, it was pleasantly mild once again for a long time.

A short hike led up to the *Little Ubehebe Crater* passing the larger *Ubehebe*. This volcanic cone emerged only a few thousand years ago, thus is geologically seen relatively young. Black lava, alternating with different coloured rocks were glowing in the warm morning light. A very gruff

## North and Central California

gravel track took us then to areas of the national park, which attracts little visitors. After the *Teakettle Junction* arrived at the so-called *Race Track*, a dry salt lake with a lava island, famous for its "wandering stones". The phenomenon of visible marks is formed when the sea is covered by a water film, and rocks are moved around by strong wind.

After that the route was "high clearance 4x4 only" in accordance with the road map, actually the narrow rocky track led steeply and washed out down to the *Saline Valley*. In low gear we crept slowly over the stone steps, the abyss on one, and the sheer cliff on the other side. In the valley we came across another "teeth grinding track", which was anything but pleasant to drive. In a steep, very scenic canyon, the road wined back up to almost 2000m. On the way we saw birds that we had never seen before, a kind of chicken with beautiful striped plumage, which prefer running up the steep slopes rather than flying. As we found out later, they were Chukar chickens, a species of bird in the pheasant family.



At the next stop we were hit by a little shock when we realized that we had lost the cover of the spare wheel. No wonder on this bumpy tracks, we had behind us! We drove back 20 km, in the hope to discover it somewhere, unfortunately without success. Sadly, we had to accept that with the cover also one of our decorative turtles was lost.

A short walk through a hot, bone-dry canyon promised to lead to a waterfall. We could not believe to find water in this landscape yet were very surprised when we actually stood in front of the waterfall. Throughout the year, a source gushes from the mountains and flows into this canyon. A large part of the precious water is collected in a pipeline and the small remainder seeps into the ground before it leaves the narrow valley.

Past a dune field, we arrived in the evening at *Furnace Creek*, the actual centre of the park. At this point, which is nearly 100 m below sea level, the temperature was again slightly higher than the previous day. The

## North and Central California

smaller campsites were closed, so we had to choose the much larger at *Furnace Creek*. Despite the size of the place it was nicely laid out and met our expectations perfectly for one night.

We could not leave the *Death Valley Park* without visiting some of the well-known highlights. So we visited the *Zabriskie Point* with the beautiful views of the magnificent erosion landscapes, the *Artists Drive* with its coloured hills and of course the lowest point of the USA, the *Badwater Basin*, where some water of the valley gathers and constantly evaporates in the great heat, and thereby forms a large salt lake.



# Nevada and Utah



## Nevada and Utah

### The Crazy City of Las Vegas

The trip to Las Vegas offered little scenic highlights, nevertheless was not unattractive. In *Pahrump*, the first major town in Nevada, we found that the diesel was significantly cheaper than we had expected in *Las Vegas*. We filled our tanks once again completely so that we had enough fuel for a long time. In *Las Vegas*, we set-up camp in *Sam's Town KOA* campground, not because it was particularly nice, but because of its location and it offered all the facilities we needed for a service day, such as washing machines, hot showers and a reasonable Internet to work on the website. Our first day in Vegas was filled with all sorts of household chores, and extensive breaks to enjoy the warm weather. Later in the evening we went to the adjoining *Sam's Town Casino* to get a first impression of this crazy gambling city. In addition to hundreds of slot machines, the casino had poker, roulette and everything else a gamer's heart could wish for is offered. We treated ourselves to a drink at a bar and enjoyed the entertaining spectacle of *Mystery Falls*, a laser show at an artificial waterfall, which was set up in a corner of the indoor park.

The next day we went to a huge Outlet Centre and complemented our wardrobe with some very favourable resurrected sports clothes. All popular brands were represented with a shop. Unlike other stores, here the cashier first showed the high original price, before the various discounts have been deducted, and finally indicated the outlet price to be paid. For about 100 USD we bought two brand pants, functional T-shirts and socks. Back at the campground we prepared to throw ourselves into the fray of the city.

A free shuttle bus took us to the centre, where all the famous hotels with their huge casinos were within walking distance. The crowds were

## Nevada and Utah

amazing in our opinion, since the weeks before we had only stopped briefly for shopping in cities. Many of the casinos had a pompous and admittedly impressive backdrop. The interior of the buildings with hundreds, even thousands of slot machines and gambling tables, bars, restaurants and souvenir shops again and again, always looked about the same. After dark, the city shone in the artificial light and looked garish and more hectic. We treated ourselves to a drink in a terrace bar and enjoyed watching the bustle on the street. Incredible, the spectrum of people that moved in front of our eyes. Fancy dressed ladies next to equally well-dressed gentlemen, next to homeless beggars and all the high-pitched and queer persons that formed the special charm of the city. The search for dinner was for us a game of patience. Fast food was everywhere readily available, the somewhat better restaurants, however, were only accessible after a long wait without a reservation. Finally, we tasted a luxury hamburger, still a kind of fast food, but at least cooked in a number of variations and very tasty. After a few hours in this bubbling and lively city, our head was smoking and we were happy to return to our beloved home.



The next evening the shuttle bus dropped us near Fremont Street, one of the main attractions in a little less glamorous area. Under the ceiling of the covered road an incredible light show consisting of millions of LED displayed impressive graphics with matching music under the roof. Tourists were flying along a zip line over our heads, shooting through the air, and on the street half-naked men and women offered themselves for a photo opportunity. A huge crowd pushed through the lively street, in front of several stages live concerts were ongoing, visitors everywhere and sellers trying to get rid of their merchandise. Overpriced drinks served in plastic cups, loosened the mood even further. The whole thing was a huge spectacle, no doubt, and it seemed to us that many of the otherwise typical US laws and regulations have been completely thrown overboard. For a while, we enjoyed being carried away in party mood,

# Nevada and Utah

but after the many days and weeks we had spent in secluded and peaceful regions, we were clearly not used to the hustle and soon the head throbbed again.

## In the Valley of Fire

Just an hour outside of *Las Vegas* is the *Valley of Fire State Park*. Our first stage, after visiting the possibly craziest city in the USA, was therefore short. In the middle of the semi-desert we met surprisingly an area with deep red rock formations. The red sandstone layers were folded up in various places over 150 million years ago and have been shaped over time by erosion to today's landscape. The beautiful campground was designed that each pitch is located in a small niche in the middle of this fascinating world of red rocks. On a hike through the rock formations in the north of the park, we let the tranquillity and the beautiful landscape settle in. On the way to a viewpoint Myrta discovered two Desert Bighorn sheep, one species of bighorn sheep living in the desert, and we were able to take pictures from close range. After visiting the most impressive sights of the park, we enjoyed the warm weather at our beautiful campsite. Our solar shower had heated so much within a short period that we had to add cold water, not least because at the prevailing temperatures we actually preferred a cool shower.



## Zion National Park

Just a few hours' drive north-east was our next destination, the *Zion National Park*. Along the way, we were stopped by a highway patrol, which gave us a queasy feeling, even though we were not aware of any error. After a usual passport control the passenger of a police officer came to our window and greeted us laughing in Swiss German. He lived in the area and was a member of the fire department, and therefore had

## Nevada and Utah

the opportunity to accompany a Highway Patrol. He was obviously surprised to see a car with Swiss license plates on American roads and had asked the police to stop us. After this explanation, our initial nervousness thought quickly and after a friendly conversation the two said goodbye with a handshake and a wink.

Once in Zion Park, we were first shocked by the amount of people we encountered. All parking spaces were occupied and the park could be visited only with the free shuttle bus. Campsites were of course all full, so we were forced to cut back again. After 20 km we found a quiet bush camp near a stream. The region outside the national park was under the auspices of the *Bureau of Land Management*, the rules defined the principle that the visitors can camp on this land everywhere. We took advantage of this opportunity often and there were always nice places to stay.

In the early morning we hoped, to get a campsite in the national park, unfortunately without luck. Before nine o'clock all campsites were fully booked again. We parked the car at the Visitor Centre and took the shuttle bus to the end of the road and started our first short hike in the *Zion Canyon*. At the end of the path we had the opportunity to continue in the river bed trough the narrows, but this meant that we would get wet feet. Because the water was rather cool in the shady gorge and more than just refreshing. We left this fun others and took a walk to the *Weeping Rock*. Emerging from the rocks, the water let sprout a dense plant curtain dropping down over the cliff. Meanwhile the sky had cleared and when we started on the way to the *Emerald Pools*, the sun was already strong. As at all other hotspots of the national park a lot of people were out on this short hike. The scenery was terrific, of course, but given the overcrowding we could not really enjoy. We left the main valley to the east of the national park and on the way out snatched again magnificent views back to the canyon. Although our stay in Zion National Park has been shorter than planned, landscape wise it has been



## Nevada and Utah

one of the highlights. After driving through a tunnel a completely different, but just as spectacular, scenery awaited us. Eroded, colourful rock formations were in contrast with the deep blue sky and bright yellow and red trees in their autumn colours.

### The North Rim of the Grand Canyon

On secondary and forest roads, we arrived at the north rim of the *Grand Canyon*. Still outside the national park, in the Kaibab National Forest, it was possible to drive up close to the canyon rim. We stayed at the *Crazy Jug Viewpoint* alone and only 20m from the abyss, so we had the canyon right in front of our living room. Ueli got up early to photograph the sunrise. Myrta felt not really comfortable so close to the abyss, thus was watching the rising sun from a rather "safe distance". Next, on forest roads we drove to the national park and collared with luck a spot in the *North Rim Campground*. The northern rim of the canyon, more difficult to access, was much less visited than the easy-to-reach southern rim. We drove to the different viewpoints and let the magnificent view of the huge, 1,800-meter-deep canyon sink in. Most impressive was the view from *Cape Royal*. It is reached via a narrow bridge to a rock platform which allows a view of the *Colorado River* and offered a panorama of almost 360°.



### A Jewel of Nature, the White Pocket

On an initially good, but later very sandy trail, we ventured to the *White Pocket*. This scenic gem is hidden in the middle of the desert of the *Vermillion Cliff National Monument*. Its incredible rock sculptures are strewn over an area of about 2 square kilometres. White, red and yellow sandstone formations in all shapes are sticking out of the ground and left the landscape look completely different again. This remote and

## Nevada and Utah

stunning area certainly made another scenic highlight of our trip so far. The region was not touristy at all (yet) and undeveloped and accessible only by 4x4. Therefore, there were virtually no restrictions and it was thanks to the small number of visitors still possible to move freely and to camp in the bush.



### Grand Staircase of Escalante Natl. Monument

The *Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument*, just north of the *Vermillion Cliff* is another nature reserve. This is also managed by the *Bureau of Land Management* and is therefore much less developed and with much fewer rules and commandments assigned as the national parks. We drove through the region from south to north on *Cottonwood Canyon Road*. Even along this track were some sights to admire. A planned trip to the so-called *Wahweap Hoodoos*, imposing spiers topped with a stone cap, however, turned out to be a dead end. The open access tracks mentioned in our description had obviously been closed.

Our next stop, was at *Hackberry Canyon*. In often ankle-deep water of the stream bed we were wading upstream the canyon without meeting other people. The foliage of aspen shone golden yellow and offered an incredible contrast to the blue sky and the coloured rocks. Just a few kilometres north of the canyon, we found a nice place to stay, for once only around 1400masl, therefore the temperature remained warm even after dusk. The nearly full moon appeared after dusk in the rocks above our camp to ghostly light up the night.

We stopped the journey again at *Grosvenor Arch*. The huge sandstone arch, formed by erosion, spans high against deep blue sky from a rock pillar to another. Along the *Skutumpah Road* we wanted to explore our

## Nevada and Utah

first slot canyon with a walk-through the narrow crevices. With the help of our guide book, we found the entrance to *Bull Valley Gorge* without difficulty. The narrow path led through the narrow gaps, partly over steps, we scrambled ever deeper into the canyon until we landed at a place where a rope was attached for abseiling. Since we did not know what difficulties the further course would offer, we decided to turn back, as long as it was still possible without problems. This adventure, was definitely too difficult to start with. A few kilometres further north we came to the *Willis Creek Canyon*. This slot canyon was easier to tackle, but no less impressive. The route ran mostly on fine gravel or in the creek, which was carrying only little water. Again and again the gorge narrowed to narrow passages and when sunlight managed to penetrate the deep slot, the walls shone in gold and black. A lovely walk, even if it didn't offer the really big adventure. Also in the eastern part of the National Monument more slot canyons were waiting to be explored.



## Bryce Canyon National Park

We had stayed in the beautiful *Kodachrome State Park*, and after a few days in the bush very much appreciated the warm shower. In *Cannonville* we had planned to top-up our dwindling supplies, but did not find a single shop in this little settlement. In *Tropic* there was at least a small general store, but with just a very modest range, especially regarding the fresh food. We could neither here nor in *Bryce Canyon City* buy wine. The station turned out to consist purely of tourist facilities with hotels, gift shops, RV Park and petrol station and the tiny liquor store only offered bottled wines, which was rather inconvenient for us.

In the *Bryce Canyon National Park*, we secured at first a spot in the campground. After that we headed along the park road to the various viewpoints. At the very end of the road, at *Rainbow Point*, we met again

## Nevada and Utah

the two French couples who we had already come across in *Watson Lake*. Both were, like ourself, travelling with an Azalai cabin, Alain also with a Land Cruiser while his friend had an Iveco as the base vehicle. After a cheerful conversation and the exchange of experiences and past adventures, we started our way back. At *Sunset Point*, we started a hike down into the maze of rock formations. The impressions wandering in the middle of this high rock towers, topped the experience, we had made viewing from above and the distance, by far. The trail led with a narrow serpentine through a couloir down to the foot of the eroded landscape and snaked through the maze the columns until it ended after a steep climb back at the view point.

Even before sunset, it was already very cold, which was not surprising since the campsite after all, was almost 2500masl. At night the mercury fell below zero degrees, so we had to fire up our heater in the morning once again, to have breakfast at a comfortable temperature.

Before we left the park, we took again an extensive hike in the *Fairyland*, located in the northeast of the park. Again, a narrow path from the rim was leading down to the magnificent erosion landscapes. The evergreen coniferous trees that grew on the ground, the pinnacles in all shades of colour and the bright blue sky revealed a gorgeous image. This, in the warm light contributed by the early morning hours, brought the otherwise already impressive rock downright to shine. At the lowest point of the route we arrived at the *Tower Bridge* that connects a double tower with a rock bridge, which, as the name suggests, recalled the original *Tower Bridge* in London.



After 3 hours we were back at the car. At the nearby hotel we put in a rest stop, to refresh ourselves and to use the public Wi-Fi to check emails and bring the website up to date. After that we left the park and went back once more to the *Grand Staircase of Escalante National Monument*.

# Nevada and Utah

## Grand Staircase of Escalante Natl. Monument

East of *Escalante* we turned to the *Hole in the Rock Road*, in order to advance further into the area, which has a large number of slot canyons. As the day was getting late, we set-up a beautiful bush camp in the backcountry. We were at the aperitif, when an old Toyota Hilux drove up and we discovered surprised that it was Alexandra and Guillaume from Canada. We had met the two already at the *Salmon Glacier* in Alaska, and then met again in Vancouver at the campground, but had previously never had closer contact. We wanted to catch up now and invited the two so after dinner to join us. During a few pleasant hours, stories were told and many tips and experiences exchanged.

After we said goodbye to the two Canadians, we drove about 40km south to the trailhead for *Peek-a-Boo and Spooky Canyon*. We parked the car at the end of a 4x4 track and climbed down in a so-called wash, a deep, dry riverbed. To get inside the *Peek-a-Boo canyon*, it was required to climb about 5 m up a sandstone cliffs. Myrta with her short legs had to capitulate so that Ueli climbed alone into the narrow slot after this first obstacle. It was so narrow that progress was only possible sideways in some places. In tight turns it led deeper and deeper into the gorge with countless sandstone arches and narrow passageways, making the *Peak-a-Boo* so unique.

Back to the sun, we were together again and going to the entrance to *Spooky Canyon*, which was at first glance hardly recognizable. This time it was possible to enter the slot canyon without much climbing. After only a few meters, the gap was so narrow that we could just squeeze through it sideways. Even a small beer belly would be enough to get stuck. We then heard voices and soon three people came to meet us. We crossed them at a slightly wider point. In passing, one of the three noticed with a grin that Dolly Parton would have no chance to pass through here. After a few meters we still had to overcome a few steps, but it didn't constitute too great an obstacle. In some places, hardly any light made it to the bottom at others the sun's rays created all shades of colours from brown to violet to light ochre.

## Nevada and Utah



On the way back to the main road, we visited the *Devils Garden*, a small but beautiful area with sandstone sculptures. With a little imagination we could see dwarves, lizards and many more characters and were surprised once again at which blaze of colours and shapes the stones in Utah made their appearance.

### Capitol Reef National Park

After we had stayed in the beautiful *Calf Creek State Park*, we drove along Highway 12 to the north and through constantly changing landscapes finally arriving at nearly 3000 m. The impressive and unique environment that we passed, would easily have the potential for some more national parks.

Once in the visitor centre, we learned that despite the early hour the campground was already fully booked. This was due to a long weekend in Utah, which meant that many locals took a trip to the national parks. For us this meant that we had to content ourselves with a day visit. We drove to the end of a *Scenic Drive* to the entrance of the *Capitol Gorge*, and walked from there for another 2 km into the canyon. The gorge was getting narrower and soon the sun no longer reached the valley floor despite being noon. When the canyon got slightly wider again, we were able to climb up the side to water holes which were filled with water even after a long dry season. On the way back we passed several places



# Nevada and Utah

where Native American petroglyphs (rock carvings) adorned the rock walls.

Shortly after leaving the park we found a nice place to stay on BLM land right on the *Fremont River*. Land owned by the government is often managed either by the National Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Both administrations often permit to camp on this land for free and without major restrictions. The western United States, way over half the land area is owned by the public sector where it is possible to stay in simple, but most beautifully situated campsites or even whenever you feel like.

## Moab and Canyonlands National Park

As already mentioned, more people were out than usual on that long weekend. Thus it was difficult to get a campsite in *Moab*, within reach of the village. Fortunately, a few days before we had received a tip for a camp site and thanks to this we arrived at the privately run *Kane Springs Campground*, not a dream place, but in a practical distance from *Moab*.

From there we started a day trip to the *Island in the Sky*, a part of *Canyonlands National Park*. For an access we chose the spectacular *Shafer Trail*, a 4x4 track, which is, for the last kilometres, cut in a steep rock face. Myrta it was not just once quite nervous, because at the edge of the slope, the wall dropped in parts almost vertically to the depths. We had planned to get a permit for the *White Rim Trail*. Due to the *Jeep Jamboree* taking place in Moab and the generally prevailing high season, no permits were available at least for a week out.

On top of that Ueli had miscalculated the diesel stock. The fuel was getting so low, that we had to leave out some of the sights in the national park to make sure we made it back to civilisation.



# Nevada and Utah

## Arches National Park

The last National Park in Utah should, once again, be a highlight. We started early in the morning and drove straight to the trailhead for the *Devils Garden*. A broad path led to the *Landscape Arch*, a delicate and very long stone arch. After that, the trail was narrow and often small climbs were necessary in order to move forward. On several detours from the main route, we reached other impressive stone arches. The farthest, *Double-O Arch*, got its name from two large, overlapping holes in the rock. The way back led us through a maze of sandstone ridges and narrow passages.

Back at the car we went to *Wolfe Ranch*, the starting point to the hiking trail towards *Delicate Arch*. A good 200 meters of altitude had to be overcome before we saw the most impressive of all the arches in the park. To end the day in *Arches National Park* we made a quick trip to *The Windows*. A short walk took us from the parking lot to the two stone arches, which proved to be more than large holes or just windows in the rock.



The individual walks added together resulted in this full day over 20 km and 600 meters elevation gain. Here again, the campground was sold out for months, and we had to leave the park to find a place to pass the night. On the *Colorado River*, we found a simple but beautiful BLM campsite without problems. There we met an interesting couple from New York. The two were on the road in their mobile coffee roasting facility, a rustic trailer, similar of a log cabin. Before the start of this trip Marc had built a bed into it. Their journey took them in 6 weeks from New York to California and back again. He roasted the coffee in a modified gas grill, in which he had installed a metal cylinder, made of perforated sheet metal, instead of the spit.

# Colorado and Arizona



## Colorado and Arizona

### A short Trip to Colorado

After only two months we had already driven so many kilometres again that another service at the Land Cruiser was due. From a call on Facebook, two garages were recommended to us which were considered Landcruiser specialists in the area. Both were not located in the 4x4 metropolis *Moab*, but in Colorado. Therefore we took a slight detour and drove along the Colorado River upriver to *Grand Junction*. We tried to spontaneously get an appointment with *metric off-road*. In fact, we received assurances that they would take care of our car the same afternoon. Two days earlier, the camper battery had displayed charging problems and the check carried out at the mechanic confirmed that it was dead. The time before the service appointment was just sufficient to change the battery and to do the grocery shopping. The mechanic, who should change the battery, unfortunately, was a super bungler who actually managed to bungle the old metric nut to the new American thread. The result was that the contact pins had to be cut off, so that the new battery was destroyed. On the house, another replacement has been installed. As compensation for all the troubles and the waiting time, we received a further 30% discount, so that the new battery only costed just 90 USD. Good for us, but probably not a profitable business for the shopkeeper.

Back in the garage, Jim went to work. Set apart from adjusting a wheel bearing and replacing a fixation on the leaf spring there were no surprises. Nevertheless it meant to make over time for Jim to finish the work on our car. Mike, the boss had offered us to stay in the backyard of the workshop. This gave us the opportunity to invite Jim for dinner, in recognition of his efforts. It was a pleasant evening and an even later closing time for Jim.

# Colorado and Arizona

## Once More Through the Rockies

At night it had poured rain, first time after weeks of dry weather and in the morning the sky was overcast. Until we left, after a few errands in town, the weather had cleared up a bit.

Steadily the road now climbed and led from *Ouray* right into the mountains, to over 3300masl, past abandoned mines. *Silverton* we saw the famous steam train getting ready for departure. Panting and smoking, the excursion train towards *Durango* departed.



We also had the same intermediate target, but had to climb a 3000 m pass again. The weather in the mountains was still unsettled and the highest peaks were dusted with snow. However, the clouds ripped open again, allowing beautiful wide views. We wanted to stay in lower elevations, because we did not want to spend a cold night or to be surprised by snowfall. After *Durango* we found once again a nice camp in a National Forest.



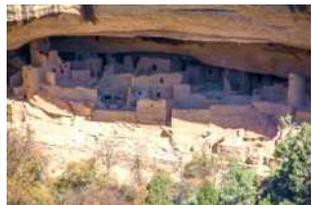
## Mesa Verde National Park

Although our camp was less than 2000m above sea level, the temperature had dropped below zero degrees and the meadows were covered with hoarfrost until well after dawn. We only had to drive half an hour until we reached the *Mesa Verde National Park*. This is known for the so-called *Pueblo Ruins*, the remains of an Indian culture that

## Colorado and Arizona

flourished approximately around 1200 AD. The ruins could be seen from a distance from a viewing platform, and with a guided tour, it was possible to descend to the buildings. Since the main season was already over, we had no problems getting a ticket for the next tour. However, the tour included only the so-called *Balcony House*, all the others were already closed.

After an hour, passing several viewpoints, we reached the access plateau in time for the tour. We were led by a very witty and very philosophical ranger, who passed on not only good information about the Indian culture, but also very personal views and opinions on world events and history. The *Balcony House* is reached only via high, steep ladders of over 10 m. They ended on a terrace under a huge rock overhang. The ruins consist of 40 rooms, including two round ceremony buildings, so-called *Kiwas*. Through a very narrow, easily defensible tunnel and more ladders and steps, we arrived finally back to the plateau.



The journey throughout the park took us to several viewpoints of other ruins. In the adjacent museum the original life in the pueblos was on display using a few dioramas with many funny details along with many artefacts. The campsite of the National Park was on 2400masl what made us decide to go through *Cortez* to a lower elevation. In another, beautiful bush camp on BLM land we enjoyed the mild evening and spent the night with pleasant temperatures.

## Monument Valley

Our next stopover was the *Monument Valley*, a Nature Park managed by the Navajo Indians. Before we got there, we made a trip to the *Valley of the Gods*. On a 25 km long loop road we drove through an imposing landscape of red sandstone cliffs. No wonder the area is referred to as a mini *Monument Valley*. The whole area was on BLM land, cost neither entry nor were there to observe many restrictions and camp in the wilderness was also allowed everywhere.

## Colorado and Arizona

The sky had become increasingly cloudy and when we finally arrived in *Monument Valley*, he was completely overcast. In this light, it made no sense to go into the valley. Therefore, we looked for a place to stay and hoped for better weather the next morning.

In fact, the clouds had broken up at night, which is why we, just after dawn and before breakfast, started our trip. The gravel road through the valley was not even open at this time. However, since we wanted to take advantage of the morning light, we drove around the barrier without hesitation. On bumpy, rocky, and partly sandy road along a signposted circular route is open to visitors. The lighting conditions were not ideal, but got better with time. We enjoyed the deserted landscape and could shoot some pretty neat pictures.



## Canyon de Chelly National Monument

Only about three hours' drive south we came to another natural wonder, the *Canyon de Chelly*. From the plateau, the depth of the canyon was not nearly recognized, however, an impressive view into the abyss opened up from the established viewpoints. The valley floor is used for agriculture by the local Indians and therefore may only be visited with a guide. We contented ourselves with the view from above. The yellow leaves of the willows on the valley floor formed a wonderful contrast to the red rocks and blue sky. Highlight of the trip was the last vantage point from which the *Spider Rock*, an impressive, 150m high rock needle

# Colorado and Arizona

can be seen. As the afternoon was already advanced, we stayed at the campsite of the park.



## Painted Desert and Petrified Forest Natl. Park

Another three-hour drive, and we arrived at another one of the many national parks of the Southwest. We first crossed the *Painted Desert*, a colourful erosion landscape in all possible shades of red through to yellow and black. Interesting was the visit to a nearby ruin, located above a river, which had counted about 200 inhabitants in the 13th century. The village was, in contrast to *Mesa Verde*, not hidden under a rock overhang, but in the open. However, this settlement had been built so that you could only access the inside of the buildings via ladders.

A hike through the *Blue Mesa* gave insight into a further erosion landscape, but here in blue and purple hues. Throughout the washed out valleys and on the hills there were countless petrified trees, an incredible sight. During the time of dinosaurs, the trees had been



# Colorado and Arizona

covered by ash and petrified later over the millennia. Now they are gradually exposed back by the erosion. In part, mighty, up to 30 m long logs with a diameter of more than 3m were to admire. A whole *Petrified Forest* was criss scattered across the landscape. The structure of the wood was mostly glassy and shimmered in all colours and also the stony bark was clearly visible.

## On the Apache Trail

Once we reached almost 2500 masl with our car and crossed at that level once again magnificent pine forests. But then the road dropped down to the *Roosevelt Dam*. Gradually, the trees were replaced by shrubs and increasingly by cacti. The first *Saguaros*, the mighty, to 20 m high columnar cacti with their typical arms, appeared. No wonder this route has received the name *From Desert to Tall Pines*.

At *Roosevelt*, we turned off on the *Apache Trail*. This historic gravel road leads along several dams in the direction of *Phoenix*. On the *Apache Lake* we stayed directly at the water, something we appreciated in view of the increased degrees temperatures of over 30 C. The rest of the route was even more spectacular and the highlight of the dusty track that snaked finally from the *Fish Creek* up high to a viewpoint. After *Tortilla Flats*, the road was paved again and the annoying corrugated road was behind us.



At the end of the *Apache Trail* is the *Lost Dutchman State Park*. After we had done some shopping at the nearby big city of *Phoenix*, we went back there and decided to take a rest day in the beautifully landscaped campground. The "rest day" we started with a strenuous hike through the desert landscape with its many species of cacti. It led along a trail which follows the foot of the *Superstition Mountains* and was still

## Colorado and Arizona

pleasantly in shadow of the morning. We got up to a beautifully located valley, framed by the weathered and wild rock towers.



### The South of Tucson

Our plan was to stay in *Tucson* itself in a camping with Internet access in order to bring the website up to date and to plan our oncoming trip to *Hawaii*. We headed first to the KOA, but they had only very expensive full-hook-up sites, thus we looked for an alternative. Ueli noticed on the road map a place called *Helvetia* (another name for Switzerland), about 50 km south of the city. The Ghost Town is within the *Corona National Forest*, which would allow us to stay there if need be. Spontaneously we drove there, but it turned out that a mining company had taken over the whole area and access was not possible anymore. Although it was now late afternoon, we had to move a bit further south, to finally find a very beautiful National Forest Campground to stay.

The next day we drove on towards the Mexican border, because we wanted to take a trip to the border zone. On the way we stopped at the *Tumacacori Mission*, one of the oldest mission churches in the South of the USA. Founded by Jesuits in the late 18th century, they lived in difficult times due to extreme climatic conditions and repeated Indian attacks, which ultimately led to the abandonment of the mission.

Just before *Nogales* we turned off into the mountains. Since we found no way to stay on *Pena Blanca Lake*, we went on a track towards the mountains. We were amazed to see all along the route camper until we found out that the hunting season should begin the next day. Access to a walking trail in a canyon was closed, so we decided to continue on and stay on *Lake Arivaca*.

## Colorado and Arizona

After our trip to the south did not work out according to plan, we wanted to return to the area of *Tucson*. On the way there, in *San Xavier*, was one other currently still used mission. As *Tumacacori*, it has been founded by the *Jesuit Father Eusebio Kino*, and has a magnificent church, built in Mexican architecture.



We settled in the *Gilbert Ray Campground*, located in the *Tucson Mountain Park*, next to *Old Tucson*, the old film city. By foot it was just a short walk to visit the open air museum. More than 300 movies and TV series were filmed there in the late 70ies. Since the season had not yet started, only few visitors were on the grounds. In the funny and original style built western town above all, different shows, buildings and museums can be seen. So we attended a bank robbery that ended so, that all parties were finally laying in the dust "dead". At the *Grand Hotel* we visited a western show with can-can girls and finally in front of the Spanish mission church it cumulated in an impressive stunt show, in which in the best of Western style, men fell off church towers and much artificial blood flowed. We had a good laugh and were impressed to see the locations, of films and series we know from childhood, up close.



## Saguaro Natl. Park and Sonora Desert Museum

Also in the area of *Tucson Mountain Park* is the western part of *Saguaro National Park*, known for the mighty, up to 20 meters tall cacti. As we

## Colorado and Arizona

had repeatedly been in "Saguaro Country" along the road and had already seen thousands of the prickly giants, the landscape impressed us not too much. Nevertheless, we made a short circle through the park and then drove back to the *Sonora Desert Museum*.



In this superbly designed open-air museum, the *Sonora Desert* in all facets is presented in a natural and generously developed terrain. On footpaths typical plants and animals of different climates can be explored. Although this Saturday a Girls Scout Day, with hundreds of "Girl Scout", was going on, the park was not over crowded due to its size. We spent several hours in this truly unique facility and learned about the plants and animals that we had already admired in nature. Particularly interesting were the many butterflies that were attracted by the few bushes and flowers still thriving in this season. The innumerable species of cactus in the *Cactus Garden* was one of the highlights of the exhibition for us.



## Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument

A day's drive south-west, bordering on Mexico, is an area in which so-called *Organ Pipe Cactus* grow. While these are quite common in northern Mexico, this is the only place in the US where these species of cactus occurs. As before in the south of *Tucson*, we were also in an area, where the US Border Patrols are active everywhere. Time and again, mobile checkpoints were set up along the highways and off the road their vehicles were parked. Border patrol in 4x4's, by ATV or even on

## Colorado and Arizona

horseback were patrolling the region, trying to deal with illegal immigration and drug smuggling. Here, an incredible effort is made to control the southern border of the United States. Up to 100km away from the border we came across check-points, equipped with dozens of service vehicles, countless quads and even helicopters. Ourselves had to show our passports only once, but were otherwise always waved through.

Once in the *Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument*, we visited the visitor centre, where we were immediately greeted by rare guests, namely two mighty *Harris hawks*. The two large birds of prey had settled in the garden on a saguaro cactus, watching the environment. We settled in the nearby campsite and once again enjoyed a beautiful sunset and a very quiet night. In the morning we went to explore the area. On the drive on a dirt road, we saw thousands of *Organ Pipe Cactus* in their ancestral environment. The spiny plants that can grow up to 6 m tall, are growing closely together in bundles that early visitors would have reminded of organ pipes. The interesting route took us through the foothills of the *Ajo Mountains* and always invited for a photo stop or short walks. Before it got too hot again, we left the park northward.



## The Southwestern Arizona

The next night we spent in the desert and enjoyed a wonderful evening mood and after sunset a clear night with a bright moon and millions of stars.



## Colorado and Arizona

On the way between *Yuma* and *Lake Havasu* we visited the *Mine Museum of Castle Dome City* in the *Kofa National Wildlife Refuge*. The private initiative has collected old buildings from the original location and rebuilt these at the original place where a lead and silver mine was operating in the past. Some of the houses were equipped with witty artefacts and collectables from the active time of the mine. The whole set-up was perhaps not as perfect as similar museums, but this just made up the charm of this place.



After we had seen the "big" Arizona attractions, the distances between the other attractions became a bit longer again. We wanted to enjoy a few quiet days and enjoy the now generally warm to hot weather along the *Colorado River*. The area around *Yuma* and along the *Colorado River* is very popular with the Snowbirds, the mostly retired visitors which spend the winter in the warm south in their huge motor homes. In *Quartzite* a huge area with more than 1,500 parking spaces, was set up on BLM land in the desert, and can be used by these people. There are dozens of RV parks, often no more than a gravelled parking lot, equipped with electricity, water and sewage connections, not to mention cable TV, so with all what "one" needs for camping. There, the pensioners spend the winter up to the spring, and when temperatures start to become uncomfortably high again, they drive back North.

We had chosen the *Buckskin Mountain State Park*, a small, nicely furnished campsite on the river. Since the temperatures were still above 30 ° C, we even enjoyed a dip in the cool water and treated ourselves to a day of rest. From our Canadian neighbours, who were on their way to their winter residence, we learned who was elected US president. We were not the only ones who were surprised by the outcome of these elections!!!

In *Lake Havasu City* we had a brief stopover to visit the old *London Bridge*. This bridge had to be abandoned in London after only 140 years of use because its foundations sank ever further. The city offered the bridge for

## Colorado and Arizona

sale for two million dollars. An American millionaire bought it, and had it disassembled in London stone by stone and re-build it for an additional 5 million again at *Lake Havasu*. Around the bridge not only a tourist destination but also a veritable city was growing, both benefited primarily from the favourable climate and the situation at the reservoir. Especially with the Snowbirds, the destination with the mild desert climate and water sports opportunities is popular today. The many health care facilities and private clinics were a further sign of the kind of guests who spend the winter in the area.

We crossed the *Colorado River* and enjoyed on the California side just another day and a half rest. For this, we chose the *Moabi County Park* campground, since it offered, among other things, a Wi-Fi. This we used extensively to prepare our planned side trip to Hawaii. The place turned out indeed to be quite loud, as was the weekend again and the Americans with their powerboats and off-road vehicles stayed on the river. Still, it was a good way for us to maintain contact with the outside world in peace.

# Southern California



## Southern California

### Mojave National Preserve

After our rest days near the *Colorado River*, we turned off the Interstate Highway 40 and drove into the *Mojave National Preserve* from the south. This type park is compared to the national parks, a less strict regimented reserve. Although the administration is also in the national park authorities, it is possible to move more freely and to camp in the wilderness. The area was designated in 1994 as a protected zone, with little developed and therefore also not very well known. Many areas are also reachable only on gravel roads and 4x4 routes, which limits the number of visitors again strongly.

In the *Hole in the Wall Information Centre*, we obtained information about activities in the park. A first short hike from the visitor centre led us through the desert typical vegetation and landscape of the *Mojave* and took us to a nice, narrow canyon in which we could try our climbing skills again. The many eroded holes in the rocks explained how the hike and the information centre got their name. A sandy, but well passable track, which ran in the river bed for the most part, led past the *Mid Hills* campsite. Back on the paved road, we drove to our chosen place for the night. Both our guide and the people at the visitor centre had recommended to set-up camp around the *Sunset Rock*. In fact, we found there some very nice places, directly at the rocks. The vegetation in the area reminded us of a botanical garden. Many types of cacti and shrubs,



# Southern California

along with the typical *Joshua Trees*, showed a surprisingly versatile desert flora.

The next morning we went on a 4x4 route through an area with many volcanic craters to a lava tube. While the lava solidified slowly on the surface, for some time liquid lava flowed inside, leaving a tunnel. Equipped with a flashlight, we went down a few steps and cautiously made our way through the cave.

At the *Kelso Depot*, a former train station in the desert, we received interesting and insightful information on the history and importance of the opening up of the region by the railroad. The buildings were rescued just before demolishment and then restored. Very close to the *Kelso Depot*, is a large area with very old and high sand dunes. This landscape form achieves the most impressive effect by the alternation of light and shadow. However, since our visit fell on noon, the sunlight was too hard and too direct to shoot attractive images.



## Joshua Tree National Park

Today, the most beautiful and dense *Joshua Tree Forests* are housed in the *Mojave National Preserve*, which apparently was not the case when the *Joshua Tree National Park* was founded in the 1930's.

The first night we stayed on the northern edge of the park in *Indian Cove Campground*. This is in the midst of beautiful granite rock formations and each campsite had been individually fitted into the landscape. On the *Park Avenue* we then drove into the heartland of the National Park. Short walks with views in the beautiful rock formations and the eponymous Joshua Trees, a *Yucca* species, which can grow up to 15m high, offered a lot of variety. Since late fall is the best time to visit this area, it also had a surprising number of visitors on weekdays and the numerous existing campsites were well occupied. However, we found a nice spot in the

# Southern California

beautifully landscaped *Belle Campground*. There we met Debbie and Steven from Los Angeles. We spent the evening together and were spontaneously invited to visit them after our trip to Hawaii. On the way to the park exit we again drove through all possible vegetation zones of the *Mojave Desert*. Depending on the altitude and water availability a completely different plant life appeared. We were ever more amazed on how many and fine, natural beauties develop in desert areas.



## Anza Borrego State Park

Past the huge *Salton Lake*, a lake with high salt content, but quickly dwindling waters, we came to the *Anzo Borrego State Park*, the largest state park in the US in terms of area. Also, this region is still part of the *Mojave Desert* and is well known for the California Fan Palms, which can be found along a short hike in a water-rich canyon. Here, too, it was permitted with few restrictions, to camp wild. We made use of it and found at the outlet of the *Fish Creek Canyon* and later in *Blair Valley* a beautiful accommodation. One of our hikes took us to the only one growing *Elephant Tree* in the area. This subtropical tree is otherwise only likely to be found in Mexico's *Sonora Desert*.

In the southern part of the 2,500 km<sup>2</sup> area we took a hike to two palm groves which are typical in this region. Over one hundred *Californian Fan Palms* formed the *Palm Bowl Grove* and form a green, shady oasis. The last night we wanted to spend in *Blair Valley*. At the first and second attempt to find a suitable place, we ended up in places where we were swarmed of bees within minutes. Where these arrived from in the middle of the desert and of what they lived there, was a mystery to us. Since Myrta had already been stung by a bee only days earlier and got a

## Southern California

thick swollen and painful arm, we decided to go down into the valley to find a better place.



## Service Day and Preparation for Hawaii

A few weeks earlier, we had decided to make a side trip to Hawaii. The flights were booked and for our camper we had reserved a parking space. Before leaving, however, still a lot needed to be done. We looked for a campsite where we could wash the car and to clean the inside. The waste water tank we wanted to have perfectly clean to prevent any nasty surprises on our return. As our laundry was also to be done, this busy day was already coming to an end. Shortly before *Los Angeles* we stayed another night, to have only a short distance to travel through the notoriously heavy traffic next day. For the night before the flight, very early in the morning, we had reserved a room in a hotel, which offered the possibility to leave the car at a relatively low price for 3 weeks. With the shuttle bus of the hotel we were driven to the airport and reached our departure gate in time, despite the huge size of the airport of Los Angeles.

# Hawaii



## Hawaii

### Oahu

The flight with Hawaiian Airlines from Los Angeles to Honolulu went smoothly. But except for a lunch nothing was included in the ticket price, neither headphones nor on-board entertainment or drinks were offered. The checked baggage was \$ 25per flight segment, or \$ 15 for frequent flyer members, which we therefore joined immediately.

The way at the airport of Honolulu was surprisingly long in comparison to the Los Angeles Airport, which meant that we arrived at the same time as our luggage at the conveyor belt. After a long wait the shuttle bus took us to the car rental. Once there, a vehicle was handed over to us, which had strong vibrations in the steering as we soon found out. Back at the rental company it was unhesitatingly exchanged for another car. With the help of your GPS, we arrived in short time at our accommodation, located very close to Chinatown. The reserved Airbnb room was OK, however, quite a few family members used the common space, so there was always a bottleneck in the bathroom and at the dining table.

The next day we started a round trip to the north coast. It is in winter famous for its huge waves. For a good reason the town hosts one of the world's largest surfing competition at the beginning of December. We have seen some of the professionals in training, which was pretty impressing for us! Whole Oahu is quite touristy and for many Hawaii



# Hawaii

visitors the only island they visit. By far the most indigenous people live on Oahu. Therefore it was not surprising that the traffic, especially around Honolulu, was very dense and traffic jams were commonplace.

On all Hawaiian Islands, access to the beaches is public. Even in areas with trendy and luxurious hotels the beach must be accessible to non-hotel guests. This regime should be a good example for some other countries, including Switzerland's with its poor public access to lakes.

On the second day on Oahu, we went first to the south, to go snorkelling in *Hanauma Bay*. Luckily the number of visitors is limited there because of the huge crowds. Before entering the beach, all guests have to watch a video instruction, which introduces the visitor to the nature reserve and the rules of conduct. Unfortunately, the swell during our visit was quite high, and the water therefore somewhat agitated and the visibility slightly turbid. The currents were stronger than in calm water. Nevertheless, we have seen countless coloured reef fish close up already in waist-deep water. Even lying on the beach was not boring. Nimble and curious mongoose, one of many other animal species brought to Hawaii by early visitors, approached us, also, many birds were observed.



A hike up to Diamond Head gave us a beautiful view of Waikiki Beach deep below us. At the edge of the crater of the extinct volcano, is a whole series of bunkers from the time of the Second World War. Despite this massive defense bunker, the US Army failed to defend the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

A walk on the famous Waikiki Beach made it clear to us that this area is still the centre of tourism. Souvenir shops and restaurants, and all types of entertainment were offered to the crowds here. A detour led us past the Hinterland Mountains, which are covered with magnificent rainforest.

# Hawaii



Because of Thanksgiving, many restaurants and shops were closed, which is rather unusual for the US, because celebrations are usually very good sales opportunities. For us, this meant that we had to walk for some time through the streets of the city until we finally found a fine dim sum restaurant. The Chinese obviously didn't want to miss the business.

On our last day on Oahu, the weather was quite volatile again. The northwest corner of the island, which was our goal today, however, turned out to be a good choice in this respect. The area lies on the leeward side and the rain is caught on the high mountains. This usually results in often sunny weather and an almost desert-like vegetation. Besides beautiful scenery, there was not too much to see and swimming or snorkelling was too dangerous for us, because the surf in this area was too strong. Before our flight to the Hawaii Island we visited the Bishop Museum. In these ancient buildings, we learned a lot about the culture of the Polynesians and the history of Hawaii. The exhibition, however, was quite bloated compared with modern museums, therefore a bit old-fashioned. Despite everything, we gained a good overview of the colonization of the Pacific region and in particular of Hawaii.

## Hawaii, The Big Island

When we arrived it poured down with rain and the ride to the nearby accommodation was pretty stressful because of the poor visibility in the dark. Thanks to GPS, we found the house without problems. As it turned out, we had this time made a very good choice with the accommodation. The young hosts were very open and communicative, so quickly a good mood established. After we had set ourselves, we drove back to Hilo



# Hawaii

and followed the recommendation and had dinner in the restaurant Pineapples.

On the first day after our arrival we stayed near Hilo and explored the eastern tip of the island. A first visit was to the Lava Tree State Monument. On the site we found a whole bunch of tree residues that had been burned in a volcanic eruption of molten lava. After the mass drained, the trunks remained hollow, coated with hardened lava and up to several meters tall.

The tropical rainforest all around impressed us once again. Plants which we buy in pots at home for a lot of money, grow here many times larger into the sky. Among other things, we discovered Philodendron with huge leaves which climbed up to the mighty trees.

Along the coast we went down to *Kaimu*. The small settlement was covered by a lava flow and thereby destroyed in 1983. Today, just off the ancient village a newly built village is home to a fairly shrill hippie commune. It was impressive to see the pitch-black mass, which moved downward from the crater rim of the volcano into the sea, and everything in its way was buried. In the distance, huge clouds of smoke could be seen, caused by a current lava flow, which also flowed to the coast.



To see this up close, we planned to walk next day from the National Park side, 8km along the coast. While on the top of the *Kilauea Crater*, the weather was foggy and drizzle was hiding the landscape, but it was mostly sunny and much warmer down on the coast. The strong wind agitated the sea powerful and provided some cooling. Finally, we crossed a fresh lava field where the air still shimmered in some places with heat. A clear indication that the liquid lava was moving a few meters beneath our feet. For security reasons, it was not allowed to go closer than a few hundred metres of the spot where the lava flowed into the water. But even from a safe distance, it was impressive to see the

# Hawaii

massive steam explosions and how the lava brought the seawater downright to a boil.



On the way to the southern tip of the island, we crossed the national park again. The weather had improved and allowed us a glimpse of the eruption in *Kilauea Crater*. The lava spurted here from the ground, and was clearly visible even from some two kilometres away. A short walk took us through a lava tube. Again, this had emerged after the lava cooled at the surface, but was still liquid inside. As the river of lava was finally flowing out, it left a tunnel. The developed section of the cave is about 3 meter in diameter and had a length of a few hundred meters.



Another highlight of our tour of the island was the Black Sand Beach. As the name suggests, this beach consisted of pitch-black, shiny lava sand. The lava rocks were crushed by the surf to fine sand and finally deposited on the shore. Here we were lucky to see some green sea turtles. The animals like to rest on this beach in the sun and are not bothered by curious people.

Before we reached the southernmost point of Hawaii, and by the way of the whole the US, we enjoyed fine pastries from the bakery that is also the southernmost of the United States. The southern tip of the island has a very unique, and very dry landscape. The constant wind and the lack of rainfall dried up the area so that they resembled a desert. Below the cliffs we could see a few fishermen who were hoping for a plentiful catch from the raging sea. It seemed quite dangerous for us, because here the wind often blows with gale force.

# Hawaii



We had booked another Airbnb, but soon realized that this accommodation and the hostess did not meet our expectations. To our detriment the house was also so remote that within 30km no restaurants were to be found, neither any shops. The state of the kitchen at our disposal turned out to be a dingy storeroom. This showed us that not everything that is beautifully described, is also beautiful and that it is important to assess the situation exactly when researching.

We visited the little Painted Church near Captain Cook, the place was named after the famous navigator. The simply decorated church surprised us especially with a mural scene which was very similar to the view from the *Axenstrasse* at Lake Lucerne in the direction of *Flüelen*. Whether this view was indeed the template for the mural, we could not find out though.

On the coast we visited a holy place of the Hawaiian native population. This is now under the protection of the National Park Service. It is reported that in the past each offender could hope for pardon if he managed to reach the temple behind the massive lava wall. The people interpreted this as a sign from the gods and spared the persecuted. Immediately adjacent to this facility was a small beach with a coral reef. Just a few meters from the shore a variety of coloured fish could be observed while snorkelling. They approached us at arm's length without hesitation. One of the species that was common to see was the state fish of Hawaii with the difficult name *Humuhumunukunuaapua'a*. We spent several hours snorkelling in the bay with crystal clear and wonderfully calm water.

Along coast we drove to *Kailua-Kona*, next to *Hilo* the only major town on Hawaii and the centre of tourism on this island. The west side of the island was much more sunny and dry and had some very nice beaches, which makes it the most popular area for beach holidays. This was the reason that the offer was tailored to these customers and thus mainly

# Hawaii

souvenir shops, restaurants and facilities for all kinds of "adventures" offered their services.



Since we did not feel welcome at the selected Airbnb, we decided, a day ahead of schedule to move back to *Hilo*. Luckily we were again able to stay with Jake and Andrea. On the drive back to Hilo, the weather was still dry and warm up to *Kona*. However, when we drove up into the mountains in *Waimea*, a black wall of clouds turned towards us and it rained until shortly before our destination.

We settled back in the house of Jake and Andrea, but soon realized that the entire building had no electricity. It turned out that the previous tenant had closed her account with the electric company without Jake having enough time to report the new connection. Therefore, we spent a nice evening together by candlelight. So be able to cook something anyway, Jake drove into town and bought a camping gas stove. We invited the two for a fish curry, so they could enjoy at least a fine dinner in spite of stress and anger.

In the morning the sky was overcast and it was raining all morning violently. We could sign into unsecured Wi-Fi of the neighbours and surf the Internet until the batteries of the tablets were empty. We waited until the two hosts, we had really made friends with them, came back from the university, to thank them and say goodbye before leaving. On the way to the airport we were left with time to visit the Discovery Centre in the city. These is an attractive museum, in which detailed and interesting information about the sea around the Hawaiian Islands and the archipelago in the northwest is conveyed.

# Hawaii

In still heavy cloud cover, but at least no rain, the plane took us further on to the island of Maui. Out the window, we saw the glowing red sky of sunset over the volcano *Mauna Kea* before night fall.

## Maui

Our first trip was to the west of the island. At the centre of the craggy peninsula is the approximately 1800m high *Puu Kuki*. The road around the peninsula leads directly along the sea. From a vantage point we could see humpback whales in the distance, which come here in the winter from the cold Alaska waters to calve. *Lahaina*, a popular tourist destination on the sunny and dry west coast, was our next destination. Here in the old centre dominated the typical shops for the many visitors. Large parts of the coast are occupied by hotels, but they have to allow access to the beaches to the public as anywhere in Hawaii. The northern tip of the island is bordered by cliffs of black lava rocks. A short walk took us to a blowhole, where the high waves squeezed the water up through a hole in the rock in huge fountains and with a loud hiss, and offered the audience a huge spectacle. The road was now increasingly narrower and was often only single lane, but thanks to the low volume of traffic posed no big problem.

To explore the eastern part of the island, we needed a whole day. Although the entire distance was only about 180km long, the road to *Hana*, however, was so narrow and winding that we needed about 3h alone for this 80km. On top of that, the scenery tempted us again and again to side trips and stops. The northeast side of the island receives



# Hawaii

the most rainfall, so that the vegetation was lush accordingly. The trails were thus often muddy and slippery, therefore we preferred to wear for a short hike the Teva sandals to the fact, that we could rinse shoes and feet the end in order to keep the car reasonably clean. The road to *Hana* led in parts trough the *Haleakala* National Park.

After that, the road was partly bumpy and remained very narrow. The coastal landscape was spectacular and tropical, until it became drier in the rain shadow of the *Haleakala Volcano* and changed to lean pastures. From there the road was better and had two lanes, so were quickly back to civilization.

A highlight of our Maui stay was certainly the visit to the *Haleakala Volcano*. From sea level we drove up to the summit of the mountain at about 3000m. Once at the top, it offered us, thanks to the good weather conditions, a 360 ° panoramic view. The sensational location is perfect for the astronomical observatory with several telescopes. The dimensions, the diverse landscape and the flora of the mighty volcano became visible only after a steep descent into the crater itself. The volcano on Maui has not been active for over 200 years, so that entering the crater is considered absolutely safe. The route took us over 900m down into a huge cauldron, passing several mini volcano craters. In part, we wandered through ash fields, then again through rugged lava areas. We were amazed by the variety of plants that had settled in this inhospitable environment. The widespread and endemic growing Silversword in this area owes its name to hundreds of sabre-like leaves that shine silvery in the sun. The largest part of the walk we could enjoy



# Hawaii

with only a few clouds and invading, dramatic acting fog. The north end of the crater rim had been eroded away over time, so that low clouds can penetrate at this point. This region receives more rain fall and the vegetation is lush than in the centre of the crater. The conditions also seemed to please the *Nene*, an endemic goose species, of which we saw several couples. When we took the steep ascent back to the crater rim under the feet, it started drizzling from the increasingly dense fog and just before the end of the hike it poured downright. After nearly 20 km and a 5 ½ hour hiking we reached the road. To avoid to be exposed to the rain any longer, we hitchhiked. Fortunately, we were soon picked-up by friendly motorists and they dropped us off a little later at our rental car.

We felt the strenuous hike in the bones and muscles and therefore allowed ourselves some rest at *Ulea Beach*, on the sunny south coast. Nick, our host had given us the tip for this trip. We parked our car at one of the luxury hotels and found a nice shady corner at the edge of the bay, which we had all to ourselves. We enjoyed the beautiful beach and snorkelling in the crystal clear water. A few meters from the shore, along a cliff, we admired wonderful coral and colourful fish in large numbers.

For the evening we had an invitation from Nick, to attend the sunset cruise on *Ali'i Nui*. He was captain on this beautiful catamaran and had to give away a few places. Normally, the luxury trip cost USD 140 per person, including first-class buffet dinner and support by a professional crew. Our costs were limited to a generous tip for the crew. As there was too little wind, unfortunately we could not sail as planned, to view the sunset. However, we enjoyed the beautiful mood, the fine drinks and good food on board. After we sighted a few humpback whales in the distance, the skipper dropped a hydrophone into the water so that we could hear the songs of the mighty animals over loudspeaker.



It was time again to change the island, which was not too difficult for us due to the rainy weather. On the way to the airport we took the two

# Hawaii

small packages with gifts for the grandchildren of Myrta to the post office. Although we only sent small things, we had to fill out all the customs forms, which took some time. It got late before we arrived at the airport, because of the construction sites where we had to go an extra lap to make matters worse, before we dropped off the car and took the shuttle bus to the terminal. But check-in and security check went smoothly, so we still arrived in time at the gate. Due to the bad weather the view on the short flight was zero.

## Kauai

We reached our Airbnb around two o'clock. Although we arrived earlier than agreed, the room was already vacated and Brian, the owner saw no problem to check us in early. The bedding we had to do ourselves, but the accommodation was relatively inexpensive. After we had inspected the kitchen and found it useful, and went back to nearby *Kapaa* to buy groceries. As everywhere in Hawaii, the prices were significantly more expensive compared with prices on the mainland, even in the well-known supermarket chain stores.

*Kapaa* is about in the middle of the east coast of Kauai, and was therefore a good starting point to explore the island. A first excursion took us to the north coast. We drove to the north end of the road, because unlike Hawaii and Maui, Kauai cannot be completely surrounded by road. At *Ke'e Beach*, the trail of the *Na Pali* starts along the coast. This section of the island is considered the most spectacular scenery. Since it had been raining heavily in the previous days, in parts, the trail was muddy and slippery, which seemed to us too dangerous in the steep terrain. We took a walk along the beach and discovered a monk seal in the sand. The animal had come ashore to rest and lay there so quiet that we first thought it was dead, but it was just absolutely not bothered by beach visitors. Only about 1200 Monk Seals are left worldwide, one of the rarest species of this animal family. Of those, only just about 100 animals

# Hawaii

live on the Hawaiian main islands, the others hold on to offshore islets, therefore to see one of these seals at all, you have to be very lucky.



Compared to the other islands, Kauai is sparsely populated and the number of tourist resorts remains (still) low. The easily accessible beaches were almost deserted. However, the surf and strong currents appeared to us too risky for swimming, despite lifeguards. The scenery was very green with the lush vegetation, a reason why the island is also called Garden Island. Among other things, taro fields were quite common. This starchy root vegetables was brought to Hawaii islands by Polynesians and formed for a long time the staple food throughout the Pacific. A detour led to the *Lilaue* lighthouse. This stands on a windswept ledge in a wildlife reserve. On the way back to the main road, we strengthened ourselves at one of the many food trucks, which are very popular and widespread in Hawaii. The food of these providers is usually good and relatively cheap and both, quality and selection, are often better than usual fast food restaurants.

The next day we explored the surrounding area of *Kapaa*. On small roads we drove through the hinterland of the city. Past the *Opeaka'a* waterfall we came back to the main road, where the *Wailua* River spills into the sea. On the river canoe races were under way, which we wanted to see up close. A team of six rowers sat in the outrigger canoes. The route led over several kilometres on which the strongest teams soon deposed and provided a thrilling head to head race. With loud shouts and great applause, the teams were cheered on by the numerous spectators on the shores.



# Hawaii

*Lihue* is the commercial centre and the largest city on the island, but does not offer too much to see for the visitor. North of the town we drove down to *Hanamaulu* Beach where we could watch men fishing with nets from the shore. Also, a seabird tried to benefit from the abundant fish and darted relentlessly from a great height into the water, apparently without much success, yet likely very hungry, for he always came back and tried again. At *Lydgate* Beach a natural, large pool was separated from the open sea by a dam of lava rocks. This makes it possible to swim and snorkel safely even in rough seas. We were even more amazed at the variety and species richness of the fish living here.

The good weather forecast for the day motivated to visit the *Waimea* Canyon. This enormous gorge stretching from the mountains that reached a height of 1500m, down to the south coast. The road climbs and at the end we got up to over 1000m, high above the *Na Pali* coast. The prevailing fog lifted from time to time, allowing glimpses of the magnificent landscape. As we reached the next viewpoint, the weather had cleared and offered a superb view of the *Waimea* Canyon. No wonder this mighty gorge is called the "Grand Canyon of the Pacific". Far down the river flows, fed by a waterfall, along the lush valley floor. The sparsely vegetated slopes of the canyon formed a strong colour contrast with the red earth. Some wild goats, descendants of animals that had been left behind by the first Western explorers, climbed skilful over the steep slopes.



On the south coast we visited the *Spouting Horn*, again one of the places where the violent surf shoots powerfully into the hole and splashing water with a hiss in the air. However, due to the rather small wave action on this day the spectacle was not very impressive. In the evening we enjoyed an excellent dinner at *Sam's Ocean View Restaurant* and enjoyed on the terrace a fine cocktail overlooking the sea.

In the last campground before we had arrived in *Los Angeles*, we had met *Eric*. When he learned that we would travel to *Kauai*, he had

# Hawaii

organized a visit to an exclusive coffee plantation for us. This was only a few kilometres from our accommodation. Les, the owner of the plant had travelled to the mainland for two months, so his manager, Tai cared for us. The operation has two primary legs, on the one hand a small plantation with organic coffee and on the other hand several small tobacco fields scattered in the region. The own coffee is processed in small quantities and in time-consuming manual work to a luxury product, costing a proud USD 40 per pound, mainly found at exclusive restaurants and sold to well-heeled customers. In addition to the self-grown, coffee from the Big Island is purchased abroad and roasted at the plantation. Tai was going to roast coffee for some orders and therefore sent us alone on a tour of the plantation. Because of the lack of qualified personnel in Hawaii the own tobacco harvest is shipped to Nicaragua, where it is processed into exclusive cigars in order to achieve the desired quality.



We spent the afternoon on the beach again before we returned for a few drinks to the room and enjoyed a cool, Hawaiian beer on the patio. Contrary to what the old German song "there is no beer in Hawaii" says, on the islands are some excellent beers brewed. As an introduction to our next travel destination we visited a Mexican restaurant, a family business where we were served authentic Mexican dishes for dinner. The waiter was pleased with our attempts to order in Spanish. Anyway, we got what we wanted, which we took as a good omen for the journey to Mexico.

On our last day on Hawaii we had to get up early for our flight to Honolulu, because it was scheduled for 06:20. After only half an hour's flight we reached the stopover in *Oahu* and an hour later we went on to Los Angeles, where we got our camper back unharmed. Before we left the Los Angeles area, we wanted to visit Debbie and Steve. We had met them in the Joshua Tree National Park and had invited us. From the hotel, where the car was parked during our absence, we reached their

# Hawaii

home in less than an hour, despite rush hour. We enjoyed a fine dinner and good company with our hosts and we shared our travel experiences.

# Mexico's Baja California



## Mexico's Baja California

### On the Way to the Baja California del Norte

After our return from Hawaii, the authorized period of stay for the US was nearly exhausted. Before the final border crossing we wanted to stock up with a few things of which we suspected that it would be a bit difficult to find in Mexico. In particular, we filled the “cellar” with Box Wine, pleasing wines in the practical 3-litre cartons. Furthermore we purchased sausage and cheese, even if though the United States represented no paradise for us spoiled Swiss.

High above the city of Escondido we spent the last night in the US in the surprisingly beautiful Dixon Lake County Park. The summer season was definitely over, so that we could choose a beautiful site with views of the city. We enjoyed the peace and impressive sunset before the lights in the city were slowly turned on.



On December 15, two weeks before the permit for the USA expired, we were on our way to *Tecate*, one of the less busy border crossings to Mexico. Soon we left the densely populated region of the greater Los Angeles behind and crossed the surprisingly sparsely populated area along the border.

# Mexico's Baja California

## Across the Border to Mexico

When leaving the USA, we first had to find someone who was interested to collect the entry form we had carefully conserved all the time. Despite accurate instructions on the back of the form, which clearly demanded what the owner of the paper is expected to do when leaving the country, the border guards of the United States seemed to have no idea about what they should do with it. After back and forth, one of the customs officers took the entry form from us and let us pass.

Although the immigration formalities in Mexico were considered to be complicated and costly, the whole procedure was for us not only handled very friendly but also without a hitch. After a gracious reception we were informed where we had to do what. Meanwhile, our car was guarded by a security, right next to the entrance gate.

The journey through the counters worked like this: stamp passport, fill tourist card, copy documents in the nearby pharmacy, changing Mexican pesos at ATMs, back to the Customs for temporary car import, and pay the *Banjercito* 60 USD. Luckily we haven't had to cue at the customs booth, so after about an hour it was all done. As have heard from other travelers, the procedure here compared to the main crossing in Tijuana was extremely fast and easy.

On our first visit in a supermarket, we were amazed and were happy about the strikingly favorable prices and large selection. Although, primarily for fresh meat, some tolerance was needed, because in Mexico everything was cut very thinly. Even the pork chops were only just 5mm thick, but then the filet piece was included in the cut. After fruitless search in the US, here we found in a small supermarket even our standard deodorant from Nivea again and this for a song.

## Rainy Weather Accompanies Us...

After our first night in Mexico, we visited the fish market in *Ensenada* and bought fresh shrimp and fish fillets. When we prepared dinner, we discovered to our great disappointment, that the fish was obviously not fresh, because he smelled strongly of ammonia when frying, thus we had to throw it away.

# Mexico's Baja California



Due to the continuing bad weather, the search for an overnight accommodation turned out to be somewhat difficult. In one campground we already slipped on the wet and sloping meadow on the way in and could only escape thanks to 4x4. Other places had been partly flooded or transformed through the rain in muddy sludge. Finally we found a campsite with sandy ground, but spent the rest of the day in the car. Welcome to sunny Mexico!

The bad weather remained loyal for the next few days, it often rained or was very windy. That was not how we imagined the south and its warm temperature, as it had until recently still been above 30 °C. In spite of everything we wanted to see something of the Baja California, of course. Therefore, we continued our journey and left the coast towards the mountains, south of *San Felipe*. A stopover at *Coco's Corner*, a crazy pub with an even crazier owner, made for a little change. The over eighty year-old man was sitting in a wheelchair and lived all alone in seclusion in the desert.



Back on the main road we reached the *Valle de los Cirios* Nature Park. Here *Cirio* cacti flourished in large numbers, from which the nature reserve owes its name. The strange, prickly plant can grow up to 12 m tall. From a clumsy trunk, which tapers upward, grow numerous small and spiny branches. In addition, we saw countless saguaros, the mighty columnar cacti, and many other species of cactus and evergreen shrubs, which conjured up a uniquely beautiful landscape even in grey weather.

## Mexico's Baja California



When we had internet access again in *Bahia de Los Angeles*, we realized that Cel and Dani already lingered in the area. Via Whatsapp we agreed to meet the two again, four months after the first meeting in Alaska. With them we met Elvira and Ruedi, a Zurich couple who was travelling with a Land Rover. They had rented a simple, yet comfortable Airbnb accommodation for the Christmas holidays. The “break-a-ways” and we camped in their front yard with our Land Cruisers. We enjoyed a few days in the company of the Swiss travel friends before we headed back on the road. The nice weather was still scarce for the coming days, thus we did not have very much to enjoy of the northern part of Baja California, which is best known for its secluded, beautiful beaches.



## Baja California del Sur

*Guerrero Negro* was the first major town in the region of Baja California del Sur. South of it is the bay *Ojo del Liebre*. Here, up to 2000 grey whales bring their calves into the world each year. Although we knew that we were a bit early in the season, we wanted to try our luck. However, we did not get very far, because due to the heavy rains of the previous day the track to the north shore was closed.

In *San Ignacio* we started therefore a new attempt, as the *Bahia de San Ignacio* as well as was considered a temporary home for many grey

# Mexico's Baja California

whales. A brief stop in the small town we used to visit the mission church, one of the oldest on the Baja, and stocked up our supplies.



On the first 50km towards the coast, the road was paved, after that it changed into a sandy track. We had to drive through some large puddles and soft spots, but they were all passable without problems. The closer we came to the beach at the targeted camp, the more the track was under water for long stretches. As long as we stayed in the consolidated lanes, our Land Cruiser also mastered these obstacles easily. We finally reached the camp, only to find out that everything was still closed. Since we were not dependent on external sanitary facilities, we decided nevertheless to stay at this beautifully landscaped campsite. We enjoyed a quiet evening, a gorgeous sunset and watched the ospreys searching for food.



## Mulegé

To go further south, we had to return to *San Ignacio* and drive from there to *Santa Rosalia*. There we had our car washed, because the muddy tracks had left their marks. The place with its many shops invited to supplement groceries. The simple mining town offered as an attraction



# Mexico's Baja California

a steel church designed by Gustave Eiffel and a French flavoured quarter. The next significant place was *Mulegé*.

We spent a few days in a landscaped campsite full of tropical fruit trees. We walked to the nearby beach, where we could watch pelicans fishing around the local lighthouse. From high altitude the birds plunged into the water and appeared almost every time with a rich catch back to the surface.



*Mulegé* is a modest tourist destination, offering the most necessary of infrastructure. Here, as anywhere in the Baja, is a typical old mission church. In the camp we met Liesel and Gebhard, a couple from Germany, which were, just like us, travelling with a 70 series Land Cruiser. Before moving on, we had once again to fill our drinking water tank. For this we went to a *Purificador*. The mostly small companies are found everywhere in Mexico, and live from filtered tap water, bottled in containers, as safe drinking water for sale. To avoid having to work with canisters, the clerk handed us the hose out of the window so that we could fill our water tank directly. For a good 30 liters we paid just 13 pesos, or about 70 cents.



# Mexico's Baja California

## Bahia Concepcion

This elongated bay should actually have been another highlight on the Baja California. Along the coast we looked again for beautiful accommodations where we could stay a few days. Unfortunately, most of the places were in the range of a busy road at night, others were pretty occupied. At the *Playa de la Perla*, we finally found a place that appealed to us. However, since a strong north wind was blowing, we were glad that we were parked next to a shelter, avoiding to have to spend the whole afternoon in the car. Real beach feeling did not arise in any case and a dip in the sea was not a thought.



Before we left the next day, Cel and Dani appeared surprisingly. They had seen our car from the road and decided to stop by briefly. After the latest news were exchanged, we both were underway again.

## Loreto

Our next stop we made in *Loreto*, a small, nice tourist town. In the small-scale centre a pedestrian zone was around the central square. We indulged ourselves in a small brewery. *Zopilote*, is their excellent beer, named for the frequent vultures in the region. For dinner we didn't want to stop at one of the restaurants in the centre that had adapted all their offerings to American visitors. The *Almejo Conchas*, somehow off the beaten track, was well attended and we were the only non-Mexican guests. Unfortunately clams, their specialty, were sold out, but we found alternatives and enjoyed a wonderful seafood dinner. For the second night in Loreto we changed from the very centrally located, but not very attractive *El Moro* camping to the *Palmas Altas*, who offered a few pitches in a beautifully landscaped garden. Except for the crowing roosters in the neighbourhood, which woke us up early in the morning, the place was very quiet.

# Mexico's Baja California



## Across the Hinterland to the Pacific

On winding mountain roads, we drove up to *San Javier*. The small town is known for another, worth seeing mission church, which is quite secluded outside the village, and definitely worthwhile the detour. For the onward journey, we were happy to be travelling with an all-terrain vehicle, because the track crossed over again the river bed. Although the river carried hardly any water, the crossings were quite rocky and the entrances and exits often steep.



The route led through beautiful landscapes and ended in the fertile plain at *Ciudad Insurgentes*. We drove to *Puerto San Carlos*, where we wanted to once again perceive a chance to go out to see whales. We quickly found a boatman in the village who wanted to take us to the *Magdalena Bay* the next day.

When we set out to the nearby restaurant for dinner, we experienced to our complete surprise a gorgeous sunset. While the sky has been overcast all day, it had unexpectedly opened a blue opening on the western horizon, so that the sun came out for a few minutes and



# Mexico's Baja California

conjured spectacular colours of the sky. At the same time, a fine drizzle in the east produced a double rainbow, which created an incredible image.

## Finally, Whales in Sight

*Calendario*, our captain, had honestly pointed out that he could not guarantee any whale sightings because we were still early in the season. However, he promised us in any case an interesting trip. In fact, after a short ride across the bay he brought us close to a sand bank on which we have seen hundreds of pelicans up close. He also knew that on the buoys lining the shipping channel, sea lions and seals can be seen sunbathing.



On the glassy sea, and in the meantime quite sunny weather, it was a pleasure to explore the bay. In the area where the bay opens to the sea we saw at last the first whales. We drove closer and could see several times how the mighty animals appeared to breathe and disappeared into the depths with an elegant tail wiggle. Although the meetings were short-lived and from a distance, because the female whales were still travelling without their young, and thus came to the surface only briefly to get air. Still, it was an impressive and satisfying experience to watch these magnificent animals.



# Mexico's Baja California

Before the tour ended, we landed at the small settlement of *Magdalena*. This place is only accessible by sea and the few cars driving here, had been brought over from *San Carlos* balancing across two small boats. A tightly bonded community lives here remotely and apparently satisfied from fishing and the sale of lobsters which achieve good prices. On the way back to *San Carlos* our boat ran on ground, a few kilometres away from the shore, because at low tide the water was often only 20 to 30 cm deep.



## The Sea Turtles of Todos Santos

We had heard from other travellers that on a beach near *Todos Santos*, a breeding centre for sea turtles had been setup. The turtles bury their eggs in the sand and are then collected and hatched in safety and then the newly hatched turtles are released into the sea at dusk. Through these measures, the survival chances of the young animals can significantly be improved and the hope is to increase the declining population again.

We camped right on the beach next to the station and at sunset were able to watch, virtually on the doorstep, as the small animals were released. Determined they were crawling towards the surf and disappeared into the vastness of the ocean, where they will still face many more dangers along their journey without the help of man.



# Mexico's Baja California

Among other attractions in the bustling and quaint town of *Todos Santos*, is the Hotel California, which became best known by the famous song with the same name.



## Finally, Weather for the Beach

Since a few days we finally had nice weather and temperatures of 25 to 30 °C under a clear blue sky. That's how we had imagined the Baja California. Therefore, we were now specifically looking for beautiful beaches where we were able to set up camp off the beaten track. The sea was still too rough for us on the Pacific coast and too cold for swimming, but when we rounded the *Cabo San Lucas*, we finally decided to take a dip into the sea. We enjoyed a few days with perfect conditions in a small bay. Our only neighbours were Eileen and Gerry from Colorado. They had spent their holidays for more than twenty years in the *Bahia Boca las Palmas*. This time they had travelled for the first time without family and enjoyed a couple of weeks in the hot climate before they had to return to the snow and cold of Colorado. Gerry, an enthusiastic and successful fishermen ventured far out with his little boat and returned with a rich catch, so that we also got fish for a generous serving. In return Myrta was baking a typical cake honouring Epiphany and we invited our neighbours to this typical Swiss custom, yet to them totally unknown. Not only Ueli, who was allowed to wear the royal crown for the day, enjoyed the fine cake.



# Mexico's Baja California

After a few days in good company, we wanted to move on, but did not get very far. Already some 50 km to the north we found another nice place to stay. As the north wind blew stronger again, we preferred to camp not directly on the beach but spent the rest of the day sheltered in sweet idleness.

## The Hot Springs of El Chorro

With a side trip into the interior, we wanted to avoid the continued strong wind somehow. Behind *Agua Caliente*, we stayed near a hot spring, where water with about 40 °C poured from the rock wall and out of the sand beach, and is collected by the river in a crystal-clear water hole. We enjoyed a pleasant, relaxing bath in the main pool or laid down in one of the hollows in the sand in the warm water. A beautiful walk or rather a scramble led up through a canyon. Magnificent waterholes, rock formations in all colours and lush vegetation let us forget that we were in the arid landscape of *Baja California*.



We arrived in *El Chorro* on a Sunday, thus during daytime some local visitors enjoyed themselves at this wonderful place. However, the evening we spent alone with just a few camping neighbours. The silence was only now and then interrupted by the howling of the wolves that live in the adjacent *Sierra La Laguna*.

## 4x4 Adventure

In *Los Barriles*, we stocked up our groceries once again and were able to buy, among other wonderful things, thick cut, finely marbled beef steaks. As already mentioned, we found elsewhere in Mexico only very thinly sliced cuts of meat, all the more we enjoyed this offer which we obviously had to thank the influence of the many Americans, spending their winter in the area.

# Mexico's Baja California

After *Los Barriles* the paved road turned into a dirt track. We followed it until the houses became less and less and were finally completely left behind. Again, we found a remote beach which we had all to ourselves. There, in the shade of a few trees, we found above all, lots of good firewood. So we could once again bake bread in the camp oven on the fire and had also the perfect amber for our steaks. At dusk, we received a visit from a curious herd of cattle. A calf was especially curious and ventured very close to our table. But they were not the only visitors. It was probably already midnight when we heard noise outside. Ueli looked surprised when he saw two larger animals that started to work on our rubbish bag. In the dark we could not see who exactly was sneaking around our camp. However, we had discovered right next to our car two large caves and assumed that it must have been its inhabitants, possibly raccoons.

The track was getting narrower and climbed steadily, partly very steep uphill. Soon we were a good 200m above the beach and had a great view into the crystal clear turquoise water below. The road was so steep that we had to engage the low gears to assist. Then, when the track along the coast ushered away into the mountains, it followed a narrow canyon, and then climbed up to a pass. Shortly after, we crossed a group in off-road vehicles, fortunately in a position that allowed crossing. The route was popular with off-road drivers and people were amazed that we ventured into this area with our camper. Soon we reached civilization and with it a paved road, which brought us finally to *La Paz*.



A few days earlier the control for the air conditioning had failed on our Toyota. That's why we went the same day to the Toyota dealer in the city to fix the problem. As on other occasions, we were disappointed with the service of Toyota, because instead of helping us, they sent us on to an air condition specialist. There we got to know the famous improvisational talent of the Mexican mechanics. Within minutes, it was figured out what the problem was. Since original spare parts were not

# Mexico's Baja California

available on the fly, apparently it was a faulty relay, the only option was to replace it with a used one. But as the error was not corrected, the mechanic installed a very old circuit board from another Land Cruiser. Interestingly, both fitted in size, had the same connectors and it worked fine. After we paid about 60 CHF, we continued our trip in a nicely air-conditioned vehicle.

## Snorkelling with Whale Sharks and Sea Lions

We learned from our camping neighbours, an American and a Dutch family, that for the next day they had chartered a boat to explore the sea around *La Paz*. Since two seats were vacant on the boat, we were given the opportunity to join. Early in the morning we drove to *Pichilingue* where the crew of the boat was waiting for us. After we were all equipped with wetsuit and life jacket, the tour started first back to *La Paz*. Fortunately for us, the sea was smooth as glass that day. We enjoyed the ride and soon the boat was accompanied by several groups of dolphins. What a pleasure to watch the elegant animals playing up close.

After a while, our guide moved into the observation post at the bow of the boat to keep an eye out for whale sharks. It didn't take long and he directed the captain close to one of the mighty fish. Now it was time to jump into the water and follow the animal. With slow and gentle movements, the whale shark glided through the water. Despite the animal's leisurely pace, it was quite a challenge for us to keep up with it. In addition, the water was relatively cloudy, so we had to try to get as close as possible to be able to see the fish at all. It was a moving experience to accompany one of these up to 10 meter long giants in the water. Soon we had to give up this first "pursuit" and swim back to the boat. However, we had several more opportunities to approach one of these fascinating sea creatures in the water.



# Mexico's Baja California

After these strenuous activities were ready to continue the tour to the north. Cruising along the volcanic island of *Espirito Santo* we enjoyed the scenery and the beautiful rocky coast. At the northern tip of it lies the small rocky island *Lobero* which houses a large colony of sea lion. First we watched the animals from the boat as they sprawled in the sun and frolicked in groups in the water.



Then it was time again to jump into the water ourselves. On the south side of the island swam incredibly large schools of fish. Again and again, some curious animals approached up at arm's length. Our guide guided us through a slot to the other side of the island. The deep canyon was magically illuminated by rays of the sun and on the walls magnificent coral grow. Once on the other side, we met ever more frequently sea lions, which seemed to have fun playing with us. The on land rather clumsy acting animals have shown their elegant and speedy swimming skills in the water, their true element. It was a huge experience to swim in the midst of this curious and playful animals.



At the lunch break on a beach we could strengthen ourselves and recover from the adventurous activities. On the way back we put a stopover in at a colony of frigate birds. These elegant sea birds, which normally live for weeks without ever resting at sea, nesting in the mangroves on the island of *Espirito Santo* and raise their young here.

We were given another opportunity to snorkel with the sea lions. But we were all too tired, except for Pieter, who ventured out again into the water. This exciting and long day at the sea, was definitely another

# Mexico's Baja California



highlight of the trip so far and we were very grateful to the Duval family that had organized the trip and let us participate.

## La Paz

Although we were meanwhile already a few days staying in *La Paz*, we had not much seen from of town itself. We wanted to change this and therefore took the bus to the centre. During a walk on the beach promenade, which follows along the whole city centre, we got to know at the same time the touristy centre of *La Paz*. The boardwalk offered all the infrastructure appreciated by holiday makers, hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops. We also took advantage of the offering and finally found the long-sought beach mats, as well as the French bakery, Doug had recommended, where we could actually buy a fine bread and gorgeous almond pastry.



## Farewell to the Baja California

After a month on the peninsula, it was now time to organize the trip to the mainland of Mexico. From *La Paz* we had two options to choose from, a passage to *Mazatlan* or *Topolobampo*. Since we were planning to visit the region of the Copper Canyon, we chose *Topolobampo*. After the weight and dimensions of our camper had been taken we purchased the tickets directly at the port. Customs checked if we had the necessary permission for the temporary import of the vehicle and a tourist card for ourself. We booked the ferry for the coming Saturday and paid for

# Mexico's Baja California

transportation incl. a cabin and dinner on board 5000 M \$, converted about 250 CHF.

With our new friends, the two families we had been on the boat trip with, we spent a day at the *Balandra* beach. In the evening drove to the northern tip of the peninsula to the *Playa de Tecolote*, near the port, for dinner. Despite Saturday night there were only few customers around and we were lucky to find a restaurant for the meal before it closed. We were early at the port, and on board the ship.



When boarding only the driver is allowed in the vehicle, all the other passengers had to get on board as a pedestrian. The crossing was very quiet, and we spent a pleasant night in our cabin, even though the cold draft of the air condition reduced the comfort somewhat.

# Mexico's Northwest



## Mexico's Northwest

### El Fuerte

At lower temperature, but with blue sky we arrived at the port in time and were soon on the way inland. Less than ten minutes on the road, we were stopped by a police patrol. The officer accused us of speeding. However, the police could not prove our wrong doing because he could not show us a radar reading nor provide evidence and so we soon realized that he just wanted money. In addition, none of the passing motorists were obeying the actually posted speed limit of 60 km / h. We didn't want to be ripped off, stuck stubborn to Swiss German and twitched to questions basically shoulders. After a short time we heard him muttering to himself, that this will quite be complicated with us, and he finally let us go.

Shortly before *El Fuerte*, we stopped at a street restaurant to have a belated breakfast. The simple restaurant was well visited by Mexican guests, what we evaluated as a good sign. We ordered a typical specialty, a *Birria* that has nothing to do with beer, but is a spicy beef soup. For us as a breakfast a little unusual, but very tasty.

Around noon we reached *El Fuerte*, a nice, small provincial town and the western gateway to the Copper Canyon. We settled in the only campground in town at the *Hotel Bugambilias*. We planned for the next day the ride with the famous tourist train *El Chepe* up into the mountains. So we had time to explore the small centre of *El Fuerte*.



# Mexico's Northwest

Originally, the city had played a more important role than it is the case today. On a hill above the town, the fort and the connected museum provided information about the history of the place and also offered a magnificent view of the city and the *Rio Fuerte*. Around the beautifully landscaped city park *Plaza de Armas* old colonial buildings and the *Palacio Municipal*, an impressive brick building, lined.

## The Copper Canyon

After careful consideration and after we had made several inquiries, we decided not to take our car into the mountains. The west side of the region is known for a large scale drug production. We did not want to take the risk to get in the way of these people inadvertently, thus jeopardizing our security. Even though the statements were partly contradictory, we wanted to choose the safe option.

A taxi took us to the railway station about 6 km outside the city, where the train coming from *Los Mochis* arrived with just under 20 min. delay. For the second class, called *Economico*, we were able to buy the ticket on the train, for the *Primera* however, the tickets had to be procured either personally ordered online at least 72 hours in advance or at the station of *Los Mochis*. The waggons of the second class operate only three times per week in each direction, the first class on the other hand, daily. We paid 750 M \$ (35 CHF) per person for the one-way, eight-hour ride to *Creel*. Tickets for the *Primera* cost almost twice as much, yet the waggons don't offer much more comfort.

For the first two hours *El Chepe* wandered along trough the mostly arid plains of the lowlands. Along a huge dam, the landscape became more interesting and green, before the tracks finally climbed from sea level up to 2300masl.



When routing, the valleys were used to minimize the incline. However, time and again steeper terrain section had to be overcome, which was

# Mexico's Northwest

solved with bold scale loops and spiralling tunnels, just as we know it from the Gotthard route in Switzerland. The landscape became more impressive and unspoiled, with only a few villages along the way. In the small town of *Divisadero* the train stopped for 20 minutes to allow the passengers a view of the unique copper canyon. The imposing canyon system can well be compared with the Grand Canyon in the USA. The last part of the ride to *Creel* ran on the hilly plateau, broken by small valleys, always at an altitude of about 2300masl.



## TIPP:

In order to best benefit from this train ride, you should make sure to get a seat on the right side when boarding, because along the route you will have the best views of the impressive landscape on this side. On the way back, however, seating on the left side is the better choice.



## Creel and Around

*Creel* with around 10,000 inhabitants, is by far the largest town in the mountains, and meanwhile, has become the tourist centre of the region.

# Mexico's Northwest

When you reach the place by train and still want to see something of the surrounding area, it is possible to book a tour. As our chosen guide couldn't any other guests, he was ready to carry out the tour in his Cadillac SUV only with us for just a moderate price premium.

At night the temperature had dropped below zero degrees and temperatures were rising only slowly. After breakfast at the highly recommendable restaurant *Veronica*, we met Gilberto, our guide at the *Plaza de Creel*.

We had the first stop on our tour in a residential cave in which an old woman had set up with her grandchildren. Under primitive conditions, but well protected against heat and cold, the grandmother had lived in this cave for decades. On a bumpy track Gilberto drove us then to about 500 meters short of the waterfall of *Cusarare*, the remaining distance we covered on foot. We were surprised at how much water shot over the rocks in spite of the dry climate, and enjoyed the beautiful sight of the partly icy waterfall. In nearby *Cusarare* we visited the beautiful mission church. The whole area is primarily inhabited by *Raramuri Indians*. The very reserved and withdrawn people live in modest circumstances and the women try to supplement their livelihood by selling handicrafts, especially pretty basketwork and woven fabrics.



At the *Atareko Lake*, we had the opportunity to take a walk along the shore. The lake, surrounded by vast pine forests and very scenic, is open for swimming in summer. Just a few kilometres outside of *Creel* we arrived at *San Ignacio* with another mission church and drove through



## Mexico's Northwest

an area with impressive rock formations, in which frogs and mushrooms are revealed, with a little imagination.

The next day around noon we boarded again the *El Chepe* to drive back to *El Fuerte*. We moved into our seats on the promising left side of the train and enjoyed the ride once again in perfect weather conditions. At dusk we reached the plain and were treated to a magnificent sunset. After punctual arrival at the station of *El Fuerte* we headed back to our car with a taxi.

## Along the Coast to the South

Back on the coast, we drove south, direction *Mazatlan*. In a small but exclusive campsite at the beach we stopped for the night and enjoyed the warm weather and the sweet idleness. On this occasion, we met human rights leader Jorge De Paz from Guatemala and his Canadian wife. In the 1980s Jorge had already been fighting for human rights in his country and has therefore been exposed to the attention of the government. For his efforts he was sent to jail and tortured by the rulers of the time. Meanwhile, he has been living in Canada for several years, but is still fighting for peace and the rights of the people. We were very impressed with Jorge and admired his dedication and tireless commitment to the oppressed.

In *Mazatlan*, we found that all the camping facilities were relatively far outside the city. That's why we decided take a hotel room. The hotel *Lerma* is only just a 10 minutes' walk from the centre and had clean rooms, good internet and secure parking in the courtyard, and all this for 14 CHF, cheaper than any campground in the area. *Mazatlan* offered, in addition to the really pretty old town with nice restaurants, many quiet neighbourhoods with beautiful green parks to rest. A beautiful indoor market invited to stroll and enjoy. In the evening a lot was going



# Mexico's Northwest

on around the cathedral, both, locals and tourists, were delighted by live music, dance performances and fireworks.

## The Central Highlands

On the old road, we climbed up to over 2500masl. On the way we visited the small town of *Concordia*. As in all the Mexican towns, the daily life takes place around the central square. During our visit, there was a kind of bazaar in progress. Mothers with their children offered handicrafts and home cooked food. We were warmly received and were offered to try all the fine things again and again.



A few kilometres further, just off the main road, we drove to the small town of *Copala*. We had the impression that this village has hardly changed in the last 100 years. The cobblestone streets, the tile-roofed houses and the apparently unchanged structure of the buildings, conveyed a truly quiet and somewhat sleepy mood.

Slowly the road became really steep and the Land Cruiser had to work hard. The landscape became increasingly wild, we hardly saw any houses and only very small villages lined the road. The tropical vegetation of the lowlands was replaced by pine forests and the temperature dropped from 30 ° C to just under 20 ° C. In a conservation area, we found a place to stay and awoke at -5 ° C next morning. The drive through the central highlands went largely over 2000m above sea level, the temperatures were pleasant during the day but at night dropped regularly to near freezing.



# Mexico's Northwest

## The Old Colonial Cities in the Highlands

*Zacatecas* is one of the ancient cities which had been grown to prosperity by the surrounding silver mines. The houses and religious buildings are correspondingly richly decorated and still very well preserved. We strolled through the narrow streets and the pretty places, past numerous museums, art exhibitions and galleries. Myrta fell in love with one of the artworks offered and before we left the next day, we visited the gallery again to buy the picture. For space reasons, we had it removed from the frame and packed the painting well protected between two boxes.



## The Ruins of Quemada

A side trip took us to the ruins of *La Quemada*, a *Toltec* defence system that flourished in the years 600 to 900 AD. For us, it was the first pre-Columbian traces that we got to see in Mexico. The impressive complex nestles into a mountainside and overlooks the whole surrounding area. Large terraces with steep dry stone walls are connected with equally steep stairs. The most important building, originally a covered hall of 30 x 40 meters, was the largest of its kind in America of the time. The remaining vestiges of 5m high and mighty pillars and the walling, allowed guessing the former size of this structure.



The route continued through the plateau with dry semi-desert, repeatedly interrupted by cultivated fields and pastures. We refrained from using the by-pass road around the many little towns. This gave us

# Mexico's Northwest

time and again insights into the lives of the locals and we discovered one or another store where we stocked up groceries. We were ever again amazed how cheap food was, especially vegetables and fruits. Even if they often were not as flawless as the supermarket products, the taste surpassed these in any case.

## San Miguel de Allende

Right in town, we found the small but nice San Miguel RV Park. Within walking distance from the city centre, but quiet in a large courtyard, it was the ideal starting point to explore the city.

On Saturday there was a rather small market very close to our accommodation, where besides fine, fresh food, tasteful handicrafts were offered. Numerous nice restaurants offered a wide selection and invited to listen to the cheerful Mexican live music.



On Sunday, the city centre was full of life. In addition to the many visitors, the locals showed up in their best clothes and enjoyed the sun in and around the *Jardin Allende*. Balloon seller served the little ones while the adults were sipping a cocktail and watched the passing people.

At the *Parque Benito Juarez*, a plant exhibition with countless stalls took place during our visit. From tiny cactus up to almost full-grown palm trees was pretty much everything to see, among many herbs and flowers, whatever grows in Mexico.



At the campground, the Europeans, meanwhile, were in the majority. Next to us were three German vehicles, with René came an Italo / Swiss,

# Mexico's Northwest

and three campers from North America. A clear sign that SMA is one of the most popular destinations of Mexico.

## Recipe - Nopales con Papas

Did you ever want to try a dish with cactus leaves? When cooked, *Nopales* are refreshing, slightly tart, in consistency somewhat like snow peas. They can also be eaten raw in salads or pickled.

Outside of Mexico or other desert countries *Nopales* are not so easy to get, but maybe other travellers venturing to try it.

The below recipe is suitable as a side-dish for all kinds of meat, or if more generously sized as a vegetarian main course. Ideally, you buy the vegetables already cleaned from the very fine spines, because this work is time-consuming and can leave nasty marks !!

### Recipe

Here is the recipe of the market women for two people:

#### Ingredients

- 2-4 cactus leaves (Nopales)
- 2-3 Medium, firm cooking potatoes
- 1 middle-sized onion
- olive oil
- salt and pepper

#### Preparation

- Cut nopales and potatoes into bite-size pieces, coarsely chop onion.
- Fry potato cubes and onion in generous olive oil for about 5 minutes.
- Add nopales and cook for about another 10 minutes (until the potatoes are cooked)
- Season with salt and pepper.

Enjoy!!!

# Mexico's Northwest



## Guanajuato

The only suburban camping option was located above the old town on the northern slope. On adventurous steep roads we arrived at a small terrace. After we had set-up, we headed for a stroll. Through a dark, about 600 m long road tunnel we entered the heart of the city. A part of the centre is free of cars, so the sightseeing was pleasant and relaxed. *Guanajuato* was once one of the richest cities in Mexico, not least thanks to the many silver mines in the region. Even today, this wealth can be seen in the magnificent town houses, the numerous churches and the impressive theatre. In the streets of the lively university town, especially many young people frolicked.

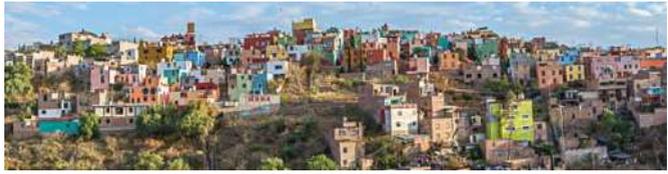


Before we made the steep way back to the camping, we enjoyed a fine sandwich with roast pork in the beautiful market hall and took the opportunity to buy fruits and vegetables.



We enjoyed the mild evening high above the city, where the peace was only disturbed by the barking of innumerable dogs in the neighbourhood.

# Mexico's Northwest



## The unknown Atotonilco el Alto

Since 25 years the Swiss Charly Schäpper operates a restaurant in *Santa Elena* and also offers a few parking spaces for campers. Among the overlanders he is meanwhile well known and, like many others, we planned a stop in there. So it was not surprising that we met other travellers on our arrival. Paul and Rosi from Germany and Christa and Kölbi from eastern Switzerland had already installed themselves there. We enjoyed a few days in this oasis and let us pamper by Charly's cuisine with Swiss specialties. Through him we met Valentin, another Swiss, who runs a medium-sized wheat mill in the city. We gladly accepted his invitation to visit the facility and learned how he got this job. Several years ago, a friend offered him a manager job to make the ailing and unprofitable mill a profitable operation again. Without knowledge of the industry nor management experience, but with a lot of dedication, he went to the task and after a year the business was running again. To date, the plant is one of the most profitable in the region and produces good quality with modern equipment. During the tour through the plant, Ueli was reminded of his former job, as he occupationally visited many such plants. Here, too, he met, not surprisingly, instruments from Endress + Hauser, since parts of the mill is equipped with machinery from Bühler in Switzerland.



For the evening, Charly had invited friends to a "tongue feast" at the restaurant. Eddie, a good friend of Charly, had sponsored a beef tongue, in Mexico a delicacy and one of the most expensive cuts of beef. We

# Mexico's Northwest

offered to take over the cooking and provided vegetables and dessert. As a side dish we planned to cook fried potatoes and nopales (cactus leaves) after we had tried this dish shortly before. Shopping in the market, we connected with the visit to a local cheese producer. He had learned his craft in France and Switzerland and produces about 25 different cheeses from goat, sheep and cow's milk. After an extensive tasting throughout the offering we filled our fridge with cheese for the next few weeks. (For those interested: [www.quesart.com](http://www.quesart.com)). Charly, meanwhile, had boiled the tongue in a fine broth. We prepared a caper sauce and, for dessert we baked Tarte Tatin, one each with apple and pear. The menu choice seemed to be well accepted, because not only was everything eaten, there was even a compliment sent to the kitchen.

## How is Tequila Made?

Based on a tip from René, we had arranged a factory tour to the *Siete Leguas Tequila Distillery* at their town office when we passed the town of *Atotonilco*. The brand name refers to the horse of the famous Mexican revolutionary leader *Pancho Villa*. Compared to many large producers in the region around the town of *Tequila*, *7 Leguas*, founded in 1952, is a rather small operation. The company has two different production sites in the city. In one the tequila is still produced as at the beginning of industrialization and only just 1200 litres are produced per day. Marta, our guide, met us at the factory gate, which we had finally found after a long search. Competently, and with much pride, she explained the process during the private tour:

### Cultivation

Throughout the region, the *Agave Azul Weber* are cultivated. Weber, a German, had found that this agave has the highest sugar content of up to 25%. Due to this high concentration only about 9 kg agave hearts are needed to produce a litre of tequila.



# Mexico's Northwest

The plants can be harvested after about 8 years. The sharp and hard leaves are cut off with razor-sharp pickaxes until only the pineapple-like heart is left in the field. The fruits normally reach a weight of 10 -30 kg, but a record size of 110 kg has been harvested.

## Cook



At the plant, the agave hearts are quartered with sharp, big pickaxes and piled in large ovens. There they are cooked for two days with steam and then cooled for another day.

## Press



In the old process, the fruit is chopped and then pressed in a mill with a heavy mill stone. The mill is operated by two mules, which slowly walk in a circle in a pit and stop from time to time, to allow the worker to throw the fibres under the mill stone again. This takes about 1 ½ hours until the whole juice has been extracted. In the more modern system, a mechanical chopping machine does this operation, followed by multiple pressing. Then, even more of the precious agave sugar is flushed from the pulp by the addition of water.

## Fermentation and Distillation



After fermenting the juice in large tanks, Tequila is distilled in archaic copper stills in small batches. As in all distillery processes the preliminary and follow-up distillate is discarded and only the central part used. Good tequila is distilled twice, which means the distillate obtained is then processed once again.

## Mexico's Northwest



Depending on the desired product, the tequila is then directly bottled or stored in barrels.

At *Tequila 7 Leguas*, tequila that is traditionally produced is mixed with the one produced the modern way, so as to achieve a balanced, delicate flavour. To experience the quality of

the product ourselves, Marta gave us each a small bottle of the noble beverage as a gift at the end of the tour.

## Lake Chapala

Just a few kilometres southwest of *Atotonilco* is the largest lake in Mexico, *Lake Chapala*. Before we reached the lake, we drove long distances through strawberry fields, where the harvest was in full swing. Near a group of harvesters, we stopped to ask, if we could buy some of the fruits directly from the field. The people agreed to fill a bag with the desired half kilo. They were happy to discuss their work and hear that their fruit would be exported even to Switzerland. Meanwhile, our shopping bag has been filled not with a half but about 3 kilos of strawberries. Our objection, that this was too much for us, they disobeyed, nor did they allow us to pay for.

On the south shore of the lake, we saw by chance a sign which indicated a pelican colony at *Petatan*. The short trip should be worth, because hundreds of the graceful birds swam on the water or circling in the air. Once some fish waste from a nearby fish shop was thrown into the water, the whole gang moved synchronously in this direction and romped around the prey.



Before we drove down to the coast again, we put in a rest day on the western shore of *Lake Chapala*. In the pretty *Roca Azul* campground we met once more travellers from Europe. With them we shared the gifted

# Mexico's Northwest

strawberries, and as still a fair bit remained, we pureed the rest and stored it in our mini freezer.

## Back to the Pacific coast

After the rather cool nights on the plateau we were looking forward to go back to the sea and to enjoy the warmer temperatures. The route led through magnificent mountain scenery, again up to 2000m above sea level, before the road finally dropped down to the coast.

As we arrived in *Sayulita*, the warm air with almost 36 °C hit us quite violently and the night temperatures remained above 20 °C. After many evenings in seclusion and without neighbours, we enjoyed the busy live in this tourist area.



In *Puerto Vallarta*, we called into a Toyota dealer to have the regular service done. However, also at this dealership, we had to provide diesel and oil filter, since diesel Land Cruiser were not imported to Mexico and no parts were therefore available.

South of *Puerto Vallarta*, we wanted to make a detour to less touristy developed coastal areas. On a narrow paved road we drove from *El Tuito* to the west, where it changed to a narrow jungle trail. When we reached the coast, we were however a little disappointed. In the targeted campsite we were expected to park on a dusty parking lot, even though we were the only guests and a beautiful spot would have been available on the beach. For this, the asking price was clearly too high, so we preferred to look for an alternative. The GPS guided us not along the coastal track, but again through the jungle back to the main road. The ride was pretty adventurous, because the narrow track was often washed out and overgrown and we were again more than pleased with the high ground clearance of the Land Cruiser. It has taken us just over 1 ½ hours to manage the 35 kilometres to the main road.

## Mexico's Northwest

After a disappointing first experience, we still found some wonderful accommodations and enjoyed the virtually deserted beaches along this coast.

# Central Mexico



## Central Mexico

### The volcano Paricutin and his legacy

After leaving the coast, the road climbed back up to well over 2000m above sea level. In the mountain town of *Mazamitla* we were even more surprised by the diverse architecture. All towns were built in about the same era and have the same origin, however, the construction of the houses, was strongly influenced by the regionally available materials. In this area, large forests dominate the landscape, thus a lot of timber was processed on balconies and pergolas.

On the way to *Anguahan*, a small town with many indigenous inhabitants, we drove through a varied landscape and had to overcome hundreds of *Topes*. These speed bumps, there were dozens in each town, were indeed annoying but it slowed the traffic really very effective. In the beautiful campsite in *Anguahan* we had a magnificent view of the volcano *Paricutin* and its solidified lava flow. After an antecedent earthquake, the volcano erupted in 1943 and ejected thereafter regularly



## Central Mexico

lava until 1952. At the end of its activity, a 400 m high cone was formed and several surrounding villages had been buried under the lava.

Next morning, before day visitors arrived, we put once again the hiking boots on and walked along the road down to the lava flow. In the middle of the black, jagged mass, the towers and ruins of the church of *San Juan Parancaricutiro* still protrude. The nave had collapsed and was carried away by the lava, the altar and one of the bell towers, however, remained. In view of these images of destruction, it was hard to imagine that not a single person was killed and not even hurt in the outbreaks.

## Valle de Bravo

We had spent another night on 2800masl and once again turned on the heater in the morning making getting up a little more comfortable. As Ueli was feeling that he is going to get a bad cold, we decided to return to a lower and therefore warmer area. In central Mexico a quite difficult thing. The only option in the vicinity was to *Valle de Bravo* at 1800m. The little town is located on a beautiful lake, which reminded us of scenic Switzerland, and it turned out to be a pleasant place to schedule a rest day once again. On the north shore, we certainly found a well-equipped campsite, well-guarded by four, at first frightening, in retrospect, friendly dogs, that passed our camp spot ever again in order to claim some cuddles. For just 75 cents we stopped a taxi to bring us to the town centre. *Valle de Bravo* is another town listed as *Pueblo Magico*, thus one of the most scenic places in Mexico. Here too, buildings with wooden structures formed the majority, not surprising in view of the surrounding pine forests. We visited the town on Valentine's Day, therefore flowers and giant stuffed animals were on sale everywhere. We walked through the lively city centre down to the lake and enjoyed at the *Plaza de la Independencia* an aperitif. During the subsequent search for a restaurant for dinner we had a bit of a struggle. It should have been an attractive and authentic Mexican eatery. Finally, we contented



## Central Mexico

ourselves with a simple, yet very tasty meal in a cafe. However, as soon as we had eaten, we passed countless restaurants.

### The Monarch Butterflies

We had learned that only a short hour's drive outside of *Valle de Bravo*, a lesser known site could be visited, where the famous Monarch butterflies could be seen.

Each year, the insects fly from Canada and the north-eastern United States thousands of kilometres to this region to spend the winter and reproduce before they start back to the north in the spring. The area, located west of Mexico City, has several places where the butterflies can be visited between November and April. The colonies are all in pine forests in over 3000m, apparently the ideal environment for the animals.

We drove up to the *Santuario Piedra Herrada Mariposa*. The admission fee of CHF 3 for the nature reserve actually already included the mandatory guide. However, the prerequisite was that a group of 10 visitors had to come together until it started. Since early in the morning only a few people were there, we took advantage of paying an extra CHF 7.50 to hire a private guide. Beside of an immediate start, the main advantage was, that we didn't have to look for anyone else and had the full attention of the guide. For an hour the trail went steeply uphill through beautiful pine forest, passing many flowers and flowering shrubs. Walking in this altitude caused some serious breathing and sweat, the more pleased we were when we got to see the first butterflies in about 3300m. In big clusters the butterflies hung on the trees, barely recognizable as such, because it was still cold and the Monarch butterflies didn't move. However, once the first rays of sun fell on the stiff bodies, movement came to the colony. More and more they flipped their wings and took the first test flights. This was not always successful and many landed soon back on the ground, where they remained until the body had warmed up. With permission of the guide, we were allowed to carefully pick-up individual animals to warm them up in the hands, and soon they fluttered off. We spent about an hour in the colony and the thousands of butterflies that eventually filled the air, left us

# Central Mexico

enchanted. Deeply touched by the incredible impressions of this unique experience, we started our way back to the car.



## The ruins of Tula

The well-known ruins of *Tula* are remains of the *Toltec* culture. Established approximately in the years 800-850 AD, the huge city was destroyed just about 300 years later and disappeared from the scene. Originally, the town consisted of 16 km<sup>2</sup> and tens of thousands of residents were located in the area. Only a few structures have been excavated and restored. The best known and most impressive element was a pyramid called *Tlahuizcalpantecuhctli* on which unique columns can be seen, so-called "atlases". The approximately 5 m high columns, which originally served as support for a roof, were partly round, partly shaped square and all decorated with beautiful reliefs. Also, two different sized ball courts have been restored, a reference to the great popularity of the sport among the *Toltec's*. According to the history, the games were quite bloody events, because the loser lost not only the game but also his life.

Within the field of ruins beautiful cactus and agave gardens have been created in recent years. Some of the cacti were already flowering, which we interpreted as the first sign of spring.



## Central Mexico

### The Hot Springs of Tolantongo

Our next destination were the hot springs of *Tolantongo*. These are about a hundred kilometres north of Mexico City, located in a massive, up to 1000m deep canyon. Beside accommodation in some hotels or *Cabañas*, the place offered a beautiful campsite right next to the river. We had planned our visit to avoid the weekend, aware that many city dwellers spend their weekends here. So we enjoyed the magical place in peace and without crowds. The river originated in a large cave where huge amounts of hot, mineral-rich water shot strong from vertical, natural wells into a large pool before it spilled over several steps to the valley floor. Held back in dozens of pools, the bright turquoise waters invited for a swim. While the water in the upper area was about 40 °C, it cooled on its way down to a still comfortable 32 °C. The relaxation in the warm river and the beautiful surroundings made the stay in the *Grutas de Tolantongo* a unique experience.



### On the way to the capital, Mexico City

Our research showed that south-east of *Tolantongo*, on the way to the capital, some interesting things awaited to be discovered. In order to avoid a major detour, we wanted to cross the *Barranca Metzitlan* on a narrow gravel road. However, at the very beginning of the route, we missed a turn-off and ended, after a few kilometres of bumpy tracks, in the garden of a farmer. After he told us where we had taken the wrong turn, we found the right way without any more problems at the second attempt. The track was indeed drawn to our road atlas, but not marked in the OpenStreetMap, which led to some confusions. Once we landed on the correct route, we could hardly get lost. It led up to a pass and on the other side dropped about 1,000 meters down to the small village of *San Pablo*. The river that flows through the valley caused the valley to be

## Central Mexico

overgrown with large, tropical trees and each little and flat area was used for agriculture. Just as we arrived at the valley floor, the gravel road rose again to a plateau. After 50 km we came to a paved road, which followed another fertile valley and led through fields with vegetable and fruit plantations.

Near *Huasco de Ocampo* we visited a geologically interesting formation, called *Prismas Basálticos*. It is a small, steep canyon which is lined with basalt columns of hexagonal cross section. These columns were formed, after a slow flowing lava flow stopped, cooled slowly and solidified. When the lava cooled down, it shrank, thus creating a lot of tension, until the mass broke up in the typical columns. As the tensions had built up uniform, this symmetrical hexagonal pattern emerged.



Before we made our way down into the vast valley of Mexico City, a trip took us through the *El Chico National Park* to *Mineral del Chico*, again over 3000masl. The small town of *Mineral del Chico* became rich through the surrounding silver mines and is now a popular, beautifully restored and well-preserved tourist destination. The landscape with its rock formations and pine forests, pull, especially in the summer, many visitors from the hot valleys around Mexico City. Many different types of bromeliads, known to us as pot plants, are growing on the firs and pines, and this time of year, its flowers put pleasant colour accents in the evergreen landscape.



# Central Mexico

## The ruins of Teotihuacan

Just a few kilometres from our overnighting place, are the mighty ruins of *Teotihuacan*. About 200 BC, the construction of the still visible main structures began. In the first centuries AD, the culture reached its peak. It is estimated that at that time 150 to 250 thousand people lived in the area, thus more residents than in Rome at that time. In the 7th century the culture largely disappeared, and the reasons are still not really clear.



In the ruins we walked along the 2 km long *Calzada de los Muertos*, past countless, smaller pyramids and arrived at the north end at the great Pyramid of the Moon. The largest structure, the sun pyramid was, with its 75 m height, the largest building of its time in North America. We climbed the 248 steep steps, and were rewarded with a magnificent view over the entire complex. In the adjoining museum we admired the many remaining artifacts, especially delicate potteries and smaller figures. The



# Central Mexico

most significant artifacts were brought to the large Anthropology Museum in Mexico City.

## Into one of the World's Largest Cities

We left our vehicle at the campground in *Teotihuacan* and took bus and metro to the centre of Mexico City. After about 45 minutes we reached the bus terminal bus *Norte*, which reminded us of an airport, where countless bus routes converged. With the outgoing metro line from here, we arrived after two changes to the *Zocalo*, the main square of Mexico City. A 2-minute walk away, we dropped our backpack at the Hotel Roble, a simple but very centrally located city hotel.

A first excursion around the historic centre, we started at the *Zocalo* with the cathedral, the largest church in the Americas. The construction of the huge building started in 1573, however, it was not completed until 1813. The long construction period through various eras is well visible by the different architectural styles. The attached, smaller church *Sagraria* stands quite slanting, due to strong subsidence of the foundation. The cathedral too, already had to be erected and stabilized at great expense. The reason for the unstable surfaces is a lake, which existed at this point before the arrival of the Spaniards. After the draining of the lake, the muddy ground was left behind and it turned out over the years, that this foundation was creating huge problems for the large city.



In the *Palacio Nacional* we admired the beautiful murals of *Diego Rivera*. With the powerful and colourful murals he documented the history of Mexico. The whole neighbourhood in the northeast of the *Zocalo* was filled with hundreds of small shops, selling oodles of things. Many of the stores had a similar offering, hairpins, decorative objects, fabric, mercerie items, toys, shoes, clothes and everything else you can imagine. We really wondered, how the owner even knew what they had on offer, since the shops were packed with goods from the floor to the ceiling.

## Central Mexico



The *Templo Mayor* is the last visible vestige of the ancient Aztec capital *Tenochtitlan*. We limited ourselves to a visit from the outside, because in any case, of the buildings was not much to see and the quality archaeological artefacts were taken to the Museum of Anthropology.

Our walk took us on to the *Alameda Park*. Directly in front, we admired the *Palacio de Bellas Artes*, an impressive building, designed by an Italian architect. By bus we went to the *Plaza Garibaldi*, the centre of the *Mariachi*, the famous Mexican street bands. Except a few musicians, who've been on the road, at this time of day not much was going on.



For dinner we tried one of the many restaurants in the vicinity of the hotel. Despite its central location in the city the prices were consistently very low, also beside ourselves hardly any other foreigners were seen. The only major tourist gatherings we met on the real hot spots such as the cathedral or the Anthropology Museum.

On the way to the famous and large museum, we visited the *Mercado Merced*, because we love markets. We were somewhat disappointed because instead of the largest food market in the city we found again hundreds of small stalls, all selling the same "junk". After some wandering around, we found a few fruit and vegetable stalls, but no more than in any small town market.

## Central Mexico

By metro we went out to *Chapultepec*. Through the *Bosque Chapultepec* we finally arrived to the Anthropology Museum. Not far from the entrance, we were treated to a presentation of the *Voladores de Papantla*. The custom of "flying men" comes from the *Veracruz* region, but is now also displayed in other areas. Since we already knew that we would not come past *Papantla*, we took the opportunity to see this spectacle here. From a high steel pole, originally a tall tree trunk, four men were flying through the air in their colourful costumes attached by their feet to ropes. The ropes were wound around the mast and then as the ropes unwound again, the men finally landed on solid ground.



The Anthropological Museum of Mexico City, is both architecturally and from the exhibition, probably one of the most impressive museums in the world. In different rooms, the pre-Columbian cultures were presented and explained. Many of the most beautiful archaeological objects of all famous ruins of Mexico are exhibited in this museum. Another section of the exhibition is devoted to the different regions, and shows how these were developed after the arrival of the Spaniards and how they show up today. Both crafts and customs and the traditional way of life of the individual ethnic groups were represented impressively.



We had discovered an interesting restaurant the night before, but then found out that the menus offered were largely sold out at half past five. As we were earlier today, we wanted to try our luck again. The *La Corte* restaurant offers each weekday different menus of the day, the 4 course menu cost no more than 145 M \$, about 7 CHF. You could choose from

## Central Mexico

two starters and 10 main courses and a number of different desserts. The most interesting was, that they offered dishes, although very Mexican, that are hardly offered in other restaurants. Myrta ordered cold served peppers stuffed with tuna and vegetables, and Ueli, a little more adventurous, had a unknown dish served, which was explained by the waiter with a grin to be "es un parte del toro" (it is part of the bull). As expected due to this explanation, the meat on the plate were "bulls balls".

After this excellent meal and a short rest in the room we wanted to end the day at the nearby *Calle Regina*. This road lured with a variety of cosy restaurants and bars. In the pedestrian zone, the tables were on the road, thus providing an ideal opportunity to for people-watching.

We are both not city people and had therefore enough of the big city after three days. Although Mexico City would have much more to offer, we were pretty tired after the hectic pace and the many impressions of the last days. Despite all, we were very pleasantly surprised, because we expected a smelly, traffic chocked megacity, where the blue sky disappears behind a cloud of smog. Additionally many people warned us in advance of the danger of being robbed or mugged. But in fact, we never felt threatened, not least perhaps thanks to the large police presence everywhere. There are certainly areas in this city, better to avoid, in particular at night, but the tourist attraction areas are hardly any more dangerous than in Basel, at home.

# Mexico's Southwest



## Mexico's Southwest

### Cholula and Puebla

From *Teotihuacan* we drove on a direct route to *Cholula*. Myrta had picked up an upset stomach, so we decided to have a rest day there. Therefore we were not very motivated to a lot of things.

In continuing the trip we passed the pyramid of *Chula*. On top of it, the Spaniards had built a church after the conquest of the area, a behaviour that they generally liked applying to demonstrate that the Christian religion was stronger than that of the natives.

In the middle of the city of *Puebla*, we visited the geyser *Cuexcomate*. This was touted as volcano but, as a matter of fact, was a geyser that had arisen after an eruption of the nearby volcano *Popocatepetl* about 1000 years ago. Meanwhile, its activity is limited to a small waterfall 20m below the surface.



## Jardin Botanico Helio Brava Hollis

On the toll road we left the city and soon were slowed down by a mega traffic jam. We crept for over an hour at walking pace, until the situation normalized. After that *Tehuacan* was reached and our grocery shopping was done, we drove about half an hour on to the *Jardin Botanico Helio Brava Hollis*.

## Mexico's Southwest

In the middle of the arid mountain landscape a large area was designated as a nature reserve. The vegetation was dominated by 53 species of cactus that grew here together with bushes and small trees and many species of birds crowded the area. As announced by other travellers, we found a beautiful camp site in the middle of the park. Surrounded by beautiful cacti and carefully designed park like garden we camped for just 100 M \$ (5 CHF). In the warm weather we walked along narrow trails through the countryside and admired the variety of plant life. After several nights on city campgrounds we enjoyed the solitude, the silence and the clear starry sky in this oasis.



## Around Oaxaca

Through an impressive mountain scenery with deep canyons we closed in on the city of *Oaxaca*. Outside the city, we settled in at the Overlander Oasis. This campsite has a very good reputation and the four sites are usually fully booked by world travellers, which is why we had made a reservation as a precaution. Calvin and Leanne, the owners, were previously travelling with a converted bus and got stuck in the area several years ago. Calvin, a passionate and highly talented hobbyists is always happy when he can help his guests. Despite recently executed repair, again we had a leaking oil seal on the rear axle and therefore used Calvin's experience to fix the problem. When we asked him for a carpenter who could build a box for Myrta's legroom, Calvin also offered to produce one for us. Thus Ueli and Calvin spent a day under and in the car until everything was settled.

## Mexico's Southwest

Another very positive experience with the generosity and helpfulness of the Mexicans we experienced when we wanted to repair the haunting air conditioning. At *Climser*, the people cared spontaneously and without delay to address the problem. Professionally and quickly the error was found and they re-soldered the cable of a temperature sensor for control. The boss refused any payment for the work with a smile. He gave us a bottle of mescal, a typical agave liquor from the region, and two cups with the company logo instead.



The Overlander Oasis is located in the town of *Santa Maria de Tule*, short *El Tule*. This small town is famous for having the thickest tree in the world standing on their territory. We didn't want to miss this giant with a trunk diameter of more than 12m. The spreading crown of the more than 2,000 years old tree covers a large part of the park in front of the church. The really impressive *Arbol de Tule* was added our hit parade of super trees, after we had already seen in California the highest (coastal redwood), the largest (Sequoia) and the oldest (Bristlecone pine) trees.



Above the large city of *Oaxaca* are the ruins of *Monte Alban*. This complex was built in the ancient *Zapotec* culture in the period of 300-700 AD as one of the most important centres of pre-Hispanic times. On the huge terrace numerous pyramids are arranged, each equipped with a spacious temple complex. During our visit we met, as often before, several school classes who received here their history lessons on the object.

Back at the camp we spent the evening with our neighbours Doro and Felix, two Germans who travelled the Panamericana from south to

# Mexico's Southwest



north. We each shared our experiences and lots of good advice and enjoyed the pleasant company of like-minded people.

On Saturday we had to vacate our place in the Overlander Oasis to new guests. Since we were still planning to visit the historic centre of *Oaxaca*, we moved for the next night to the nearby "normal" campground. After a bus ride of 20 km we reached the town centre. The *Zocalo*, the social centre of every Mexican city, was busy on Saturday. Countless people crowded the square, musicians played, balloon sellers attracted the children - a perfect place to watch the city life. In a very well visited restaurant we drank a beer and enjoyed a snack.



Walking through the busy market halls, we had the opportunity to get to know the local specialties. Among other things, Mescal, an agave liquor like tequila, dried locusts or the famous cheese from Oaxaca were offered.

# Mexico's Southwest



## On the Way to Hierve el Agua

Our next planned milestone was the *Hierve el Agua*, the "boiling water", about 60km from *Oaxaca*. On the way we visited the market in *Tlacolula*. This takes place every Sunday and serves mainly the population from the surrounding villages who offer their goods or stock up on everyday goods. Few tourists lost their way into this place and the market was very authentic and the offer was aligned on the daily needs of local people.



Also on our route, were the ruins of *Mitla*, a rather small site, but it came up with some interesting architectural quirks. Nowhere else are the facades decorated with reliefs like here. Although, besides some accessible grave chambers, the pyramids were empty, we were given an interesting insight into the diverse construction of the ancient Mexican people.

The journey continued via a narrow mountain track up to a pass where we could take a first look at *Hierve el Agua*. It was a busy Sunday at this beautiful place. We settled in the far corner of the camp, next to the ledge, above the pool.

## Mexico's Southwest

The weather was quite cool and windy, so we had withdrawn into the car. After a while we noticed a man who inspected our vehicle with interest. We got into conversation with him and it turned out that he was from *Tierra del Fuego* and visiting friends in *Oaxaca*. When we told him that we wanted to visit Patagonia on our trip, he invited us spontaneously to visit him when we will be travelling through his area. We accepted the offer gladly, even though we had no idea if and when we will reach this southern region.



The next morning, before other visitors showed up, we explored the sights of this special place. Below our overnight place the water from the rocks bubbled into a pool, hence the name "boiling water", and spilled over the edge into the abyss. The high mineral content has formed over the millennia white deposits that looked like a petrified waterfall. During the subsequent breakfast we again enjoyed the magnificent view of *Hierve el Agua*, thereafter we packed our stuff up again.



## Involuntary Trip to the Pacific

Our plan was actually, to drive directly to *San Cristobal de las Casas*, with one or two nights in between - but it turned out a bit different. Shortly after *Mitla* we got stuck in a long cue. Nothing was moving anymore. When we asked about the cause of the congestion, we were informed that it was a road blockade. In southern Mexico, this is a popular way to demonstrate for or against something and to draw attention to the

## Mexico's Southwest

problem. How long such a blockade lasts, no one knows in advance, they may be terminated after a few hours, but maybe only after days. Some cars were trying to evade the blockade on dirt roads, but had to turn back because even there the passage was denied. So we had two options, either wait indefinitely or to drive around the place in a wide detour. Although the bypassing variant meant we had to drive down to and along the coast to get back on our planned route, we chose this option.

Through dry semi-desert we went first towards the mountains. Here too, we were slowed down again by a lot of the unpopular, annoying *Topes*, thus our average speed was, despite well-developed road, only just under 35 km/h. Once more we drove through impressive landscapes. However, Ueli got little opportunity to enjoy this, because the narrow, winding mountain road for over 100 km and an altitude of 2800m took all his attention. What would have been a dream ride on a motorbike, meant hard work by car. The trip down to the coast led through increasingly green and tropical vegetation. At the same time the temperature rose again to over 30 °C - luckily our air conditioning worked perfectly again.

In *San Agustin*, a small village with a beautiful beach, we found a nice place to stay at one of the many restaurants. The large number of tourist facilities let us imagine that in high season and on weekends a lot must be going on here. That evening, however, we were almost the only guests and had the whole attention of the staff when we treated ourselves to a cold beer followed by a delicious dinner on the beach.



Other visitors gave us the hint that not far from the beach a small coral reef invited for snorkelling. Before we moved on the next morning, we went therefore, fitted with fins and mask, into the water. In fact, we found the reef barely 10m from the shore. Although the abundance of fish was not quite like those seen in the waters in Hawaii, yet we enjoyed the refreshing swim in the clear and calm water.

# Mexico's Southwest



## Stopover at the Waterfall El Aguacero

To get speedy forward, we chose once again the *Cuota*, the toll road, across the isthmus. This narrowest part of Mexico's measures only 200 km width and the highest elevation is only 250m. To take advantage of the ever-present wind in this area, hundreds of wind turbines have been installed. On paper, there are actually ideas to build another canal between the Atlantic and Pacific at this narrow point.

In *San Pedro Tanapetec* we turned again into the mountains. We arrived on the climbing road, for once making good progress, and reached our destination, the natural park *El Aguacero*, in the early afternoon. At temperatures above 30 °C, it was definitely too hot to tackle the 700 steps down to the canyon floor. It was evening before we ventured to the descent, down the long staircase. Once at the bottom, we followed the river upstream and soon stood below the waterfall, which poured from multiple sources over a rock wall. The constant moisture created, in the otherwise arid landscape, a dense vegetation and the rocks were covered with green moss. In the sandy river bed, with ankle-deep water we waded back, and tackled the many steps back to the rim.



# Mexico's Southwest

## In Sumidero Canyon National Park

We arrived at the park in mid-morning and so had plenty of time to organize the boat ride in the *Sumidero Canyon*. In order to benefit from favourable unit prices, we wanted to wait for a boat to get full. We had chosen an operator with relatively small boats, yet it took almost an hour to get enough people together. The ride was over 32 km through the gigantic canyon, whose walls extent at least 1000 m at its highest point, until we finally reached the dam. Along the way the skipper stopped repeatedly to alert us to the sights or on animals. Near the shore crocodiles lay in the sun and could be observed at close range. Countless birds, mainly various species of herons and cormorants, pointed to the abundance of fish in the river. A group of spider monkeys jumped happily in the treetops and provided further photo opportunities. After two interesting and exciting hours we were back at the starting point.



## San Cristobal de las Casas

*San Cristobal de las Casas* in about 2100masl has significantly cooler temperatures than in the lowlands. This took us to "FIGUGEGL" mood. Swiss reader, at least the older generations should know what it means. For any others, here the explanation: "*Fondue isch guet ond get e gueti Lune*" and for all non-Swiss: "Fondue is good and makes a good mood", an old advertising slogan of Swiss cheese producers. That is, we enjoyed the evening with a wonderful cheese fondue from our supplies.

# Mexico's Southwest

Our campsite was only about 15 minutes from the city centre. *San Cristobal* is one of the tourist centres in the state of *Chiapas*, and also the political focus of the *Zapatistas*, an indigenous group that rebels for years against the government of Mexico. In the past it has therefore erupted in some bloody clashes. For us as visitors none of these problems were obvious.

The old town of *San Cristobal* is very well preserved. In many of the old buildings hotels of all classes, souvenir shops with very beautiful handicrafts, cosy restaurants and bars and numerous offices of tour operators are housed. Because most visitors come without personal transport to *San Cristobal*, many take advantage of the deals on trips to nearby or more distant destinations. Among the many tourists especially a large number of so-called pseudo hippies fell on us, especially young women. Many of these low-budget traveller tried to increase their travel money with the sale of self-made jewellery.

We enjoyed our stroll through the lively old town and treated ourselves after a long time, once again, with an Aperol Spritz in one of the bars.



## Lagos de Colon

*San Cristobal* we drove through the mountains toward Guatemala. A look at the iOverlander app had shown us a nice place to stay just before the border. 10 km off the main route we came to the *Lagos de Colon*, a series of small, turquoise blue lakes. Meanwhile we were at only



## Mexico's Southwest

600masl, the temperatures were high and we enjoyed a swim in the crystal clear water. In addition to some Mexican visitors who wanted to spend their weekend in this beautiful place, we were once again the only foreigners. That the lakes are a popular Sunday destination for the locals showed the next morning. On the way back to the main road, lots of cars were travelling towards the lakes.

# Guatemala



## Guatemala

### Across the Border at La Mesilla

When we arrived at the border with Guatemala, we realized that we had already driven past the Mexican border station, where we had to stamp our passports. That meant, to drive 4 km back and pick up the stamp. Also our tourist card was drafted, even though we explained that we would soon be back in Mexico. Therefore we will have to obtain a new card and pay the fee again upon re-entry.

By immigration officials we were then sent to the Customs to do the administration for the car. After about half an hour later, when two more people were cleared, we learned that no formalities were necessary for us because our car was registered as a camper when we entered Mexico, granting 10 years validity. Visitors with normal cars receive usually permission for only 180 days for vehicle and people. In addition, in this case a deposit of a few hundred dollars had to be deposited, which is refunded after departure.

Back on the border with Guatemala our car was once more disinfected. To do this, the tires were splashed a little bit with a chemical for which we paid 40 quetzal (about 6 CHF). To get local currency, one of the many street vendors offered to change money. The rate directly at the border crossing was 6 instead of 7 QTL, as usual far from good, that's why we only changed as much as necessary.

The entry formalities and stamping the passports were done quickly. The temporary import permit (TIP) for the car was issued just as fast and efficiently, and cost 160 QTL. After half an hour the whole formalities were completed. At a bank nearby, we changed additional *Quetzales*, this time at a better rate, so we were ready for our stay in Guatemala.

# Guatemala

## Lake Atitlan

Actually we had planned to visit the village *Todos Santos Cuchumaton* in the mountains. Because of a construction site near *Camoja* the road, however, was blocked for an indefinite period. After about half an hour waiting in the heat, we decided to change our plans and go directly to the *Lago Atitlan*.

The road followed first a valley and then rose steadily. A fairly dry landscape accompanied us and we drove often through small villages. This had with Mexico one thing in common: the hated *Topes*, but these were almost lovingly referred to as *Tumoles*. At the height of nearly 3000masl suddenly we were in thick fog, we had reached the low-lying cloud base. The view was pretty bad and it rained partially violently.

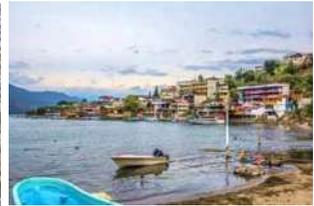
On steep roads we came finally to *Panajachel* on the *Lago Atitlan*. This was on an ideal altitude of 1500masl, making the nights not too cold and the days were pleasantly warm. We picked a campground for a night near the town. Since it was raining again, we spent most of the evening in the car. The next morning awaited us with pleasant weather and we took the opportunity to take a walk in *Panajachel*. The place was quite touristy and there we noticed that, just as in *San Cristobal*, especially many backpackers were around. Restaurants, hotels and souvenir shops dominate the townscape in the centre.



We packed our stuff and headed back up to *Solola*. Instead of the main road we chose a "shortcut" for the onward journey. A narrow, steep and winding road led us through small villages, almost exclusively inhabited by Indians, past small terraced fields on which vegetables and corn was grown under arduous conditions.

# Guatemala

The road down to *San Marcos la Laguna* was a real challenge for the brakes. In countless bends, the extremely steep road dropped down over 1000 meters. To avoid having to constantly be on the brake, it was sometimes necessary, to drive in first gear. Despite the challenging road we reached the campsite *Pasaj Cap* without problems. This little paradise has been built up over years by Pierre, a Frenchman. The place was right on the lake, offering a magnificent view of the surrounding volcanoes. The beautifully landscaped pitches and excellent sanitary facilities were just right to relax a few days and enjoy landscape and environment.



Directly below our camp we were able to hail one of the passing taxi boats to take trips to the places around the lake. The area around *Lago Atitlan* is very popular to take Spanish lessons, thus many schools and accommodations for the visitors can be found in the villages. *San Pedro*, a nice tourist resort, was reached by boat in just 15 minutes and was also transfer point for the more distant *Santiago*. The days in *Pasaj Cap* flew by, not least because the place has become a focal point for many travellers, thus we had the opportunity to exchange ideas with others and enjoy the good company.



# Guatemala

## The Market of Chichicastenango

Every Thursday and Sunday there is a big market in *Chichi*. This is primarily aimed at the approximately 20,000 Indians who live in the area. On the market day, they come to the town to buy their needs on one hand and on the other hand offer their own goods.

On Saturday, we drove in two hours from the lake up to *Chichicastenango*. The ride up the steep route to the mountains was much more relaxed than driving downhill a few days before, even though our Land Cruiser had to work hard in second or even in first gear. In the middle of town and just 200m from the market place, we parked on a guarded and closed parking to stay. The manager couple Fernando and Lety welcomed us warmly and made sure that we and the other visitors in their parking lot were not missing anything. Even though our Spanish was still not perfect, we talked with them about God and the world and learned a lot about Guatemala and how they had experienced the difficult past of the country.



# Guatemala

During a brief tour of the nearby Old Town, we were able to observe the preparations for the next market day. However, in the city next to it was still little business ongoing and we were the only guests at dinner in the restaurant. Meanwhile, our friends from Brazil that we met on *Lago Atitlan*, had also arrived at the place for the night. They, too, wanted to visit the market the next day. After dark it was chilly, not least because of the unpleasant wind that blew incessantly, even if Fernando explained that this was very unusual for the season.

In the morning we two were invited by Lety and Fernando for breakfast. A service that they offer only special guests as they stressed. We enjoyed the tortillas with Frijoles, boiled beans, and a fine local coffee, grown by personal friends of the two. They left us even the rest of the already roasted and ground coffee. In return, we gave them Swiss chocolate from our stock.

Then it was time to throw ourselves into the fray of the market. The entire city centre had been transformed overnight into a huge sales area. In every street, market stalls were set up, where everything what people need for daily life was for sale. In addition there were countless food stalls and tables with beautiful handicrafts for the visiting tourists. The market was something of the most colourful we had ever seen, because in Guatemala, the Indian women still wear their colourful traditional costumes made from homemade fabrics, and each village has its own colours and pattern. Not only older women dress traditionally, the girls from small to tall, proudly wear the traditional clothes too. The market



# Guatemala

stalls were mostly run by women, there was a lively and cheerful operation, the people bargained and chatted.

Around noon, we said goodbye to our hosts Fernando and Lety and drove in a short leg to Antigua, the old capital of Guatemala.

## Antigua

Since there was no official campground in Antigua, the *Policia de Turismo*, the tourist police, had opened their park like area within the city for travellers to camp. The place had indeed, except for water spigots, no infrastructure, but was free and lay under shady trees. A prerequisite for the use that the camper equipped with a toilet. The location was ideal to explore the city centre on foot.

*Antigua* has been repeatedly plagued by severe earthquakes in the past, which is why many of the old churches are only preserved as ruins. The houses were built almost entirely single-storey and are therefore less likely to be destroyed. The large central square is lined with old, beautifully preserved colonial buildings and some government offices.



# Guatemala

Famous is also the archway in the middle of the city, through which the nearby *Volcan de Agua* can be admired.

In the evening, our Brazilian friends had organized a Pizza night. Together with them and Monica and Mariano from Argentina, we baked one pizza after another until all were satisfied. Our Coleman oven was on a large-scale operation, together with the Argentine oven of Mariano. We enjoyed a wonderfully uncomplicated evening with the people from South America.

We stayed an extra day because not far from the camp we found a garage, which has been recommended by other travellers, to change the brake pads. Thanks to the fact that our Landcruiser in Guatemala was for once not an exotic one, we purchased the pads with no problem in a near-parts store. Finally, the whole action cost us about 100 CHF, which would not have passed in Switzerland for the parts alone.

## On the road in Northern Guatemala

A few kilometres from Antigua we inserted a stop at the *Cabaña Suiza*. Over 80 years ago, a Swiss with his Guatemalan wife had settled here and set up a chicken farm. Gradually, the business was expanded with a café and accommodation. Today the third generation of the founder is operating the business, each of the five grandchildren serves an area of the business. In the beautifully landscaped grounds, there are also a few places to camp. The restaurant was still run as a cafe and offered next to a couple of Swiss specialties mainly a wide selection of desserts. Our Brazilian friends arrived a bit later, so we celebrated the 47th birthday of Marcos in the evening.

On the way, passing Guatemala City, we took the opportunity to stock up groceries at Walmart. Only in these big supermarkets we could from time to time buy certain "European" food, such as sausages and buy imported cheese, which gladly supplemented our breakfast.

# Guatemala

According to the map, the road to *Coban* was highlighted as the main connecting axis. In reality, however, within any agglomeration a *Topo* was installed every few hundred meters, so we hardly moved forward. Outside the populated areas, the road turned into a narrow and steep mountain road, which turned out to be a bumpy gravel road at the end. The road led high over the green valleys through the mountains and provided a spectacular scenery. The people in the few small villages live here exclusively on agriculture.



Before *Coban* the road rose even higher, and soon we drove in heavy fog and lush vegetation, typical for the cloud forest. With noticeably cooler temperatures we stayed in *Coban* in a small but beautiful National Park, practically in the middle of the city. Before we left in the morning, we explored the dense jungle on a short hike. Mighty giant trees and dense palm groves dominate the landscape. The large number of birds which populated the area, we could indeed hear in the trees, but in dense vegetation only few were seen.

## Semuc Champey

On a paved yet potholed road, our trip from *Coban* continued eastward. After *Lanquin* it was replaced by a dirt road that led deep into the valley. For the subsequent route to *Semuc Champey* we were pleased once again to be on the road in a 4x4. The track was quite good, but so steep in parts that we had to engage low gears, both uphill and down. Over an adventurous suspension bridge we came to the south side of the river where we set up our home at the *Rana Camping*. On foot we finally reached *Semuc Champey*, the real attraction of this area. The rapid river roared through a narrow, densely forested ravine and disappears for a few hundred meters underground. However, some of the water

# Guatemala

remained on the surface and formed, due to the high mineral content, wonderful swimming pools with crystal clear water, in all possible shades of blue. Once we stretched out their feet into the water, small, not timid little fish started to tug at our body hair. Initially, a rather unusual feeling, but we enjoyed the refreshing dip in this unique landscape. The young family, which operated the small campsite, grows on its site all kinds of fruits, including cocoa, mangoes or pineapple. We also shared the place with chickens, turkeys and pigs and a tame bunch of dogs, got their cuddles occasionally, and hoped for an extra bite. A heavenly place surrounded by nature and with happy and friendly people.



## To The Far North of Guatemala

Back in *Lanquin* we continued our journey on a track that was assessed as one of the very bad roads by other travellers. Only after a few kilometres, we understood what the comments meant. The now very narrow, rocky mountain road allowed even our Land Cruiser only a speed of about 20 km / h. We did not imagine what happened to drivers of larger motor homes, which expected, looking at the map, a normal main road. In one of the small villages along the route, suddenly no progress was possible. On the main road through the town, a market had been built and cars, buses, taxis and motorbikes, everything with wheels, had come to a standstill and blocked each other. After the node had finally loosened up, we were able to drive around the chaos on narrow back roads through the village. The scenery was even more

# Guatemala

impressive, but the road required a lot of attention from the driver. A few kilometres before we arrived back to a paved road, we crossed three Chinese on bicycles in a steep descent. They pushed the heavily laden bicycles, because to ride the track, it was definitely too steep and rocky. We talked for a while with them. To answer their questions about the road conditions, we could give them no really good news. Having already taken us over three hours for the 50 km from *Semuc* to the beginning of the asphalt road, the cyclists would probably have to suffer some more time.

On the now well-developed road, we were again progressing rapidly. In the tropical landscape particularly oil palm trees were grown or cattle bred and many houses were covered with palm leaves. Just before we left *Sayaxche*, an ideal place for us to stay overnight, after the exhausting journey, was in the *National Park El Rosario*. The simple but beautiful campsite was surrounded by dense forest and a small lake. Although a billboard warned of crocodiles, it didn't stop the young people from the nearby village to swim in the lake. We took a short hike through the jungle in the hope to see howler monkeys that we heard again and again in the forest. Except for a few exotic birds in the beautiful vegetation, wildlife remained hidden from us.



## Flores and Lago Peten Itza

On a ferry we crossed the *Rio de la Pasion* and reached in two hours *Flores*. We drove around the narrow lake arm to the east and so came to the opposite lakeside of *Flores*. High above the lake, we found ourselves in



# Guatemala

a beautiful campsite. From there, we had probably the best view of the island town of *Flores*, in addition, we were able to reach it by boat taxi in only 5 minutes. Apart from the spectacular location, the slightly rundown *Flores* had not much to offer. A walk on the north bank led us to a viewpoint and then to a beautiful beach where we could swim in the pleasantly warm lake.



## The Maya Ruins of Tikal

When entering the National Park of *Tikal* before 15:00, the relatively expensive admission ticket is valid only for the day of arrival and you would have to pay again for the following day. Therefore we did not want to arrive there early and left *Flores* in the afternoon.

Since we had enough time, we inspected briefly the campsite we planned to stay after the visit of *Tikal*. When we arrived we were amazed and delighted to find there Ruedi and Elvira, who we had met on the *Baja California* just before Christmas. We exchanged the latest news and then went as planned to the ruins of *Tikal*.

The ruins can be visited in the morning from 6am. Around this time, dense fog normally prevailed, but we expected that this would dissolve at eight o'clock. We were among the first visitors, as most either arrive later as day trippers from outside or they had booked expensive Sunrisetour and were still staying in the back of the property. However, we wondered how much Sunrise they had seen with all the early fog.

Through dense jungle, we walked on wide trails deeper into the system without any signs of the ruins being visible. But suddenly we were faced with one of the many giant pyramids. We walked around them and stood on a large open space surrounded by smaller buildings and other pyramids. We were totally overwhelmed by this incredible witness of

# Guatemala



an ancient culture!! We took several hours to explore the huge area and stopped in amazement again and again. Besides the ruins of the flora and fauna impressed us too. We got to see beautiful wild turkeys, watching the playful *Coatis* and a variety of exotic birds. Even one of the famous *Toucans* we saw high up in the trees.



## Guatemala

Around noon we left the ruins, because it was now increasingly hot and we were looking forward to a swim in the cool lake. There we met once again to our friends from Brazil, who arrived with Pedro and Sarah. We arranged for the evening a common BBQ a few hundred meters away in a picnic area, which was perfect for a cosy evening. We enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere, which almost automatically set in, if you spent the evening together with Latinos.

# Belize



## Belize

### Across the Border to Belize

Based on the information we had exchanged we expected to cross Dani and Cel ([www.break-a-way.net](http://www.break-a-way.net)) in the area and Ueli actually noticed their Land Cruiser at the last moment from the corner of his eyes. We sat down for a drink together at a nearby restaurant and exchanged the latest news and tips. Since we planned to go back to Mexico in order to ship from Veracruz directly to Colombia, the other two would continue their journey through Central America, this was probably the last opportunity to meet Cel and Dani before arriving in South America.

### Rock Farm Bird Rescue Centre

The first night in Belize we spent in Clarissafalls resort where we camped right on the river, under huge trees. The water of the river was indeed only knee deep, but very refreshing at the prevailing heat. On the ongoing route we organized a few things in *San Ignazio*, then we visited Spanish Lookout, one of the largest Mennonite settlements in the country.



Since we wanted to get there on a backroad, we had to cross a river using cross a hand-operated car ferry. In a butcher shop in Spanish Lookout, we could, once again, buy excellent meat and

# Belize

stock up with fresh produce in a grocery store. Everywhere we saw people in her old-fashioned clothes and with strikingly fair skin and blond hair. The original immigrants arrived to Belize in the 1950s from Canada. Today, most of the agricultural production and commercial operations in Belize are in the hands of Mennonites. The trade, however, is largely Chinese-owned, while many of the tourist facilities are owned by western foreigners, mostly Americans and Canadians. On our return question, what do the "locals", the answer was often "they enjoy life." Perhaps this statement is a bit exaggerated, but certainly not all wrong.

From Cel and Dani we had received the tip, to camp at the Rock Farm Bird Rescue Centre. This is primarily a privately operated centre where injured, orphaned or confiscated birds are cared for and, if possible, released again. Beside it they offered also guest rooms and some camping pitches in the huge, manicured grounds. Besides a splendid place among shady trees we enjoyed the luxury of clean toilets and good Wi-Fi and the ability to swim in the crystal clear river. While relaxing, we had the opportunity to study the social life of the many free-range chickens or watch the many wild birds. In addition, the Rock Farm was an ideal



# Belize

starting point to explore the surrounding area. However, we especially enjoyed the sweet idleness, because the temperatures were quit hot and this slowed us down a bit.

## Pine Ridge Reserve

About half an hour drive southwest of our location was the Pine Ridge Reserve. On a small gravel road we drove to the *Rio Frio Cave*, where a small stream actually had eroded a large, approximately 100m long tunnel into the mountain over time. In the middle of the jungle, we came across a huge portal, measuring 15m in diameter, which opened the view of some stalactites in the semi-darkness of the cave.

Our next stop at the *Rio On Pools* we made mainly to cool down. Since it was Sunday, also many locals had gathered there to enjoy a cool dip in the large pool. Some of them had dragged half the kitchen equipment, they grilled and cooked, and the cool water of the river made sure the drinks remained fresh.

Much quieter it was thereafter at the Big Rock Falls. In the parking lot we met surprisingly René, the Italian-Swiss, whom we had met in *San Miguel de Allende*. The Polish family that we knew from *Flores* had also landed in this remote place. After a few minutes down a rocky trail we came to two deep, crystal clear pools below the falls. The bath in the delightfully cool water fully compensated for the arduous climb.



# Belize

## The South of the Country

We packed our things and made our way to the south of the country. The distances in Belize are not huge in general, because the whole country only covers a little over 20,000 km<sup>2</sup>. So, after a short ride we reached the Blue Hole National Park. Before we cooled off in the shady water hole, we took a short hike through the jungle. As usual, we heard numerous birds, but in the dense forest, they were hard to spot. The Blue Hole itself is a big pond, which was quite deep on the one side, and thus appeared to have the deep blue colour. We enjoyed the dip in the cool, clear water and were just about dry before, once again, a school class arrived who wanted to cool off here as well.

In Hopkins, the only available camping option was at the Kismet Inn. The facility was very rustic, to say the positive. Hostel and surroundings were indeed built creative and imaginatively designed, but also quite long in the tooth. Disappointed we were from the beach, which, like apparently the whole southern coast of Belize, had been washed away over the years. In addition, the coast was knee-high covered with rotting, stinking seaweed, a paradise for mosquitoes and other animals. In any case, the beach was unsuitable for swimming, for this we would have to go to the off-shore islands.



In the evening, live music was announced at the nearby Driftwood Bar. When we arrived, many seats were already occupied, so we enjoyed our drink at an already pretty full table in the company of a family from the United States. Soon the musicians arrived and

# Belize

began to play. The area is known for the excellent drummer. This was also pretty good, but the singer, with their humble voices and the lousy sound system could not quite keep up.

## Cockscomb Reserve

Since it was cloudy at night, the temperature did not fall below 30 °C. We had not slept very well, so we were up early. After only a half hour drive we came to the entrance to the Cockscomb Nature Reserve. On a narrow jungle track we drove another 10 kilometres into the jungle to the visitor centre. There we took up the offer for a tubing adventure. Sitting on car inner tubes we drifted down on the nearby river. As we floated silently, we were obviously not classified as hazardous by the many birds and they often could be observed from close range. Again and again a kingfisher shot past us, close over the water, on the hunt for something edible. Impenetrable jungle with large trees, covered by hundreds of bromeliads, lined the shore. After about an hour we reached the point where we had to leave the river again. If we had missed the exit, we would have drifted into the wilderness, from where there is no way back. After a short walk we arrived again at the Visitor Centre.



## Belize Zoo

After we had spent another two nights at the Rock Farm, we drove to the Belize Zoo. We are both no great friends of caged animals,

# Belize

but many other travellers had recommended this visit. In fact, we found generous scale enclosures, often placed quite naturally into the surrounding jungle. Almost all of the animals are indigenous, so that climate and environment were largely appropriate to the species, the most came as orphans or injured to the zoo and have not been captured in the wild. For us it was a chance to see animals that can hardly be seen close up in nature. To spot a Jaguar or one of the other four cat species in the dense jungle, is almost impossible, particularly since the animals are nocturnal. Luckily, many of the unspoilt areas, where a large part of the local fauna lives, are still covered by dense jungle.



## In the North of Belize

In Belize City the former capital of the country, who was repeatedly devastated by hurricanes, we made a short stop to look around a bit and have a drink. Almost a third of the nearly 400,000 residents of Belize live here. The city centre was a lively bustle of people of all colours, but offered the visitor no special attractions. Only the along river we saw some of the old houses, standing on stilts. In the same area is the harbour, where the boats take off, to



# Belize

go to the islands. Not far from the main road, we visited Crooked Tree, a small village which is famous for the cultivation of cashew nuts. At individual trees we saw the bright red fruits, but the main season did not start until later in the spring. In the near lagoon on the other hand we could observe a variety of water birds, but the most of the migratory birds had already left for the north.

## The Ruins of Lamanai

Just before Orange Walk we turned off on a gravel road which leads to the ruins of *Lamanai*, crossing the agricultural land, all managed by Mennonites. In the middle of the jungle and located on a large river, slumbered the former Mayan city. We admired the old stone pyramids, on the stairways of the most famous, a big relief in the form of a mask is placed on the left and right. The ruins around the Jaguar Pyramid also impressed us very much. Just as interesting is the flora and fauna of the area. Here we had the first time the opportunity to observe howler monkeys up close. Their aggressive sounding roar is a warning call in the first place or it serves the communication between them. Until now we had only ever heard the monkeys, sometimes over great distances. Now we could watch them, as they swung artistically through the treetops. Several of the beautiful and impressive toucans showed up.



At the ruins itself, it was not allowed to stay overnight. However, one of the employees at the visitors centre gave us the tip to camp down by the river. In fact, we found there, well hidden, a small parking lot on the waterfront. A pleasant breeze eased the heat and we enjoyed the peace and nature views. In the morning we

## Belize

got up with the sun and were rewarded with a spectacle of a special kind. High above us in a mighty tree, climbed a large group of coatis around and was eating the fruits. Even on the thinnest branches and high in the treetop, the cute animals get to their food. When they got tired after a while, they disappeared into the bush again.



The same way we had come, we drove back to Orange Walk. Again and again, we passed or crossed Mennonites travelling with their little carriages. The men with their old-fashioned straw hats and overalls or the ladies with their bulky skirts and bonnets, offered an unusual picture. Even the little kids were dressed just like adults. Most people waved at us shy and timid when we met.

In northern Belize we often drove through sugar cane fields before coming back to the sea near *Corozal*. From there it was not far to the Mexican border. Here we met acquaintances again, whom we finally got to know personally. Nadine und Sergio ([www.viva-panamericana.ch](http://www.viva-panamericana.ch)) had shipped their Landrover on the same vessel as our car, however, from Hamburg to Baltimore. After many months, now our paths finally crossed. The meeting point, in the departure hall of the border post, was a little unlucky, but the joy large. We could at least talk briefly, but since we already left the country of Belize and they'd entered, it was not possible to spend more time together. But we both hoped to meet again in South America.

# The Yucatan Peninsula



## The Yucatan Peninsula

### Back in Mexico

The border crossing went pretty relaxed, especially since no formalities had to be done for our car, because we were travelling with the 10-year RV permit. First, we were asked for fresh food on board. Ueli showed the officers three bananas which either would be confiscated, or we could eat them right away and dispose the skins in the rubbish bin. After this concession, we were not questioned or examined any further, and were able to import the remaining food without problems.

For ourselves, we had to again fill out a tourist card and pay on the fee of 500 M \$ at the counter, after which we again got 180 days residence permit. Before we definitely were allowed to drive into the country, our car was "disinfected" with a few splashes of chemicals.

Since we had brought very little food from Belize, we went at once to a supermarket. We enjoyed the much bigger offer and significantly cheaper prices. After that, we settled for a few days in the only campground in *Chetumal*. Again, we met other travellers, this time from Holland and France.

### The Ruins of Kohunlich and the Laguna Bacalar

On the way to the *Laguna Bacalar*, we planned a trip to the ruins of *Kohunlich*. These are less frequently visited, as they were too far away for day trips from the *Riviera Maya*. The facilities are in the middle of the jungle and included some fine pyramids, former residential complexes and a playing field. Especially remarkable is the pyramid of the masks, which has large mask reliefs just as in *Lamanai*, left and right of the

# The Yucatan Peninsula

stairway. To protect them from further weathering, they are protected by a palm leaf roof.

Since we arrived on Easter weekend at the *Laguna Bacalar*, the usual campsites were hopelessly overcrowded and in *Bacalar* itself was a hustle and bustle. Therefore, we drove to the northern end of the lagoon and stayed all alone in *Camping Laguna Azul*, a simple campsite without electricity, far from the nearest town, and therefore apparently not attractive for a long Easter weekend for the locals.



## The Colonial City of Valladolid

Through a largely flat landscape we drove to *Valladolid*, a town, incorporated in 1545, with about 50,000 inhabitants. In the afternoon we walked to the city centre and visited the old town with its colourful, almost without exception single storey houses, lined on cobblestone streets. Really pompous building we met only around the central *Zocalo*. On the market, we bought a hand-woven hammock made of cotton and sisal. As we found out, they are only rarely available, because today most are made from nylon.

In the shaded courtyard of one of the nice restaurants on the square we enjoyed a typical Mayan menu. We had chosen marinated, thinly sliced pork with a puree of dried tomatoes and beans.



# The Yucatan Peninsula

At dusk, life at the main square picked up. A local dance troupe showed traditional folk dances. The men were all dressed in white, the women wore multi-level, white skirts with coloured flower embroideries. We were surprised that the group consisted almost only of very young people, who obviously had fun to follow the traditions. Two clowns involved the audience in their show. The "volunteers" were motivated to amuse the spectators with all sorts of more or less embarrassing acts. Young and old were amused and for us it was wonderful to be part of the fun and lively Mexican society.



## The Cenotes of Yucatan

On our trip through the Yucatan Peninsula, we have repeatedly headed for so-called *cenotes* to swim in the cool water. Large areas of the region are made of porous limestone and contain, only a few meters underground, tremendous amounts of crystal clear drinking water. This resulted in water holes that have formed caves, both at the surface or deep below the ground.

In total there are over ten thousand of these *cenotes*, only a few hundred of them but are publicly accessible. Some can be visited for free, while others cost \$ 30-100 M per person. For *cenotes* near the Mayan coast, prices are often several times as high. In remote places, it was often possible to stay right on site overnight, which had the advantage that we could enjoy the *cenote* mornings and evenings almost certainly alone.

# The Yucatan Peninsula

Each of the visited *cenotes* had their own charm, either because they were in an especially beautiful cave or, like the *Carwash Cenote*, a crystal clear lake, with a widely branching cave system, which attracts adventurous divers.



## The Flamingos on the North Coast

We drove to the north to reach the northern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. Still, the landscape was flat and fairly dry. The first destination was *San Felipe*, a seemingly popular seaside resort. However, it turned out that the beaches were all on a barrier peninsula and could only be reached by boat. The village itself is simply a collection of restaurants and cottages and offered no place to camp. Further east, in *Rio Lagartas*, we arrived at a *Balneario*, a public swimming pool. It was still Easter weekend, thus with all the countless people, the water in the really beautiful freshwater pool was coloured more like milk coffee. Until late in the evening, the locals enjoyed the holiday with food, drink and music. Therefore it was already late when we finally got our sleep. The next morning we had the whole place practically to ourselves. The torn up sediments had settled overnight, and the pond appeared with crystal clear water again.

# The Yucatan Peninsula

The nature reserve on the north coast is known for its flamingo colonies. Depending on the season they live here or on the west coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. On a sandy road we drove along the coast, to the left the sea with pristine ocean beaches, to the right the shallow lagoons, where salt was mined in part. There, however, we have seen only a few



individual flamingos, but as we continued towards *El Cuyo*, we saw a colony with well over a thousand birds. The sandy track became increasingly narrow, but it was easy to drive. *El Cuyo* turned out to be another nice little resort. However, since we did not want to stay on the beach, we moved on.

## Visit from Switzerland

Several months ago, we had started the preparations for the visit of Myrta's son, Oliver, and his two children, Elijah and Caitlin. For this, we had rented an apartment in *Playa del Carmen*. From there we went on trips with our visitors, among other things, to the ruins of *Coban* and *Tulum*. We combined the trips whenever possible with a visit to a beach or a *Cenote*. In the evening we cooked either ourself or enjoyed the Mexican food in one of the nearby restaurants. *Playa del Carmen* itself



# The Yucatan Peninsula



offered a lot, especially for the children and so the two weeks past in a flash. Soon we were back on the road alone in our little rolling home.

## The Ruins of Chichen Itza

*Chichen Itza* are the most visited ruins from pre-Columbian times throughout Mexico, especially since they can be reached in a day trip from the Mayan coast and its mass tourism. We stayed in the immediate vicinity of the ruins and started our visit at eight o'clock, the time of door opening. At this time of the day, the temperature was still reasonably pleasant.

Although the whole area is not very extensive, it took us a good two hours to reach the main buildings. On the same grounds are several open *cenotes*. These were not only used for the water supply of the city at that time, there is also evidence that people had been sacrificed to the god of the water. In *Chichen Itza* the ruins of an astronomical observatory can be admired. Even without optical equipment, it was possible for the Mayan to observe important astrological constellations that were of great importance for religion and probably also for agriculture.



# The Yucatan Peninsula

## Izamal

The small town of *Izamal*, another *Pueblo Magico*, is also called the Golden City. This is because almost all the houses in the core zone are painted in a warm yellow. The old town is dominated by a huge monastery complex, which was built on an ancient Maya pyramid, a practice which was often used by the Spaniards. In addition, in the middle of the city the largest Mayan pyramid of Yucatan is located. Although it was reconstructed not quite as perfect as others, it's location in the built-up area is a unique feature.



## Hacienda de Peon Sontuta

From 1850 to 1950 *Sisal* was cultivated on this hacienda. Before the farm fell into ruins after the demise of the industry, triggered by the emerging production of cheap and durable synthetic fibres, it was bought by a German-born idealist of the Peon family, and he restored the buildings in style. Today, it is a living testimony of the once important, regional *sisal* industry.

Only a few large landowners had then grown sisal fibres, known among the Maya for a long time, as an alternative to even more expensive hemp. All of them became very rich. The Peon family, for example, possessed alone 14 *haciendas* with tens of thousands of plants. The *Agave*, which supplies the fibres, takes 7 years, until seven leaves can be harvested, two times per year. After about 25 years, the plant is consumed.

## The Yucatan Peninsula

The entire production process was shown and explained on a guided tour. Even today, a few tons of fibre per year are produced, but primarily to relieve the open-air museum. In order to demonstrate the production of end products, contemporary braiding- and weaving machines have been collected, so that the individual steps can be shown impressively. Interesting to know was, that on site only the fibres were produced. Ropes and mats were produced only in the recipient country. We also learned that the name "Sisal" has nothing to do with the plant itself. The fibres, however, were at that time exported exclusively through the harbour of the city of Sisal, thus the bales were always marked with the imprint "Sisal". The people in the importing country finally used that name for the product. Following the insightful guided tour, we were driven through the agave fields to a cenote by a mule wagon where we could cool off underground.



## The Ruins of Uxmal

*Uxmal* is one of the larger and more important ruins of the Mayan culture. Because it is far enough away from the crowds of the Riviera Maya, the number of visitors is acceptable. The most significant buildings were largely reconstructed and are mainly characterized by the rich relief facades. Another special feature is the large and impressive pyramid, which was constructed with rounded corners on the building, which is unique in the Mayan architecture. On our visit the temperatures were again well above thirty degrees and we were glad

# The Yucatan Peninsula



that the area of the ruins has many shady trees. Nevertheless, the scrambling to the top of one of the tallest structures was a sweaty affair, especially since it was already afternoon, and the ruin was fully exposed the sun.

## Campeche

On our way south we made a short stop in *Campeche*. The small but beautiful town is another UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mexico. The core of the city is characterized by the coloured facades of colonial buildings. We admired the beautifully preserved buildings, painted in soft pastel colours along the cobblestone streets and the tree-lined main square with the cathedral and the Municipal Palace. The thermometer had risen again to 38 ° so that our visit was short-lived and we were happy to sit back soon in the air-conditioned car.



# Chiapas



## Chiapas

*Chiapas* is the Mexican state, which forms most of the border with Guatemala to the south. In the low, hot plains tropical jungle dominated the landscape. Deep within, hiding traces of the Maya culture and small municipalities, where the descendants of the Maya live largely isolated, can be found even today. Some of the ancient cities have already been explored and excavated, while many other ruins are waiting to be rediscovered under the lush vegetation. To the west the land rises to over 2500masl. Pine and cloud forests dominate the picture there. Crystal clear rivers, fed by the rains in the mountains, were a welcome oasis to cool down. Along the Guatemalan border ran a road that led past several significant Mayan ruins, many waterfalls and rivers. This area was opened up traffic-only about 30 years ago. Previously, only a few jungle trails connected the small existing villages. Along the road today are a few small villages without much infrastructure, which is why it is appropriate to make sure to top up fuel and food before driving.

## The Mayan Ruins of Palenque

We spent a quiet Sunday in the beautiful Maya Bell campground, because we knew that on Sundays all ruins receive much more visitors as for the Mexicans on this day there is no entrance fee charged. We enjoyed the rest day, because it was still very hot and humid and the beautiful pool invited to cool down. In the shady jungle we saw a lot of birds and even some howler monkeys we

# Chiapas

got to face. At the night countless fireflies crawled and flew through the dark, we only very rarely see any in Switzerland.

The next morning, we were early up in the ruins. Still in the parking lot, we met Myriam and Abraham from Liestal. They were also travelling with a Land Cruiser and were underway to South America. Since the two had just driven the route we were planning to drive, they gave us some interesting and important tips.

The ruins are surrounded by forest, just around the buildings and pyramids the forest had been cleared. From different vantage points we got an impressive view of the grounds. Once more there were beautiful, finely crafted reliefs to admire. Here it was even possible to enter some parts of the pyramids and to visit the interiors. Even the jungle, in which the ruins were built, offered a feast for the eyes with towering trees, covered by hundreds of bromeliads and orchids and a variety of flowering shrubs.

As with many other Maya sites in Mexico, the history of *Palenque* was short-lived. The first mentions were dated to the year 500 AD, but only 300 years later, the culture was obviously declining. During this short period, however, a very strong society, which largely dominated the surrounding area, developed. Simultaneously with the general decline of the Maya culture, *Palenque* disappeared from the scene, although here too, there exist no observations or documents about these events.



# Chiapas

## By Boat to the Ruins of Yaxchilan

The road now led mostly through agricultural area, which was mainly used for cattle. The trucks which brought the animals to the market, also presented a good portion of the meagre traffic. In a small *Lacandon* settlements we spent one night. The *Lacandon* or how they label themselves "true or real people" are descendants of Mayan and live today in eastern *Chiapas*, largely according to their traditions and their religion. One of the local family offered in the middle of her small village the opportunity to stay in cabins or to camp. When we asked how many inhabitants live in the village, the owner of the farm said, that there were about 150 people and if we include women and children, about 400!

The next morning, we wanted to visit the fantastic nearby ruins of *Bonampak*. These are under the administration of the Indians and for the last 10 km to the system it was necessary to use a shuttle bus service. For this short distance there and back, they demanded 100 M \$ / person. In Mexico usually one can travel no less than 200km in a modern bus for that price. After we had already paid a dubious fee to be allowed to just drive to the village to stay and for the ruins also again an entrance was raised, we had enough of the rip-off, and skipped the visit. It is both understandable that the original inhabitants, who owned the land, want to make money with their facilities today, in part, however, the cost bordered on usury.

Instead, we drove straight to *Frontera Corozal*. From there we went by boat down the river for half an hour to get to the ruins of *Yaxchilan*. During the leisurely trip we could repeatedly see crocodiles sunbathing. These Mayan cities were in the middle of the jungle and the walk was quite sweaty. We saw very beautiful stelae, stone columns, decorated with engravings, and to see more

# Chiapas

sculptures. This could be admired on site, given it would have been too costly to transport them, like many of the treasures from other ruins, to the museum in Mexico City. In general, in *Yaxchilan* many fine stone carvings were to admire, as we learned, a special feature in this region. Also, the location of the ruins along the river was very impressive and especially beautiful.



## Las Guacamayas

One of the tips that we received from Myriam and Abraham led us to this place. As recommended to us, we booked a boat trip in the *Montes Azules National Park*. This is largely inaccessible and one of the few ways to see at least a tiny part of the park, was a boat tour. Along with a Mexican visitor couple we went early in the morning down the *Rio Lacantun* and then turned onto a small tributary. Already in the first kilometres we had the opportunity to see birds, monkeys and crocodiles. The adventurous trip on the river led ever deeper into the virgin forest. Again, and again the skipper showed us animals we would have never even discovered, and this even though it required his full attention for the many obstacles and shoals in the water. Suddenly, we were speeding towards an approximately one-meter-high waterfall.

# Chiapas

There the trip didn't end as we suspected, on the contrary, the skipper shot up through the narrow outlet with a lot of momentum and overcame the step without problems. Highlight of the tour for us was the sighting of *tapirs*. Three of the mighty animals we got to see walking along the river bank or swimming in the water. We didn't have the luck to see a jaguar, like Myriam and Abraham previously, but also *tapirs* you do not get every day to face.



## The Cascadas del Paraiso Escondido

We had decided not to stay in popular *Las Nubes* but chose a lesser-known place for the night in the small village of *Loma Bonita* on the *Rio Lacantun*. The campsite was in the shade of large trees along the river. We enjoyed a rest day lying in the hammock and reading, in between we chilled down in the cool, clear stream. The turquoise waters and the fine sand beach formed a beautiful contrast to the green jungle on the banks. A footpath led high above the river, from where we could enjoy a magnificent view of the many pools and waterfalls of *Rio Lacantun*. The climb, however, was a sweaty affair in the hot and humid air, although only about 1.5 km and perhaps 150 meters elevation had to be



# Chiapas

overcome. In the bushes around our camp, we often heard a rustling. Countless lizards, some well over a meter long, were our shy neighbours. We observed different types from brown to bright green, striped and dotted and in all sizes. Countless birds were chirping above us in the trees.

## Lagos de Montebello National Park

We had stayed at *Lago Tziscoa*. After many weeks of hot days and nights, it was very relaxing to sleep again with pleasant temperatures. However, we realized that we were apparently already quite used to the heat, because when in the afternoon, a fresh wind came up, at 24 ° C, we soon put on a sweater.

From our overnight place, it was only a few kilometres to the *Lagos Montebello National Park*. It lies at about 1500masl and includes a few lakes, nestled in the mountainous forest of the surrounding area. We visited first *Lago Pojoj*. The deep blue lake is surrounded by a ring of mountains, with a small island, that can be reached with balsa wood rafts.

Very close to the parking lot we started one of the few hikes within the national park, the *Sendero El Perol*. The trail leads around 3 km through the forest up to a lookout high above *Lago Cinoc*, another of the many lakes. Temperatures were ideal for walking, also the trail was almost all the way in the cool, shady forest. We took a few pics at the viewpoint before returning to our car. However, the hike could have been shortened by descending to the lake



# Chiapas

shore and take a raft to cross the lake and from there a taxi to the parking lot.

We continued our tour and came along narrow dirt roads through some simple and small Mayan villages where people even today live very unpretentious and remote. Moreover, the route went past some other lakes, which showed a range in colour from dull green to crystal clear blue.

## El Chiflon

After two hours we reached *El Chiflon*. Since this place was down on 600masl, the temperature was back to 35 ° C. Nevertheless, we wandered along the turquoise river uphill and repeatedly came past magnificent lakes and waterfalls. However, we refrained from walking all the way up, because the upper part of the trail was in the blazing sun. We were content to go to the foot of the highest and most impressive of the falls. On the way back we enjoyed the deserved cooling in amazingly cool waters of the river.



Actually, first we had planned to stay here, but when we learned that we should stay in the parking lot with the vehicle because the beautiful campsite was set up for tents only, we decided to keep going to *San Cristobal de las Cases*, much higher up and therefore much cooler.

On the way, at *Las Roses*, the outskirts of a massive thunderstorm caught us. A few kilometres we were accompanied by lightning and thunder and very heavy showers. The temperature dropped

# Chiapas

within minutes from 35 to 21 °C. In the elongated villages along the route, we moved only slow. On the one hand there was a lot of traffic and on the other hand the countless *Topes* in particular slowed us down even more. Finally, we reached our destination after all just before sunset.

## San Cristobal de las Casas and around

After a long time in the increasingly hot and humid lowlands we were happy to spend again a few days with pleasant temperatures. Since we had deliberately left out some of the sights on the first visit, we took the time to remedy this omission. We also wanted to run some errands and especially visit the local market in the city itself. That the wet season had started, was shown by the fact, that each afternoon thunderstorms built up and we were not spared from heavy downpours. The cobblestone streets of the city centre then transformed within minutes into fast flowing streams, channelled by the high curbs.



From the trip to the two best known Indian villages, *Chamula* and *Zinacantan*, we had expected a little more, following the write-up in the guidebooks. Although we saw some Indigenous dressed in traditional costumes, but unlike Guatemala, we had the impression, that many of the traditions, were mainly maintained for the tourists. However, very special and impressive was certainly the cathedral in *Chamula*. It showed elements from both, the Christian and the original indigenous, religion. Countless statues of saints adorned the room, which was lit by thousands of candles. The floor was completely covered with pine needles,

# Chiapas

which gave off a wonderful scent. Out of respect for the faithful, taking photos was forbidden in the church.



## Cima de las Cotorras

After the refreshing days in over 2000m above sea-level we plunged again down into the hotter areas of the South. We stopped next at the *Cima de las Cotorras*. It is a giant crater, or correctly referred as a sink hole, with 150m diameter and 80m deep. On the vertical walls there was the opportunity to rappel to the overgrown floor with dense green growth. However, the special experience at this location were the huge flocks of green parrots, who inhabit the hole, and at dawn, spiralled screaming into the air to fly out to look for food. We got up at sunrise and went to the edge of the hole. Now in summer, the hustle was not too big. Although, the birds flew in and out all day, the big flocks as they are seen in the spring, we missed out on. For us, the trip had been worthwhile but nevertheless, because even the landscape in the area is very attractive and the campsite at the crater was very nice and pleasant.



# The Southeastern Mexico



## The Southeastern Mexico

### La Jungla

On the motorway, we drove down to the coastal area. With every meter the temperature rose higher and when we arrived at the *La Jungla* camping, right at the *Lago Catemalco*, the mercury had reached nearly 40 °C. Additionally there was the high humidity, which dampened our desire for physical activity significantly. Our only neighbours in the camp was a French couple, which was travelling in a Land Rover camper along the Panamericana.

The site itself, known for its bird life, is located in a natural jungle right on the lake. In fact we have seen a large flock of macaws just above us in the trees. The colours of the giant parrots glowed in the light, as they climbed playful around in the branches and cracked the fruits. Despite the heat, we enjoyed the evening and the night at this wonderful place.



# The Southeastern Mexico

## With Some Detours to Veracruz

Since we still had about two weeks' time before we had to be in *Veracruz*, we decided to, once again, take a trip to the cooler mountains and spend a few days in *Oaxaca*.

In the fertile coastal plain we drove mainly through pineapple and sugar cane fields. In the vast plantations of the big global companies, countless pineapples grew close together. The fruits were offered in the villages along the road and we were pleased once again to be able to buy these gorgeous sweet and juicy fruits directly from the producers.

Behind *Textepec* we followed the river in an increasingly ascending valley and then climbed steeply to almost 3000masl. We stayed at the pass and enjoyed the need of wearing a sweater and socks again. At night, the temperature dropped for the first time in months to a cool 10 ° C. Through magnificent pine forests and increasingly arid landscapes we arrived in *Oaxaca* and spent again a couple of leisurely days in the Overlander Oasis.

In the last two days, the weather in *Oaxaca* reminded us once again that the rainy season was advancing inexorably. By the increasingly frequent rains we had fear that roads could become impassable, which was the case a few days later, on the southbound road,. Therefore we left *Oaxaca* a day earlier than planned and drove down to the Gulf Coast.

## Veracruz

Because of a few incidents in the past, the city has a very bad reputation and was generally regarded as dangerous. The fact was here too, that the shootings were always internal conflicts between rival drug cartels and neither innocent residents nor tourists had

## The Southeastern Mexico

previously been harmed. We had definitely never had the impression, that we were exposed to excessive risks in the historical centre of the city and therefore felt safe. The police presence was not higher than in any other major city of Mexico.

The historic centre of *Veracruz* is small but nice. We had taken a room in the venerable *Hotel Diligencias*, located on the main square. So we lived not only close to the action of the city, but also in walking distance to the office of the customs agents, who took care of the paperwork of the car shipment for us. In the hotel we met an Australian couple and a French family who had shipped their vehicles together in a container from *Cartagena* to *Veracruz*. We spent a few pleasant evenings with them and enjoyed the company and exchanged experiences and stories with them. After we had delivered the car at the port, where it waited for the departure to *Colombia*, we spent another two "holidays" in *Veracruz*, before flying back to Switzerland for three weeks.



## Home Leave

We were aware, that we didn't only have holidays ahead of us. In the short time in the home country, we wanted to do some shopping for the countless things that are difficult, if not impossible to procure on our trip. Above all, we wanted to spend time with family and friends. Our agenda was full of invitations, everyone wanted to see us and hear how we were doing. The days and nights were filled and we enjoyed to be welcome everywhere

## The Southeastern Mexico

and to report our experiences. Anyway, the three weeks had passed in a flash and it was soon to say goodbye.

# Colombia



## Colombia

### The Journey from Switzerland to Colombia

After our three weeks in Switzerland we flew from Zurich via Frankfurt and *Bogota* to *Cartagena* where we wanted to pick-up our Landcruiser again. The already long journey was slightly extended at the end as our flight from *Bogota* to *Cartagena* was delayed by 1 ½ hours. Finally we arrived at our booked hotel, at least before midnight.

### The Colonial City of Cartagena

Between the individual appointments for the car pick up and on the "free days" we used the time for sightseeing in the old town. However, during the daytime it was always very hot, so we usually started the visits in the evening. We spent the hot hours in the air conditioned room or at the hotel's cool pool.



For visitors, the lively and vibrant city of Cartagena is one of the main destinations in Colombia. Many restaurants and bars vying for the attention of the visitors. Especially the weekends are very busy in the city, while in spite holiday it was surprisingly quiet on Monday. The old town with its mighty encircling city wall and the beautifully preserved historic centre is easily explorable on foot. Southeast of the *Centro de Convenciones* we went twice to the restaurant *Casa de Socorros* for dinner. We enjoyed the good food at this highly recommended place in a nice

# Colombia

ambiance and with excellent service and all at a fair price. Restaurants in the centre often asked way too much for what you got offered.



## El Totumo, the Volcano, Which is None

Northeast of Cartagena on the coast road is this special place, popular with locals and tourists. When we arrived, the crowd was thankfully not huge, so we decided to stay and risk the bath in the mud. The approximately 2,000-year-old "volcano", actually a mud cone grown over time, has a small pool at its peak, which is filled with viscous mud. The density of the mud is so high, that we could stand up vertically without sinking in very much. The fact that the hole is about 400m deep, made us a little queasy. We stayed for a few minutes in the warm, thick sludge before we left the pool via the slippery ladders again. After the bath we went down to the lagoon and had the mud washed off by one of the women waiting for a tip. Another service was offered by a few young boys. During our bath in the mud they were watching the clothes and shoes and took pictures of the visit with our camera. This was very helpful because once covered with mud, it is not recommended to touch anything by yourself.



# Colombia

## Santa Marta and Around

Sometime in advance we had linked with Toyota owners in Colombia via Facebook. So we came in contact, among others, with a gentleman who offered us to spend a few days in his apartment in *Rodadero*. The city of *Rodadero* is located just south of the more famous seaside resort of *Santa Marta* and consists primarily of tourism facilities such as hotels and apartments. When we arrived at the offered apartment, we discovered that the owner lived in *Bogota* and could not be there in person. His caretaker, however, was informed of our arrival and welcomed us very friendly. To our delight, the bedroom was even equipped with air conditioning as the temperature and the humidity on the Caribbean coast were still uncomfortably high.

In the guide book we had learned that *Minca* would be a pretty mountain town, well worth a visit. So we went up the narrow mountain road through tropical forest to about 600masl. The temperatures were indeed more pleasant than down in the valley, but still amounted to just over 30 ° C. The village itself, with its simple hotels and guesthouses as well as a few nice restaurants, did not impress us much. The area around *Minca* is especially popular with hikers. However, at the prevailing heat and humidity we did not want to move more than necessary.

To get an impression of the famous *Tayrona National Park*, we went to the often recommended beach at the *Bahia Concha*. Just like us, many Colombians didn't mind the bumpy dirt road leading to the beach and because there was also weekend, it was bustling with activity. We were looking for a shady spot and enjoyed cooling off in the sea. However, we had the impression that the water was something less warm than we were used from the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, however, it was not a disadvantage at the high temperatures.



# Colombia

After a few hot, tropical days on the coast, we finally moved toward the mountains.

## San Gil, Barichara and Guane

On the way to *San Gil* we passed the *Chicamocha National Park*. The mighty canyon surrounded by a dry mountain scenery offered a stark contrast to the green and dense vegetation before and after. The centre of the actual national park reminded us more of an amusement park than a sanctuary, with a cable car and water park and many other adventure opportunities. *San Gil* himself was on about 1000masl. That was noticeable, with a much more pleasant climate. However, the weather was not very stable and offered usually only in the morning sun, while in the evening it often rained in powerful thunderstorms. *San Gil* offered not really much to see, but we took the opportunity to have the oil changed on our Toyota once again. As our model is quite common in Colombia, even a suitable oil filter was on stock at the garage. We settled for the next days in a beautifully located camping outside the city to explore the area around *San Gil*.

One trip took us to the mountain village of *Barichara*. In the well-preserved, quiet colonial town, we strolled through the steep streets to the *Capilla de Santa Barbara*, high above the town. Great views of the houses and the mountainous surroundings made up for the strenuous climb. All the roofs are covered with red tiles and the walls are decorated with wooden balconies with turned banisters. Back at the car we found a message from Elvira and Ruedi which let us know that they also were staying in the village. No sooner as we sent them a text message, Elvira stepped out of one of the restaurants to pick us up. We exchanged, as always, when we met other travellers, experiences and information, and



# Colombia

in comparing our future plans it became clear that we would meet again soon.

After visiting *Barichara* we went to *Guane*, a sleepy village where people still live a quite traditional live style. In the centre, around the *Plaza Central*, there were some beautifully preserved old houses, the church and a clock tower to visit. That the area is known for fossils was evident everywhere. In the few shops of the village fossils were sold, also many of them decorated the walls and walkways of the town. Since we do not like to take the same route twice, we didn't mind taking a little detour for the return trip. However, it was not apparent from the map that the roads were no more than better cart tracks and the route took a long time to complete. However, the scenery down to and along the river though was terrific. As a further complication, we were surprised by the usual afternoon thunderstorm. In the pouring rain and with poor visibility, we fought our way through to the main road and were finally glad to have solid ground under the wheels.



Back at the camp we met Caro and Martin, a young couple from eastern Switzerland ([www.gufligers.ch](http://www.gufligers.ch)). We spent the rainy evening in our small and cosy home and enjoyed the lively discussions.

## Villa de Leyva and Surroundings

The trip to *Villa de Leyva* was entertaining and led again through beautiful mountain landscapes. The area is dominated by agriculture, on one hand as a pasture, on the other hand, mainly sugar cane was grown. We also saw many orchards where mostly bananas and other tropical fruits were cultivated. The last section of the road turned out to be another bumpy track. Based on the signature on the map, the quality of roads was seldom obvious, that's why the GPS often led us through small tracks. We were certainly always happy to be travelling in a rugged off-road vehicle. At the campground in *Villa de Leyva* we met, not entirely

# Colombia

unexpected, Elvira and Ruedi again, not long after us, Caro and Martin also turned up.



We enjoyed the days at the *Leyva Camping* with excellent infrastructure and good company. In the city a Christian holiday was celebrated once again, this time it was the veneration of the *Virgin Carmen*. This meant, above all, a long weekend for the locals and time for an appropriate celebration in the city. Alcohol, especially beer, flowed freely, which is not uncommon, when the Latinos celebrate.

When we were exploring the surrounding area, the *Casa Terracotta*



impressed us the most. This futuristic and somewhat mystical building had been built over a period of 15 years. The house is, as the name suggests, made of terracotta. For the construction of the clay

walls, a layer of coal was heaped up against it, lighted and so burned. The interiors of the house, bathroom, bedroom, kitchen, etc., were all made of



terracotta whereas all was shaped in round and smooth lines. The building is lovingly decorated with many mythical creatures and figures

# Colombia

made of terra cotta and wrought iron. The house was never occupied full time and now serves as a tourist attraction.

Also near *Villa de Leyva* was an important historical testimony of the *Muisca* culture, the indigenous people of this region. It is a simple astronomical facility which made it possible for people to calculate certain celestial constellations. It consists of rows of stone pillars and is very similar to Stonehenge in England. On the same site different symbols of fertility in the form of huge, erect, phallic-shaped stones were also on display.



## The Region of the Laguna de Tota

Via *Tunja* a side trip took us to the region of the *Laguna de Tota*. However, before we went to the reservoir, we wanted to pay a visit to the village of *Mogui*, high up in the mountains.



In addition to the intact historic village centre the place is famous for the production of footballs. In 1934, during his service on the border with Peru and Brazil, a soldier came in contact with companies which produced footballs. Back home, he saw it as an opportunity to create a new life with this craft. He did so successful that, meanwhile, about 350 people work in this business. Until the 1990s, this small company was the unique supplier of footballs for all major FIFA tournaments. In a small museum the traditional production of leather footballs is displayed. In an exhibition with pictures and examples, we saw the

# Colombia

development of manufacturing technology and materials used, as well as some of the balls from past tournaments. Even from the 1954 World Cup in Switzerland a leather ball was displayed.



As the weather was not really favourable, our visit at the reservoir was quite short. Despite the rainy weather, we decided to take a "shortcut" through the mountains again. It took us nearly three hours for the 60 km, narrow dirt road, which climbed to 3500m. We were rewarded with a beautiful view and a unique flora.



## Bogota Region

Before we made the trip to the capital, we visited the salt mines of *Nemocon*. Today, they are no longer used commercially, but serve as an attraction for interested visitors. In addition to the history of salt mining in this area, as part of a tour, specifically created attractions were presented, for example, a chapel, dug into the salt walls. Particularly interesting was the scenery, which was built for the filming of the film



## Colombia

"The 33" featuring a mining accident in Chile. This event, in which 33 workers were buried alive, made, worldwide headlines years ago, especially the weeks it took for the rescue of the survivors. Thanks to the construction of a special rescue capsule, which was seen here as a replica, all buried miners were recovered.

We decided, not to take the car to *Bogota*. As in all large South American cities, it is hard to find parking and traffic is always rather hectic. We were fortunate to get a ride to the city from Karl-Heinz, originally from Lörrach, just a few Km from our home. We had met him in *Guatemala* on *Lago Atitlan*. He had an appointment with a veterinarian in *Bogota* for his dog and offered us ride.

For the last bit to the historic centre we took the bus. We were once more surprised by the helpfulness of the Colombians. Since we did not have the necessary prepaid card for the bus, the driver let us ride for free and also informed us when we arrived at the right stop. A young woman on the bus, who had overheard that we wanted to visit the Gold Museum, even took the time to guide us up to the gate.

The visit to the *Museo de Oro* was really worthwhile. In a first department we were explained how the gold had been exploited and processed in the pre-Columbian times. After that, a room is dedicated to each region of Colombia, where we could admire hundreds, or thousands of wonderful objects in display cases. If you consider that the Spaniards had, at the time, stolen thousands of these magnificent pieces and melted them down, it is hard to imagine how many of these treasures must have existed in total. The exhibited objects in the museum alone must consist of hundreds of kilos of gold.



# Colombia

After an interesting walk through the old town, past the *Plaza Bolivar* and up the steep streets of the neighbourhoods we were glad to leave this impressive, but very hectic city. The bus ride back to our campground was actually only 60 km, but because of the many road construction sites it took 2½ hours. Although the driver used all his tricks, e.g. while waiting at the red lights at the construction sites he only waited until the oncoming traffic died, then overtook the cue on the left lane and pushed back into the flowing traffic.



## Rio Claro

On the way to *Medellin* we wanted to visit the Salt Cathedral in *Zipaquira*. However, when we got there, we found out that because of yet another long weekend, this time Colombia celebrated its National Day, masses of people were queuing. Again, the visit was only possible with a guided tour and we did not want to follow a whole flock of people.

Thus, we continued on our way, and came across the hills to the main road going west. On the drive over another high pass we enjoyed the pleasantly cool temperature, but soon after we landed back in the heat. After an interesting half-day's drive, we finally arrived in the nature reserve of *Rio Claro*. We hiked along the river down into the canyon and treated ourselves to a dip in the cool, clear water. A few kilometres



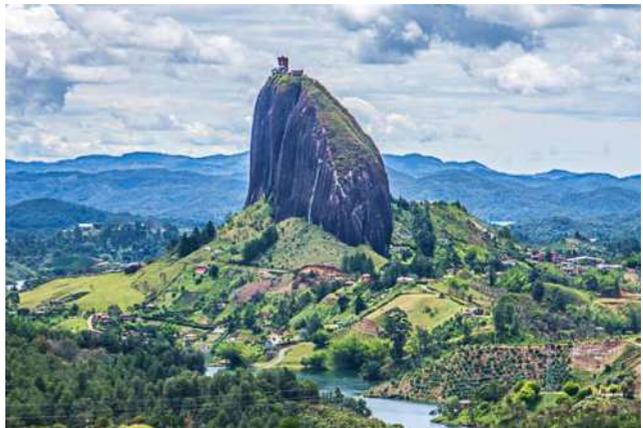
# Colombia

further downstream we found our place to stay. Here we met, to our great joy, once again familiar faces. Caro and Martin had chosen the same camp. We decided to spend the long weekend here to avoid the many people and the dense traffic on the roads.

## The Rock Tower El Peñol

Together with Caro and Martin we went on to visit *El Peñol*. We chose the most direct route which took us along narrow roads through remote mountain regions. Although, we didn't win any time, but we got once again a taste of the simple life of the people in the countryside.

We arrived directly at the back of the impressive rock formation. The 200m high monolith stands alone in the landscape and towers over the reservoir of *Peñol*. A boldly built staircase leads 750 steps up to the top of the rock. Myrta refused to climb up, given the exposed trail, but Caro, Martin and Ueli ventured up the rise. Passing many panting Colombians, they reached the "roof" of the rock and were rewarded with a fantastic view of the mountains and the labyrinth of the extensive lake system.



# Colombia

Since we didn't find an acceptable place to pass the night in the vicinity of the *Peñol*, we continued until shortly before *Medellin*. And as it often happens when one is already late, something leads to an unexpected delay. First it was just the strong return traffic that slowed us down but no more than 3km before the campground, a police check-point wanted to see all our documents in detail. Thus we reached our goal this time just before sunset.

## Medellin, Much Better than its Reputation

*Medellin* owes its bad reputation, mainly the infamous drug lord *Pablo Escobar*, who raised his empire around here and had terrorized the entire region. Today, the town, like most regions of Colombia, is pacified and after a peace agreement the guerrilla organization FARC has largely ceased its activities. For us travellers a blessing, because Colombia and especially its inhabitants, are definitely worth a visit.

Our camp was about a thousand meter higher than *Medellin*. With a bus and then with a kilometre-long cable car we travelled down to the city. The cable car was floating high above the rooftops downhill and gave a good overview of the extent of the city with its 3.7 million inhabitants. Countless neighbourhoods, mostly built of red brick, cover the hillsides. With the modern Metro we were carried to a few steps away of the *Plaza Botero*. Here the most famous artist of *Medellin*, *Fernando Botero*, placed some of his typical bronze sculptures. Lush animal and human sculptures and mythical creatures decorate this park right in the centre of the city. Through a bustling and busy pedestrian area we walked to



# Colombia

the historic centre of *Medellin*. In addition to well-kept houses from the colonial era and some government palaces, the city offers many museums. We contented ourselves with the tour and walked across the river to a Swiss bakery where we bought good bread and enjoyed fine pastries in a small coffee shop. Back in the city centre we were looking for the bus stop, from where a bus took us the very steep and winding route back up to *Santa Elena*.

## The Mountain Village Jardin

A Colombian had given us the tip, to make a detour via *Jardin*. From our camping we drove down the mountains to *Medellin* and right through the heavy traffic of the city. At first, still in the area of the metropolis, the traffic was dense and hectic. Once we turned off the main route, it calmed down a bit and we could enjoy the scenery. Soon we saw the first coffee plantations, even though the area does not belong to the well-known coffee region of Colombia. Following a river, the road finally started to climb. Once in *Jardin*, we first settled at a trout farm to stay overnight. From there we walked to the city centre and drank a beer in a cool looking bar on the main square. The village consists of well-preserved houses, painted in bright colours. The church, built from dark stone, was pretty special and made a bleak impression without the sun. The place is a popular destination, thus a lot was going on in the bars and shops around the *Plaza Central*.



Back at the camp we enjoyed a fresh trout for dinner. When preparing the fish, the bones were removed and the two sides were opened.

# Colombia

Although the trout has been deep fried as a whole, it was not at all greasy and tasted excellent.

In the morning before leaving, we bought some more fresh trout to take with us and then started to make our way toward the coffee growing zone. On a gravel road we crossed the mountains to *Riosucio*. The road was constantly winding up and for quite a long time we had a free view back to *Jardin*. The western slopes of the mountains are covered with tropical jungle. But as soon as the pass was left behind, pine forests and open pastures dominated the landscape. Also on this side we enjoyed wonderful sweeping views down to the valley. On a paved road, we finally reached, actually for the first time on our trip, the legendary Panamericana Highway, and proceeded much faster on this well-built road. The route followed a broad valley with fertile land.

## Zona Cafetero

*Filandia*, a small town in the middle of the coffee zone, we had chosen as a base for exploring the region, and Steel Horse Finca not far from town is a comfortable home base for Overlander. An English couple who had travelled through South America for a long time themselves with motorcycles, had purchased the Finca end of 2016 and they were in the process of expanding it to an Overlander hotspot. Still there was an awful lot to be done before this goal would be reached, but the place was anyway beautiful cosy and pleasant.

On the recommendation of Yvette, the owner of Steel Horse, we visited the coffee plantation of *Doña Nelly*, just a few kilometres away. There were dozens of alternatives to gain an insight into the cultivation of coffee, but we preferred to visit this small family plantation. *Doña Nelly* took us through her facility and explained the whole process from A to Z. When we visited, the coffee cherries were still green, the harvest season would only begin in October. We could indeed see the facilities



# Colombia

for processing, but not in operation. In order to test the quality and taste of the coffee produced here, we bought a package for our stock.

A short walk took us then down to the Twin Falls, a small double waterfall in a steep valley. Tropical, dense forest left the place seem almost gloomy. To our delight and surprise we saw a turtle on the shore of the small pools. In addition, many birds and butterflies populated the wonderful surroundings.



Next day, Martin and Caro arrived and we spent a weekend together at the Steel Horse Finca.

## The famous Wax Palms the Region

Our two friends had already visited the famous *Valle Cocora*, which is known for the *Quindio* wax palms, but had expected more of them. When we asked Yvette about this, she had given us the tip do drive the mountain track from *Salento* to *Toche*, where many more of these palm trees grow and where also not many people would have to be expected. So we gave up the visit of the famous valley and when we left, drove together to *Salento* and from there up into the mountains. The narrow dirt road climbed to almost 3500m. We got ever closer to the cloud base and finally drove through dense fog. As soon as we were back below the cloud cover, the first palm trees showed. These up to 60m high, graceful trees grow in Colombia at an altitude between 2500 and 3000masl. The trunk of this highest palm of the world is covered with a thick layer of

# Colombia

wax that was used in the 19th century for the production of wax candles. Although the existence of the palm trees is in great danger by the spread of agriculture, we drove through a fascinating landscape where solitary palms standing in open meadows in change with palm forests.



It went steep down to the small mountain village of *Toche*. After another 15km stony track we arrived at *Cajamarca* on the main road with its large, smoky and slow trucks. What was for us an annoying obstacle, yet for others a great help, because we saw a young cyclist who was hanging on to a truck in heavy traffic and let himself be pulled along. We didn't want to imagine what would have happened, if it had chucked him. Inevitably he would have been run over by following traffic. In Colombia, people are fatalists, because they believe or hope such things just cannot happen ....

Near the city of *Ibague*, we found a very nice campground. Actually, the *Camping Tacuara* is open only on weekends, but after a parking attendant had called there at our request, the owner came to the front gate and let us in. We enjoyed a very quiet evening just a few kilometres outside the busy city.

## The Tatacoa Desert

A day's ride to the south is the small but beautiful desert of *Tatacoa*. To save the long detour via *Neiva*, we took a small dirt road which leads directly to the northern region of the desert. After the exit of a tunnel we crossed the *Rio Magdalena*, here already a large river, and immediately after the bridge, the road disappeared into the next tunnel. Through dry, but thanks to irrigation from the nearby river, fertile areas we reached the desert. Instead of driving directly toward the main entrance, we turned, a couple of kilometres before, to the east, and aimed on a sandy track for the *Valle de la Constitucion*. Ever again we stopped and admired the interesting surroundings and the varied flora. A surprising number

# Colombia



of bushes and trees, and even grass, grew in the barren, arid landscape. But we also got to see a lot of cacti, whether the small ball shaped cacti or the mighty columnar cacti. In the middle of this desert, we found a simple campground and to our surprise, Saul the owner had even built a spacious swimming pool with quite unexpectedly cool water. The temperatures had again risen to well above 35 °C, but with the low humidity, this was no problem to stand. Nevertheless, we enjoyed very much cooling off in the pool.

As the previous year, we celebrated August 1<sup>st</sup>, the Swiss national day, along with travellers from Switzerland. Last time we had enjoyed a cheese fondue in the far North together with Celine and Dani at cool temperatures. This time we celebrated in the solitude of the desert with Caro and Martin.



In the morning we drove further south and met the main gravel road. Along this route, we made multiple stops at beautiful viewpoints. Probably the most impressive landscape is directly below the astronomical observatory. A fascinating landscape, made of red rock formations, eroded with deep trenches and peculiar rock formations, spread out before us. Actually, our idea has been to view the stars through the telescope of the observatory here, but already the night before, the sky had been overcast almost continuously. Today, with the

# Colombia

ever-growing cumulus clouds, the prospects were dwindling that the following night would allow a clear view of the starry sky.



So we decided to cancel the visit of the observatory and after we enjoyed the view of the eroded landscape, we said goodbye to our friends. Unlike us, they wanted to leave Colombia from here pretty directly towards Ecuador. We were pretty sure it was a farewell to time and we would eventually meet somewhere again.

## The Archaeological Site of Tierradentro

We stopped for the night in the garden of the simple Guest House *Lucerna*. On request, it was confirmed by the owner, that many years ago, in fact a Swiss was owner of the property but today only the name remains of it.

*Tierradentro* is known for its ancient grave sites. In the morning we visited some of the tombs. On a well-marked trail we climbed steeply uphill to get to the most famous and most beautiful sites in *Alto Segovia*. About a dozen of the up to 9m deep graves had been dug out and exposed. The most precious finds were unfortunately stolen by grave robbers and irretrievably sold off. Some of the tombs are decorated with colourful geometric patterns, in only one of them, however, the original urns can still be seen.



Another group of graves was a quarter of an hour away, high above the valley. Everywhere helpful and competent park rangers are available, which know and tell a lot about the background and history of these sites. In general, very little is known about the original culture. It's

# Colombia

known that the culture flourished about 2000 years ago and it is believed that the tombs are the burial sites of whole families. Even this information is not consolidated, as no other traces of this culture exist.



After we arrived back at the starting point above the small village of *San Andres*, for the conclusion we visited the two museums in town. Again, we enjoyed a private tour of a very dedicated employee, who was a descendant of the original inhabitants. One museum pointed to details the present life of the indigenous population, which upholds and maintains its traditional culture.



After this visit, we drove toward *Popayan*, to bring parts of the slow track of this route behind us. At almost 3500masl the road reached its highest point. Again we enjoyed the unique flora in this climate zone. According to information boards, spectacled bears should live in this area. We never got to see any, however, the owner of the restaurant, where we stayed, confirmed to us that the rare bears indeed regularly appeared here. In view of the altitude of about 3000masl we had to expect a cold night. We were pleased that we got to see a spectacular sunset, despite the cold, wet weather.

# Colombia



## San Agustin

Next day, after we arrived in much lower *Popayan*, it quickly became warm again, but only for a short time, because to go to *San Agustin*, we had to cross the *Cordillera* once again. So it was not surprising that, on a distance of just 200km, we climbed more than 3500 meters in altitude and descended over 5000m. 40km of the route led on dirt roads through the *Purace* National Park, a large sanctuary for the native flora and fauna. The track crossed the pristine cloud forest, and as expected in this climate, we were driving mostly in the fog and drizzle.

*San Agustin* is another one of the rare places where traces of past cultures can be admired today. We walked for hours through the extensive grounds, past 2000 to 3000 year old tombs with beautiful stone sculptures. The first leg led through the jungle, where a large number of stone statues can be found at regular intervals. The tombs discovered at the site are decorated with more impressive sculptures. Besides the graves, the so called *Fuente de Lavapatos* was to admire. In these, partly



man-made and partly natural water channels, ritual ablutions were carried out in those days. The used and well preserved channels and the therein implemented stone

# Colombia

carvings are magnificent witness to the craftsmanship of the past cultures.



To see more of the impressive surroundings, we wanted to make a round trip through the area by car. However, this plan finally ended in a dead end, because the track was getting narrower and eventually there were no car tracks anymore. Finally, we had to realize that the chosen route ended at a not motorable bridge over the *Rio Magdalena* and were therefore forced to turn around. But finally we reached the rapids of the river, our final goal of the trip. Here, the up to 50m wide river squeezed seething and foaming through the narrowest point, only just 2.2 m wide between the rocks. The afternoon we spent in the middle of a very pleasant tropical garden situated at the *Camp Hostel Casa Nelly*. Although we were the only campers.

## Fin del Mundo

On the recommendation of the owner of *Casa Nelly* we made an overnight stop in *Mocoa* in order to explore the Fin del Mundo, the end of the world, next day. He had told us that we should allow about 45 to 60 minutes each way to reach the goal, however it took us 1 ½ hours one way. The track was indeed only about 4 km long, but the 450 meters of altitude on the slippery stairs and the muddy trail required a tremendous effort, not least because of the subtropical, humid air in this region. However, we were rewarded with beautiful, clear waterfalls. At the exit of the small valley of the river plunged from a pool 70 meters down, so that it gave the impression that he would disappear at the end of the world over the horizon. On the way back a group of firefighters came up the trail with the task to rescue a man with a broken foot, certainly a huge challenge.

# Colombia

In the evening Myrta discovered our, so far, probably most bizarre camping neighbour, a beetle named *Cucujo*, as our research revealed. This 2-4 cm long, brown insect had two greenish glowing dots on his head that resembled two LEDs. In the dark, it looked like two normal fireflies, but since the luminous points were always exactly the same distance apart, we picked up the torch to have a closer look at the "thing". We were amazed when we saw this strange and unusual beetle crawling through the grass.



## The Road of Death in Colombia

We had heard from various travellers and locals of the so-called *Trampoline del Muerte*. It is a dirt road leading from *Mocoa* to *San Francisco*, a partly narrow and steep 60km long route through the mountains. The road twisted up to over 3000m altitude and was in some places knocked out directly from the rock. In the lower elevations, we drove past rushing streams passing through dense jungle. With increasing altitude, and especially on the west side of the track, the vegetation changed continuously. Despite poor weather, the ride was impressive, but never really scary, as the name would suggest.



# Colombia

## Laguna de la Cocha

The drive through the mountains ended at a big lake, the *Laguna de la Cocha*. As it lies at 2800m, the weather here is mostly cool, or even cold as when we arrived. The area is a popular destination and as we arrived on a weekend at this crowd-puller, thousands of visitors were travelling. We therefore turned quickly around and decided to come back the next day again, because we wanted anyway to stay in the area. As we correctly suspected, next day the streets and the many restaurants in *El Puerto* were almost empty and we had a look around in peace.



## The Santuario Las Lajas

Shortly before the border to Ecuador we visited the *Church Las Lajas*, built-in a narrow gorge. With the cable car we floated at a snail's pace down the valley and reached the famous pilgrimage town without effort. Unique is primarily the construction, the main building was still high above the raging river on a brick foundation. The place has a great importance both for the faithful from Colombia and Ecuador. Hundreds of panels and inscriptions had been attached to the rock walls to thank



for help or healing.

# Ecuador



## Ecuador

### Ibarra

From the border we drove on the well-developed Panamericana to *Ibarra*. There we bought food for the next days and settled down at the *Finca Sommerwind* on the *Laguna de Yahuarcocha*. This campground is a "must-stop" for overlander. The farm is run by a German couple and was indeed a pleasant place with good infrastructure, just right to relax a few days and bring the car back in order. Here we met the *Gufligers*, Caro and Martin, again and met a few more travellers. Karl Heinz appeared also after he had finally got his replacement gearbox through customs in Colombia and had it installed.



## The Saturday Market in Otavalo

On Saturday we went together with the *Gufligers* to *Otavalo*. Every week there is one of the largest craft markets of Ecuador, if not South America. Several hours we strolled around the colourful stalls. For lunch, we enjoyed a delicious suckling pig menu in one of the many food stalls. The piglets are the specialty in the market and were wonderfully smelling and crispy on the sales tables. With the variety of fabrics in all colours and from different materials, and lots of leather goods, jewellery and pictures in all variants the market is the ideal place to buy souvenirs. Before we left *Otavalo*, we stocked up with fruits and vegetables from

# Ecuador

the richly laden stalls. On our way back we drove on small side roads through many small towns. Shortly before arriving at the campground Martin, who was leading, was guided to a supposed shortcut by his GPS. Before we could follow him, we were stopped by locals. Fortunately, because it turned out that the road was not only very steep and narrow, but also ended at a stair. After about 10 minutes our friends came back to the main road and had to report an adventurous story of their turning manoeuvres.



## Quito

From *Ibarra* to the city limits of *Quito* it only takes about two hours, but after that, it takes one more hour to the centre. On the way to *Quito*, we enjoyed the first time the view of one of the snow-capped volcanoes, the 5790m high *Cayambe*. Shortly after, we crossed the equator. However, on the Panamericana there was no marker or sign, we had to use the GPS to find the exact location. In town, we parked in the front yard of the *Hostal Zentrum*. The camping space was quite tight and in daytime rather loud because of the noise of the adjacent street, but the location was centrally located and we could reach everything on foot or by bus.

# Ecuador

The weather outlook for the next day was clear and sunny, so we took the opportunity to take the cable car up to the house mountain of Quito, the *Pichincha* at 4000masl. From the top station a hike led another 600 meters up to the summit of *Pichincha Rucu*, which means in the *Quechua* language old *Pichincha*. After an hour, about halfway, however, we realized that due to the elevation, we didn't progress as expected. Since we didn't have to prove anything to ourself or others, we shortened the hike and skipped the summit.



Of course, we took advantage of the stay to visit the old town of *Quito*. Around the *Plaza de Independencia* are some streets with historic buildings and the feudal presidential palace. However, the centre of *Quito* could not stand the comparison with the old colonial cities that we visited in Mexico. In addition, we are both no outspoken city people and get quickly tired of sightseeing. Especially as the also abundant shopping streets in Quito looked all the same as in any other big city.



# Ecuador

## Excursion to Mindo

After we booked a cruise to the Galapagos Islands, a few days remained. We decided to make a trip to *Mindo* to take advantage of the time. On the way we stopped at the *Mitad del Mundo*, the centre of the world. Like virtually all Panamericana travellers, we wanted to take our picture at this point in order to document the crossing of the equator. Around the monument, a tourist infrastructure had been built up with restaurants, museums and souvenir shops. When we visited on a weekday it was barely operating, and many of the shops were closed. So we made the obligatory picture with one foot on the southern and one in the northern hemisphere and soon moved on. Based on the GPS reading it was obvious that the painted equator line on the floor is off by a few hundred meters. Most visitors would never know and it doesn't change things anyway, and, who cares...



Our next stop on the way to the West of Ecuador was the crater *Pululahua*. On a steep, narrow road we drove 800 meters down, to the floor of this huge caldera. On the steep slopes grow a lot, and even endemic plants and the fertile ground of the crater is used for agriculture. As is so often the weather was unstable on the day of our visit and dense fog covered the crater walls. This produced a wonderfully mystical atmosphere, but denied an overall view of the caldera. It was only when we got down, when we realized that we could leave the crater on an alternative route. The track with little traffic brought us finally back to the main road just a few kilometres to the west.



# Ecuador

In Colombia we had received the tip from other travellers to visit the privately owned nature reserve *Bella Vista*, which is known for its variety of birds. So we left the main road and headed out on a dirt road into the jungle. At the lodge, we were allowed to camp on a basketball court, although a bit far away from the existing infrastructure. The weather was cooler and rainy again so we postponed the planned hike to the following day.

In the area around the lodge we saw a variety of iridescent hummingbirds on the suspended feeders. Our walk led through the dense forest of the reserve. On narrow trails it went up and down, sometimes the way proceeded even in a creek bed. An interesting, pristine vegetation rewarded us for the efforts. Although we had hardly seen birds in the dense forest, the walk through the jungle was, after all, an impressive experience.



On the way towards *Mindo* Ueli observed on the pressure monitoring system that the left rear tire was losing air. After the pressure had fallen to a critical level, we were forced to stop and pump up again with our built-in compressor. The air held just long enough until we luckily arrived in *Mindo* where we could get the tire fixed. A stone in the form of a prehistoric arrowhead - who knows, maybe it was really one - had pushed through the carcass and even stuck out several millimetres on

## Ecuador

the inside. With a large patch the problem was solved in no time. In any case we had to keep the "precious" stone as a souvenir. *Mindo* is attractive for many city dwellers from *Quito*, who like to spend their weekends and holidays or here, thanks to its pleasant climate.

The next day we drove on small forest roads back towards *Quito*. On rarely travelled dirt roads we arrived just a few kilometres short of the outskirts of the city. High above *Quito*, we enjoyed an impressive view down to the agglomeration of this huge city. In the evening, a storm with heavy rain forced us to retreat to the car. We packed our bag for the trip to the Galapagos Islands the next morning and went to bed early.

# Galapagos Islands



## Galapagos Islands

### Day 1

#### Isla Santa Cruz: Playa de las Bachas

For 05:45 we had ordered the taxi that took us to the airport. There was little traffic early on Sunday, and we reached it in half an hour. A representative of the travel agency was waiting for us and helped us to do the check-in and the formalities. We had to pay 20 USD / P for the compulsory transfer card in advance and it was handed over to us together with the documents. It left us with sufficient time to eat breakfast before we went on board. After a half-hour flight, we arrived at the stopover in *Guayaquil*, where more passengers boarded. We landed on time at *Baltra Island*, the main airport in the Galapagos archipelago.

Jairo, our guide, was waiting for us and accompanied the now complete group to the bus, which took us in a few minutes to the pier. The provided dinghy of the *Nemo II* brought us to the boat. After check-in and getting the luggage to the cabin we enjoyed the first output of the galley.



After a short drive we moored in front of the *Playa de las Bachas*. The Zodiac took us ashore where we had our first so-called "wet landing", which means we stepped into the shallow water to get to the beach. On a walk we came first time in contact with the sea lions. They were not

# Galapagos Islands

disturbed by us at all and kept lazing in the sun. In several brackish lagoons behind the beach we saw a few flamingos.



Our snorkel gear was used first time here, but the visibility was not very good by the churned up sand near the shore and we also had to get used to the cool water. Nevertheless, we already got a little idea of the abundance of fish in these waters.

To get to the overnight anchoring site the Nemo drove into the channel between *Baltra* and *Santa Cruz Island*, where we enjoyed dinner and the evening in calm water.

## Day 2

### Santa Cruz and Santa Fe Plaza Sur - bay on Santa Fe

The anchor was pulled at five o'clock in the morning and for breakfast we were already off the island of *Plaza Sur*, ready for a trip ashore on the narrow island. At the pier an enormous reception committee was waiting for us, a group of sea lions. The north-facing slopes of the island are overgrown with, at this season, bright red coral bushes. In between towered mighty cactus trees in the air. The south coast of the island was



# Galapagos Islands

formed by a high cliff, from where we could see some humpback whales in the distance. Many seabirds sailed right before our eyes along the rocks and everywhere we saw land *Iguanas* that were well camouflaged among the rocks. The sea lions were playing in the water between the two banana-shaped islands or sunning themselves on the rocks.

In a sheltered bay, the boat dropped anchor and we enjoyed lunch in peace. The excursion boats with the day trippers gradually disappeared and when we launched the dinghy to go snorkelling, we were alone in the bay. Again and again young sea lions appeared surprisingly, and playfully swam around us. In part, they came so close that they touched us and made it impossible for us complying with the minimum distance of 3 m to the animals.



After a warm shower and a pause another shore excursion was on the agenda. A short hike led from one beach to another through the dense bushes, past mighty cacti and some *Iguana* colonies. The *Iguanas* living here are endemic, which means are found only on this island. From the highest point we enjoyed the views of the turquoise bay with the Nemo II at anchor. The way to our boat on the beach we had to find between countless sea lions. They wouldn't care about us at all and often not even opened their eyes.



## Day 3

**Isla San Cristobal: Kicker Rock - Cerro Brujos - Isla Lobos**

# Galapagos Islands

During the night our boat had travelled the route from *Santa Fe* to the north coast of *San Cristobal*. In a sheltered bay, within sight of the rocky islet *Leon Dormido*, also known as Kicker Rock, we were anchored. This was our first destination of the day, even before breakfast at 7 AM!! Thanks to this early start we would have the snorkel location to ourselves until the boats with the day trippers arrive. It took quite a motivation, to jump out of bed in the cold water on an empty stomach. However, the spectacular underwater scenery fully compensated the effort. Although the visibility wasn't perfectly clear, thus we could not see the sharks sleeping in the narrow channel. But we admired up close the many coloured fish in the coral on the steep rock walls. Myrta had waived the early pleasure and slept in another hour and after half an hour snorkelling Ueli's hands started to get cold and he decided to swim back to the Zodiac.

After a warm shower, the breakfast was served on deck and we continued the trip to *Cerro Brujos*. From the white beach, we were able to observe sea iguanas in the black lava as they were "harvesting" the plants on the rocks and swimming around. Scattered sea turtles showed up swimming in shallow water.



For lunch, we went back on board. While we enjoyed our meal, the captain already took bearings for the *Lobos* Island. We started our activities with a snorkelling tour along the coast. Again, young sea lions came very close. Playful they shot around us, let air bubbles escape and touched us again and again. During the subsequent land excursion we observed the nesting frigate birds up close. The males who had not yet found a partner, tied to impress the females by ballooning their bright



# Galapagos Islands



red throat pouch. The well-known and funny blue-footed boobies were not bothered by our presence. Not even the sea lion females with their new born babies showed any fear of us.

To the southwestern tip of the island of *San Cristobal*, we went under sail, because the wind was blowing strong and in the right direction. We anchored in calm waters near a large, Chinese fishing boat, to enjoy the dinner. The ship from China had been caught fishing illegally in the area of the nature reserve. As we learned, the authorities found, among other things 6000 killed sharks on board. The crew was facing a multi-year prison sentence and there was talk that the ship would be confiscated.

After dinner and at the subsequent briefing for the next day everyone was tired after this long day, and retreated to the bunk. For the crew, the labour was not yet finished, because while we were sleeping, the *Nemo* cruised on to the *Isla Española*.

## Day 4

### Isla Española: Suarez - Bahia Gardner

Our anchorage was close to the first day's destination, *Punta Suarez*. The first time on our cruise we shared the bay with other boats. We delayed our shore leave a bit, that we could enjoy the walk in peace, behind the other groups. Already when we arrived with our dinghy on the pier we had to be careful that we didn't step on the tail of one of the many sea iguanas.



# Galapagos Islands



Through densely overgrown bushland we got to the cliffs, where many sea birds in courtship, breeding or in the air were observed. On this island a colony of albatrosses was at home. They were breeding in the grass, close to the trail. Some of the chicks were already hatched, brown, fluffy wads who were waiting that the parents brought back some food. The blowhole in the coastal rocks didn't live up to its name when we visited, as the tides weren't ideal and the swell was modest, so the expected fountain was rather small.

In the afternoon we visited the *Bahia Gardner*, another bay with bright white sand. Here we had the choice to explore the beach or snorkelling from shore. We chose to walk on the beach, because the visibility in the water was not optimal. Once again, we observed the playful sea lions and were again amazed how friendly they are. Two of the animals had moved within a single meter of Heather, one of our travelling companions, and were having a nap in the sun. Although more than enough space on the beach was freely available to them, the sea lions were clearly enjoying the closeness to the people.



With overcast sky and light drizzle, we took course on *Isla Santa Cruz* shortly after 4-o'clock. On this track whales can often be sighted, unfortunately none showed up that day. With the support of two sails, *Nemo II* reached a speed of 11 knots. We were already in bed when the boat moored in the bay of *Puerto Ayora*, the largest town of Galapagos. None of the guest wanted to take the opportunity to enjoy the nightlife in the city, after the tiring daytime activities.

# Galapagos Islands

## Day 5

### Isla Santa Cruz: El Chato Ranch - Darwin Research Station

In *Puerto Ayora* the family with the two children from France and the Austrian father with his two sons left, because they had booked the 5 day tour. During the day Deborah from Hamburg, and Vincent, a Chinese, joined us for the second half of the trip. In addition, the owner of the three Nemo boats with four kids came on board.

We started the day with a visit to the *El Chato Ranch* in the mountains. There we got to see some of the famous Galapagos giant tortoises. From the birthplace near the south coast, these reptiles move slowly uphill over a period of up to thirty years, in order to find optimal feed conditions there. Therefore, only adult animals are living in the area. The environment is used for agriculture, yet the turtles can move freely and live a largely undisturbed life.



Another attraction on the site was a lava tube, a remnant from the time when the volcanoes of the islands were still active. Same as the previously visited tunnels, the draining liquid lava had left a large, here a nearly two-kilometres long, tunnel during the cooling of the lava flow.

Lunch was served on board the Nemo and later we visited the Darwin Research Station. This is just outside the city, already in the national park. In various enclosures, tortoises from the different islands are bred, and are later released, back into their original habitat. With these measures, it is possible to reproduce the almost extinct species successfully and rebuild a healthy population in nature.

# Galapagos Islands

On the way back to the boat we had the opportunity to explore the town of *Puerto Ayora* a little bit better. The town consists largely of restaurants, souvenir shops and travel agencies, as is customary in tourist destinations. At the small fish market we noticed a sea lion between the legs of the seller, nibbling on a tuna under the sales counter. He wasn't bothered by all the people around and the fishmonger indulged the thief. On a terrace we enjoyed a cocktail and watched the hustle and bustle in the streets. Surprised we realized how unusual the lively business in the city felt, after only few days on the boat and on the deserted beaches.



The departure to *Isla Floreana* was delayed until midnight. On one hand, it offered the guests on board another opportunity to go to the city, on the other hand it was for the crew, as all of them were at home in *Puerto Ayora*, to allow them to visit their family and friends. They took the opportunity gladly, for they were for 6 consecutive weeks working on the boat, only then would they have three weeks off. All guests, however, had gone to bed early, to regain strength for another busy day. Although we were woken up briefly when the anchor was pulled with a loud rattle, we fell asleep with the monotonous engine noise soon.

## Day 6

### **Isla Floreana: Cormorant Punto - Isla Champion - Post Office Bay**

New day, new island. We had anchored just off from *Punto Cormorant* and soon after breakfast, we flitted ashore in the Zodiac. The beach was not white here for once, but had a greenish tinge. Our walk took us first to a large brackish water lagoon where some flamingos had their territory. In addition to the adult birds also some youngsters waded through the shallow water. They didn't have the pink colouration yet which is established only by eating food containing carotin. Through the

# Galapagos Islands

hills, we arrived on the other side of the peninsula, back to a white sandy beach where we were greeted by the usual sea lions command.



On a short ride the Nemo II brought us to the southern tip of *Isla Champion*. We got into our wet suits, mounted snorkel and mask and jumped from the boat into the water. As Jairo had predicted, we ended up being surrounded by huge schools of fish, which found much food here due to the strong current. We floated with amazing speed along the island, passing large rocks and surrounded by the diverse marine life. Depending on the current and depth of the water, the species of fish changed.

After lunch we continued on to the *Post Office Bay*. Since 1791, a post box is located near the beach. The sailors of that time deposited their mail and at the same time checked whether mail was waiting to be carried toward the desired destination. Since this tradition is maintained until today, we were able to leave our own postcards and also check if we would find anything, we could pick up and personally deliver to the listed address. We actually found a card that was addressed to Binningen near our home. But because we would not immediately return to Switzerland, we left it in the mailbox, in the hope that soon other visitors from the Basel region would drop by.



Back at the beach, we got ready for another snorkel adventure. We swam along the rocks to deeper water and soon saw a first sea turtle up close. A little further away from the shore, we had the luck to move close to a group of at least 20 of the graceful animals that plucked the abundant seaweed from the rocks. Surprisingly, later we saw one of the rare

# Galapagos Islands

Galapagos penguins from the beach. Like a lightning, the little animal shot close to the shore through the water on the hunt for something edible.

At the end of an eventful day, just before sunset, we took a boat ride, hoping to see more penguins. These did not show up, but we saw lots of birds and sea lions while enjoying the beautiful evening mood. The trip to *Isla Santiago* should last for 7 hours, so the captain started the engines shortly after the dinner.



## Day 7

### Isla Santiago: Sombrero Chino - Isla Bartolomeo

Our first view in the morning fell on the *Sombrero Chino*, the Chinese hat, a small rocky island that actually has the shape of a hat. Before we went on land for a short walk, we cruised with the boat along the coast of the main island. In addition to the wild volcanic landscape, with only sparse vegetation, we saw repeatedly nesting seabirds in the cliffs. We finally landed on a small sandy beach, and were once again greeted by a group of sea lions. We soon spotted in the distance a Galapagos hawk, surprisingly, he did not flee, and let us approach within a few meters. The juvenile bird was so curious, that he even followed us and landed again nearby.

Also on this island many female sea lion had recently had a baby. The mothers tried the first educational measures, where they urged the youngsters rather rudely in the desired direction if they wanted to get lost on their own. A small group of sea lizards finally posed for the camera in different, for us funny positions. The small "dragons" delivered again a wonderful subject for beautiful pictures. The planned snorkelling trip we left out this time and enjoyed instead a drink on the sun deck.

# Galapagos Islands



Our next destination was the small *Isla Bartolomeo*. We got there after lunch and an extensive rest, and had another opportunity for snorkelling. This time we had to share the water with other guests from day trip boats, because the place was only just a quick hour by boat from *Santa Cruz*. The diverse marine life and huge schools of fish of all colours, who moved into the rock canyon, let us quickly forget the other swimmers. We even got to see again a penguin, who plunged from one of the rocks in front of us into the sea. Trying to follow it failed miserably, because the little guy moved quickly like an arrow. Since the water at this point was significantly warmer than usual, we could easily take a little more time for the observations.

After a break on board the Zodiac took us to the nearby jetty, from where we climbed up to the volcanic cone. To the summit it took about 365 stairs. With many stops and explanations of geology and vegetation by our guide we made it to the top. A great view of the *Isla Bartolomeo* and the slightly more distant *Santiago* rewarded us for the ascent. The view reached even up to our next destination, *Isla Santa Cruz*.

The trip there was initially in the lee of the island and therefore fairly calm. In open water tough, the sea was rough and shook our boat violently. Shortly after a Farewell drink, we thankfully were back into calmer waters, so that we could enjoy our last dinner without rocking. We anchored just outside the *Caleta Tortuga Negra*, because the next morning Jairo wanted to take us there at 6 o'clock.



# Galapagos Islands

## Day 8

### Isla Santa Cruz: Caleta Tortuga Negra

As threatened, we were up early at 6 am, equipped with life jackets, ready for our last excursion. With the dinghy we drove through a narrow entrance to the winding bay, enclosed by mangroves. The quiet and safe environment is used by many sea creatures as spawning ground and nursery. So it was not long before we saw the first black tip shark and beautifully patterned rays in the clear water. Besides sea turtles and, to top it, even several hammerhead sharks turned their rounds just below the water surface. Through a tunnel of mangrove Diego drove us through small channels where no wind disturbed the surface.



Back on the ship, a hearty breakfast was served a last time, before we had to return our gear and say goodbye to our crew. One last time, the dinghy brought us ashore, then a bus carried us to the nearby airport. A few hours later, we landed back on 2900masl in the big city of Quito. A great week with countless wonderful animal encounters and many new friends came to an end.



# The south of Ecuador



## The south of Ecuador

### From Quito to the ruins of Ingapirca

After returning from the Galapagos we stayed one more day in Quito to try to fix Ueli's dying tablet. After none of the visited electronics repair shop was able to fix the device sustainably, we decided to move on. On the well-developed Panamericana highway we cruised through the mountains further south.

The bustling town of *Baños* is well known for its thermal baths and the perennial threat of the volcano *Tungurahua*. It is a very active volcano and breaks out every now and then, therefore the town had to be evacuated several times since 1995. The cloudy and humid weather was not very tempting to visit one of the hot bath and the volcano also didn't offer a spectacle, so we left *Baños* the next morning towards *Cuenca*. We had read in the travel guide book about the *Nariz del Diablo* (Devil's Nose), but have not figured out what it was all about. A short side trip brought some enlightenment. It turned out, that in the region the railroad track, that run along the floor of the deep canyon, overcomes a prominent rock outcrop with two hairpins.

In the afternoon we arrived at *Ingapirca*. We decided to visit the ruins of the most important archaeological site of the Inca culture in Ecuador the next morning. The site can only be visited with a guide. This day, we were the only English-speaking guests, thus got a private tour. The very competent and well-informed guide knew a lot about the history of the large site. The first traces of civilization came from the people of the *Canares* and dates back to about 900 BC. End of the 14th century this nation was involved in a thirty year long war by the Incas, which ended with a peace agreement. Both cultures built their religious centres on the

## The south of Ecuador

site of today's ruins and lived peacefully side by side until they were attacked by the Spanish in 1533.



Today, direct descendants of these cultures still live in the area and certain rituals and festivals are still celebrated. In addition to relatively simple structures of the *Canares*, the sun temple of the *Incas* stood out. As in *Machu Picchu* and other *Inca* ruins, the walls were built dry and without gaps. It was proven that the used, greenish stone was mined from a quarry at some distance to the ruins. To date, nobody could explain how the *Incas* managed to transport the heavy stones and trimmed them so precise.

## Cuenca

After visiting *Ingapirca* we drove down to *Cuenca*. After a short shopping stop we settled in a peri-urban campground and took a taxi to the centre. First thing was to look for a replacement of Ueli's tablet and then we strolled through the old town. Beside the mighty and impressive cathedral, the historic district offered some well-preserved streets lined with beautiful colonial buildings.



Our route took us further south to the border of Ecuador, where we wanted to use the little used border crossing *La Balsa*. After a few hours driving, we spent another two nights in a campground with Swiss owners, not far from *Vilcabamba*, a popular small town for alternatives and dropouts. On a good dirt road we then reached the border.

# Peru



## Peru

### The Culture of the Chachapoyas

In the northwest of Peru, in the Andes, is the area of the *Chachapoyas* culture. This mysterious and little-known people lived in the area from about 500 BC until they were expelled and suppressed by the Incas in the 15th century. At that time about 500,000 members of the *Chachapoyas* have lived. They were later joined by the Spaniards to defend themselves together against the Incas. The Spanish conquerors imported diseases, such as Measles, thus the population was decimated massively until only about 90 thousand survived and the culture finally largely got extinct. Occasionally however, even today you can meet light-skinned, blond and above all exceptionally tall man in the area. These are definitely descendants of *Chachapoyas*. Their external appearance, DNA comparisons and other facts suggest, that these people originally descended from the Celts and had somehow managed to push forward across the Atlantic, across the Amazon Basin and up into the Andes. It's proven, that this settlement was happening more than thousand years before Columbus discovered America. The whole history of *Chachapoyas* is documented impressively in the book "Was America discovered in ancient times?" by Hans Giffhorn. We both had read this book in advance, so we were very excited to visit the places described.

From *Jaen* we followed the *Rio Utcubamba* upstream. Along the hot, tropical valley we gained again altitude. The road led through lush green rice fields, alternating with more barren, dry rocky desert and turned uphill through deep canyons and an ever narrower valley. We turned onto a steep, rough dirt road and reached in several switchbacks finally *Luya*, a small and quiet village. To arrive at our next goal, the sarcophagi of *Karija*, another 15 km laid before us. To now at 3000masl we parked our car and walked on a steep path down to the

# Peru

archaeological site. High up in a rock wall we discovered a group of man-sized figures, which have been made of clay and are supported by a wooden frame, according to the description. Protected under these rock shelters the remains of the deceased were buried there at the time of *Chachapoyas*. A little further away, but not easy accessible, more such tombs were to be admired.



After we had stayed in the area, we drove up to *Tingo Nuevo* next morning. With a cable car we got comfortably from 2000 to 2900masl, to near the *Chachapoyas Kuelap* fortress. From the mountain station it took about half an hour on foot to reach the fortress. The remains are high above the valley on a ridge on two terraces and stretched out over a kilometre in length and about 150 m wide. On these flat areas, accessible only via three narrow and steep entrances, dozens of circular buildings and many more, buildings mostly for religious ceremonies, were left in ruins. Many of the ruins were still barely excavated or restored, but according to the plan, more work should be carried out over a period of 5 years. Still, it was amazing to see the remaining of the once great system today. We came to the conclusion that these ruins, also thanks to the opening up of the cable car, will reach a much higher priority in the near future, than it currently was the case. Whether it will ever become a magnet for visitors like *Machu Picchu* remains to be seen, the potential of both the history and from the site is certainly there.



# Peru

After visiting *Kuelap* we drove into the mountains. In *Leymebamba*, a sleepy little town, we visited the small but excellent museum. The focus of the exhibition was also on the culture of the *Chachapoyas*. In the area, around the near *Laguna de los Condores*, tombs were discovered. The excavated artifacts were mostly recovered and taken to the *Leymebamba* museum before they were plundered like most other sites in the region. Highlight of the exhibition was a space in which a few dozen mummies are presented. They are, although over a thousand years old, outstanding and very impressive to look at. The highly recommended museum offers probably the best way to learn about the culture of the *Chachapoyas*. Here too, however, we received no conclusive information about the suspected origin of this people, as described in the book by Hans Giffhorn. The author proposed the thesis, that scientists are generally very cautious in the exploration of this culture, perhaps not least in order not to put the glory of Columbus, as the discoverer of America, in question.



Our journey ended that day on 3000masl in a beautiful side valley on a clear mountain stream. The night was not too cold, despite the height and above all it was extremely quiet and peaceful in this secluded place.

## Through the Cordillera Central to Cajamarca

Up to almost 4000m, then down to *Las Balsas*, less than a thousand meters above sea level, and across the valley back up to 4000m, describes our next stage shortly. A wonderful landscape made up for the hour-long cranking of the steering wheel. Ice cold temperatures high up and tropical heat down on the *Rio Marañon*, barren stone landscapes and green, lush vegetation with mango orchards accompanied us that day. Fortunately there was little traffic on the route, because the narrow road

# Peru

with rock walls on one side and deep abyss on the other side, offered few options to cross.

Shortly before our destination *Cajamarca* we visited the very extraordinary Sanctuary of the *Virgen del Rosario*. The facility was completed no more than 5 years earlier, after four years of construction. The initiative for the construction of the building came from a Italian Padre. He invited arts and crafts students from his homeland to participate in the construction. The outcome is a beautiful church complex, decorated with large-scale, colourful mosaics with biblical scenes. The statue of the *Virgen del Rosario* was in the middle of a courtyard, with even more mosaics on the walls, but there are also stone carvings, magnificent wood carvings and paintings to admire.



Near *Cajamarca* we visited the so-called *Ventillas de Combayo*. The tombs, which look from a distance like little windows in the rock wall, hence the name *Ventillas*, are attributed to the *Cajamarca* culture. This nation had its heyday about 1400 years ago, thus also lived before the Inca period. The journey to this attraction took us an hour through a beautiful valley where we were again at over 3000masl. After a short walk we reached the foot of a cliff, in which a large number of small niche graves had been worked out. We were once more amazed at how precise and artistically the craftsmen have been working with their simple tools.



# Peru

We did not want to leave without paying a visit to the beautiful old town of *Cajamarca* around the *Plaza de Armas*. On our tour we discovered, among other things the *Queseria Los Alpes*, which sold Swiss style cheese from its own production. We were told by the owner, that his ancestors had migrated from Switzerland and since then made cheese based on Swiss recipes. We took the opportunity, of course, and stocked up with Emmental, Gruyere, etc.



## Huamachuco, Another Little-Known Culture

After a long drive, we arrived in the evening in *Huamachuco*. In the last light, we drove high up to 3500m and enjoyed from our camp great views over the city and the surrounding mountains, just a few hundred meters from the ruins. These lesser-known site, with the gigantic extents of 3.5 km in length, up to 500m wide and surrounded by a 9.5 km long wall, lays on top of a ridge. Based on the entries in the guestbook, we realized, that we were, except for two other Europeans, the only foreign visitors for a long time. A beautifully landscaped, approximately 5km long trail leads through the ruins and ends at the most impressive and well-preserved sector *Las Monjas*. The remains of the largest building in this part is easily 15 m in height. Interestingly was the information, that none of the walls have been rebuilt. They were only cleaned from plant growths, and are still just as they had been discovered in 1941 by archaeologists. Like all pre-Inca cultures, the culture of *Huamachuco* was destroyed by the Incas. We were the only visitors in this huge facility and could move freely and unhindered through the whole area. A present guard even took us behind the barriers inside one of the largest building and brought a special feature in the design of *Huamachuco* to our attention. The whole, huge circular building, as well as many of the

# Peru

remaining houses were built with a double masonry and thus are incredibly solid and secure. We thanked the warden for the interesting and informative private tour.



## High up and down low

We wanted to get closer to the highest mountains of Peru. Although the high, snow-capped peaks in the heart of the Peruvian Andes were only a few hundred kilometres away, however, once again, meant driving narrow, often unpaved mountain roads, often well over 4000m high and down back to 2000m. The route also included the 50km-long canyon of *Rio Tablachaca* and the spectacular *Canyon de Pato* on the way to *Caraz*. The whole route allowed an average speed of not more than 30 km/h.



# Peru

Therefore it was mainly the passenger to enjoy beautiful and frightening views while the driver had to stay to the utmost concentration.

## Cordillera Blanca

The area around *Caraz* and *Huaraz* is often referred to as *Suiza Peruana*, the Peruvian Switzerland. We soon realized how this comparison was reached, because on a clear day the glaciated snow mountains showed their beauty. However, these are a good 2000m higher than the peaks in the Swiss Alps and have a completely different vegetation. In the Andes, on 3500masl, agriculture still exists and the tree line is well over 4000masl.

From *Caraz* we took a day trip to *Laguna Paron*. This is about 2000m higher than the starting point and is only accessible via narrow, rocky tracks, which meant a driving time of 1 ½ hours for 32km. We left the car parked on the shore of a mountain lake and laced walking boots. A simple, flat running path led along the beautiful turquoise lake. Much more demanding was the trail to a viewpoint. Although just over 100 meters had to be overcome, at 4200masl we got quite short of breath. We were rewarded with magnificent views of the mountains that showed up despite some high clouds on the otherwise bright blue sky. Once again we were amazed at the variety of vegetation at this altitude. We discovered, among other flowering plants, that even cacti and orchids thrived in this climate. The tree line too, was far from being reached at the lagoon.



The route led from *Caraz* via *Yungay* over a 4700m high pass to *Yanama*. Through an agriculturally used area, the dirt road climbed up to the limits of the *National Park Huascaran*. After we paid the entrance fee of 10 soles per person (3 CHF), we reached soon after the two *Lagunas Llanganuco*. The weather threw a spanner in the works. Initially the snowy mountains were at least still visible at the base, but the clouds condensed

# Peru

rapidly and soon it was pouring rain. In countless switchbacks, the road climbed higher and higher. 3 km before the pass several vehicles were stuck firmly on the muddy and slippery road. Nothing moved anymore. A truck tried to manoeuvre out of the mud, but had to be dug out again after a few meters. After several unsuccessful attempts, the driver let us pass and we were able to continue unimpeded. In this situation we were definitely at an advantage with our 4x4 vehicle once more. At the summit, with 4720m the highest so far on our trip, we were completely packed in fog and only after we descended a few hundred meters down the valley came clear of the clouds again.



Having bottomed out at 2300masl, the road climbed again on the other side. Again we saw in the distance low-lying clouds shedding their wet load and it did not take long before we drove again through the rain. Fortunately, the road to *San Luis* was paved so that the travelling in precarious conditions has not been made more difficult. On a river we found a place to stay, still with pouring rain. The temperature had now dropped to 7 ° C and we were seriously thinking whether it would even begin to snow at higher elevations.

In the morning it was still cloudy, but at least the sun came out from time to time. When climbing to *Punto Olimpico*, soon a truck crossed us, which gave us the certainty that the road had to be passable. In fact, the weather cleared and when we came to the summit tunnel at 4680masl, the sky was mostly clear of clouds. We enjoyed the view of the spectacular panorama of the surrounding mountains, which are all over 6000m high. On the way down into the valley, the temperature of a low



# Peru

3 °C rose quickly to 25 °C. Thanks to the excellent road, we reached *Huaraz*, our destination for today, before noon.

## The Glacier Pastoruri in Huascarán Natl. Park

In the morning, we were delighted by a clear blue sky, just the right weather to explore the scenic area in the southern *Cordillera Blanca*. First, we followed the paved road through the valley and rose further uphill and then turned on a gravel road. The barren landscape with its green, soft rolling hills, reminded us of pictures from Mongolia. After a few kilometres we saw the first of the mighty *Puya Raimondii*, native to this area. The plant belongs to the Bromeliad and can grow up to 15m tall. At the age of about 50-70 years, it grows an impressive, spherical, up to 3m large rosette of leaves. The *Puya Raimondii* can be up to 100 years old, but blooms only once in the whole life cycle, after which it dies. At the time of our visit, unfortunately none of the plants was blooming, however, many of them had dried inflorescences and gave an idea of the splendour and size of the gigantic bromeliads.



The landscape was now increasingly mountainous and repeatedly showed snow-capped peaks. On the ever higher climbing dirt road we arrived the car park near the *Pastoruri* glacier on 4800masl. On a landscaped walkway we were panting up to over 5000m, which was for Myrta new altitude record. The impressive view of the imposing glacier made up for the strenuous climb. The whole hike was indeed only just



## Peru

5 km long and included 180 meters ascent, but on 5000m we felt every step twice, even though we were now quite well acclimatised.

The further road through the park was much less used, because most visitors come from *Huaraz* and return the same way. With 4880masl our car also reached its altitude record. This altitude brought the vehicle to wheeze and we did not move quite as fast forward. The magnificent views of the peaks of the *Cordillera Blanca* and to the south of the *Cordillera Huayhuash* amazed us once again. The route was scenic, clearly another highlight of our trip. After about 50 km poor road we arrived on the paved main road and Ueli was finally able to relax a little and also enjoyed the passing scenery.



## The Ruins of Huanuco Pampa

In *La Union* we drove on a dirt road a few kilometres up to a large plateau with pastures and visited another, large Inca ruin. On an area of more than one square kilometre, a variety of buildings are scattered, yet only a small part of the facility was restored. Based on the structures, however, the dimension of this huge Inca site can be guessed today. The *Castillo*, a giant platform for ceremonies had already been largely reconstructed. Some impressive, well-preserved gates pointed to the onetime splendour of the building. The facility was at the time a popular residence of the Inca leader with their entourage and properly equipped with spacious accommodation and bathing facilities that were still clearly visible. We stayed overnight with the ruins in sight distance. The grazing animals around us were retrieved to the stable by their owners before it got dark, so that we, with the exception of a friendly dog, soon

# Peru

stood alone. As always at this altitude it was very cold after sunset and in the morning frost was on the meadows.



## The Bosque de Piedras

A long day's drive took us to the *Bosque de Piedras*, the stone forest. As the afternoon was already advanced, we postponed the planned hike to the next morning. Our neighbours on the place for the night, was a herd of llamas. These animals are not bothered, neither by the cold of the night nor the altitude while we had not slept really well on 4124masl. Shortly after sunrise fog moved in and applied a mystical touch to the landscape. We set out to explore the impressive landscape with its many rock formations and stone columns. We tried to identify the mythical creatures within the rock formations, described in a small guide book, which was not always easy. We were surprised, how many different birds we encountered on our 2-hour hike at this altitude and how great the variety of plants was here too.



# Peru

## Reserva Nor Yauyos - Cochas

For once we moved swiftly forward, because the plateau around the *Laguna Chinchaycoche*, at over 4000masl, had no gradients and stretches out to nearly 200 km in length. Even overtaking the many trucks was not a problem on the open road. The plateau is home to many vicunas, grazing peacefully along the road, which are the small, wild archetype of the llamas. Shortly after *La Oroya*, where we replenished our food supplies, we turned off on a dirt road that led us to the huge nature reserve *Nor Yauyos*. First the route follows an elongated valley until behind *Cochas*. The GPS took us to a bridge on which the road was blocked with barbed wire. After asking residents of a nearby farm we were explained that this only served to keep the cattle under control. So we could continue our journey and climbed once more a pass at 4625m. On the whole route there was obviously little traffic, but it was in fairly good condition, apart from a few washouts in the steep sections. During the entire trip, we crossed a single truck. In *Vilca* we joined the main road, which followed the main valley. The scenery was again spectacular. The crystal clear river we followed, kept falling down over natural steps and formed often beautiful, bright blue pools. The road usually leads high above the valley, thus offering magnificent views down. The cobbled road through the towns of *Huancaya* and *Vitis* is very narrow, and was even for our car quite a challenge.



# Peru

## To the Coast and the Paracas National Park

From 3200masl we went down to sea level within 3 hours. We followed it a beautiful green valley with many orchards, which changed slowly to dry desert. The closer we got to our goal, the more the blue skies gave way to the typical coastal fog.



At the northern end of the *Paracas* National Park, we found a place to stay on the coast. We shared the place with a couple from Switzerland, they travel, just like us, with a Land Cruiser with Azalai cab and a young couple from Germany, which travelled with a Land Rover.

In the morning we had to wait until ten o'clock before the fog lifted and we could leave for our exploration tour across the peninsula. We drove towards the southern coast and laid in stops again and again in order to enjoy the magnificent views of the sea and the small fishing villages. From the beautiful *Playa Minas* we observed a variety of birds, who had their nests in the steep cliffs. For the onward journey to the *Mirador Lobos* much attention was needed to only see the track at all. Even from a distance, however, we smelled that we were on the right track, because the "fragrance" of sea lions rushed far ahead of the animals. In addition to these sea creatures, which crowded the beach by the hundreds, several gannets, gulls and other seabirds nested in the rocks. We even saw a few penguins.



According to the GPS map a dirt road leads along the coast to the south, for the entire length of the National Park. We followed this route, at the beginning well passable and relatively wide, however after a few kilometres only few tracks were visible in the sand. Thanks to the

# Peru

navigation aids we navigated well and moved quite quickly forward. After another few kilometres of driving, the orientation became more difficult because the track was suddenly just a few traces, looking at the width, probably from quads. After all, it gave us a rough direction. With the slow progress we had the opportunity to admire the magnificent desert landscape. The bright blue ocean with solitary, long beaches, high cliffs and rock formations in the colourful sand provided spectacular photo opportunities. With a lot of intuition and careful cross country driving we finally met again a recognizable, marked dirt road. It was not really a well-built road, until we turned inland from the coast and came back the right route. It was brutally corrugated and rocky, so that not only we, but also our car was shaken. After more than an hour of this poor track, we finally reached the city of *Ica*, so to speak through the back entrance. However, the welcome was anything but nice, because the rubbish from the dump was distributed all over the desert by the strong wind. On the way to the city centre, we drove through residential areas with very simple huts and here also garbage was everywhere.



At the suburban *Laguna Huacachina* we picked a campsite. As we had arrived at this tourist hotspot again on a weekend, we could not expect to enjoy a relaxing time. Every minute the dune buggies thundered past our camp with their V8 engines roaring, to provide the occupants a kick with a drive through the dunes. We didn't mind that the people enjoyed the adventure, but preferred to walk to the top of the dunes to enjoy the



# Peru

view of the lagoon. The oasis with its palm trees and green gardens formed a wonderful contrast to the desert and therefore attracted, especially on weekends, many visitors. In the evening, however, as soon as the operators of the buggies closed the operations, it was quiet in the village.

## The Nazca and Other Lines

The hinterland of the coast, is where we visited the world-famous Nazca lines. The huge ground engravings can actually best be seen from the air, but since the safety reputation of this airplane tours are anything but good, we skipped it. Near *Palpa* we saw the first examples of the geoglyphs. On one hand, a huge sundial was visible from a hill in the plain and on the other hand, several beautiful figural engravings, which had been drawn into a slope. According to information on site, these images were created, by people of the *Paracas* culture which was active 200-500 BC, thus even before the time of the *Nazca*. It is assumed that the engravings had religious purposes.



## Peru

A few kilometres further we came to the *Nazca* lines. From a tower we could see three of the best, although not the largest of the images. Primarily the images are made of countless straight lines, some of which are several kilometres long. Along with the geometric patterns, various animals such as monkey, hummingbird, condor, etc. were drawn. The exact meaning of all the lines is still unclear, some researchers put them in the context of astronomical events, while others assume more religious backgrounds.

### The Graves of Chauchilla

In the middle of the desert, about 20 km south of the city of *Nazca*, grave sites of the *Nazca* culture were discovered. In countless niches dug in the sand, archaeologists found the mummified remains of the deceased, together with grave donations. Meanwhile, a dozen of the grave chambers have been uncovered, restored and opened to the public. The view of these corpses, dried and wrapped in towels, didn't leave us untouched. The niches were partly individual graves, but mostly two to three persons sat in a chamber. Thanks to the dry desert air, the bodies are remarkably well preserved. Even today, the excavated niches are only protected by a thatched roof without apparent damage to the mummies.



### Cuzco

It took two long days of driving to get from the coast to *Cuzco* in 3500m altitude. The former capital of the Inca culture is the main tourist attraction of Peru. So it was not surprising, that we encountered visitors from around the world in the Old Town. Even in the campground high above the old town several Overlander had settled. Getting up there a real was a real challenge, because the GPS led us through the city, along

# Peru

narrow and steep cobblestone streets. Because of the rain, we even had to engage the 4WD to tackle the slippery ascent.

The path for a stroll down to the historic centre was easy to deal with, but for the strenuous way back we preferred to take a taxi. Around the *Plaza de Armas* is a small pedestrian area, otherwise a huge traffic chaos prevailed throughout the city.

The tour through the historical part of *Cusco* was very diversified and impressive. Whole streets with excellently preserved buildings from the colonial period gave insight into the ancient times. Many of the old buildings were built on foundations of walls from the Inca period.



As always, we also wanted to visit the local market, where we were inspired by the many, sometimes unusual and exotic, food. Here in *Cuzco* we found, among others, a kind of brawn in the form of a huge sausage that was over a meter long and about 15cm in diameter. The piece offered for tasting was so good that we could not resist. For lunch, we sat down at one of the many food stalls. For only just 5 soles (about 1.50 CHF) we received a nutritious soup and a tasty dish with meat, rice and French fries. One portion was enough satisfy both of us.



Only just 5 minutes walking from the campground are the ruins of *Sacsayhuaman*, one of the largest complex from the Inca period. High above the city perched this huge facility, probably built as a fortification. The impressive buildings once again demonstrated the incredible abilities of the Incas to build seamless and precisely aligned walls. As impressive as the monumental buildings was the view of the old city of *Cuzco*.

# Peru



## Valle Sagrado de los Incas

After *Cuzco* we wanted to visit the Sacred Valley of the Incas. This area, one of the most important agricultural areas of the ancient kingdom, was at that time densely populated, leaving a corresponding number of traces and ruins. We wanted to visit as many as possible of the existing Inca ruins and therefore purchased the 10th-day tourist ticket. For 130 soles (45 CHF) per person this is relatively expensive, however, individual entry to the ruins cost 70 Soles, so the ticket was worth its money.

Our first stop were the ruins of *Moray*. These are funnel-shaped terraced fields which were elaborately worked into natural hollows. Due to the special arrangement of the acreage they produced a microclimate that increased yields. Three of the funnels had been carefully restored and made accessible. These facilities proved again the skills and the vast knowledge of the Incas. Would the terraces be planted with traditional products, it could probably even today be proven how efficiently this cultivation method worked.



Just a few kilometres later we came to an old salt saline, which is in operation since Inca times. From a source in the mountains saline water flows into approx. 4000 small ponds. Under the strong solar radiation,

## Peru

the salt water evaporates to the point until the salt can be harvested and bagged. The whole production is entirely hand operated, even today. The pools were on the steep slopes of a narrow valley and offered, especially when viewed from above, an impressive picture. The hues ranged, depending on the stage of evaporation, from snow white to brown.



*Ollantaytambo* houses another, large Inca system. Along the many remaining buildings, the great landscaped and terraced fields caught the eye. Remarkably well preserved storage buildings were built across the slopes, to accommodate the crop yields.



In the valley we admired the great skill of the Incas on the basis of a still working, sophisticated irrigation and water distribution system.



Since there is a huge tourist rush even outside the high season at all the sights in the entire region around *Cuzco*, we tried to dodge the crowds as good as we could. Therefore we drove up the valley on the same day and stayed near the ruins of *Pisac* in the *Hospedaje Kausay Punku*. This simple hostel offers space for 2 to 3 small campers. During construction of the beautifully designed, simple facility many traditional building

## Peru

techniques were applied, which were imaginatively combined with modern ideas. For example, PET bottles were built into the adobe walls, which provide a special lighting inside the building. *Arcadio*, the owner of *Hospedaje*, also grows old corn species and medicinal plants and additionally tries to preserve the old traditions.

In the morning, well before the first groups of tourists arrived from *Cuzco*, we were already at the ruins of *Pisac* and enjoyed the impressive complex practically to ourselves with glorious weather. Much of the towering ruins were unfortunately closed off at the time of our visit due to construction, but the visitors facilities open for the visitors were more than impressive.



Many might now wonder where the report to the famous *Machu Picchu* is. After much deliberation and back and forth, we decided to forego this attraction. Meanwhile, a visit to these ruins takes so much preparation until all tours, entrance fees, etc. are organized so that it was just too complicated for us. Of course you could just book the whole thing at a travel agency, but we were not ready to pay up to 500 US \$ per person. In addition, we were not really tempted to be part of the stream of visitors of up to 6000 people per day. After we had already visited so many interesting evidence of the ancient Peruvian cultures, *Machu Picchu* would probably not have revealed much new, except that we could say "been there, seen that".

## Cerro Colorado, the Rainbow Mountain

After visiting the *Pisac* ruins we headed for the Rainbow Mountain, which the Incas called *Vicunca*, about a three hours' drive south-west of *Cuzco*. We had seen in the iOverlander app that it was not necessarily advantageous to start too soon on the mountain, because that would mean to sleep above 4000masl and start the hike in the crack of dawn to avoid the many tour groups coming from *Cuzco*.

# Peru

We planned our arrival at the starting point of the ascent to be around noon. As it turned out, the timing was the perfect choice, because between 12:30 to 13:00 all the tour buses started back down the narrow mountain road and there were few places to cross them. In July 2017, the new car park and the starting point to Rainbow Mountain were opened, what shortens the approach by some 2 km and 200 vertical meters, a relief that is highly appreciated at this altitude. When we set out to climb the mountain, at the beginning of hundreds of visitors who had started early in the morning came down the trail. After the first big slope, it soon became less and in the second part of the climb of about 2 hours we were actually travelling alone. Despite fairly good acclimatization Myrta struggled with the altitude and we gladly accepted the offer by locals to provide a ride on horseback for about 2 km. However, the final piece we had to cope with on foot.



On more than 5000masl we reached a saddle, after that we had again a little ascend until we enjoyed the magnificent view of the Rainbow Mountain. The ridge, which could be seen from the highest point of the walk, was actually glowing in all colours. Also the whole rest of the surrounding area was gigantic and we were lucky to see even the highest peak with 6800m almost with no clouds. Even the *Vicunca* himself showed up again in the sunshine, which only brought the colours of the rock layers to shine. After the breath taking impressions we made our way back, it went of course much easier and less stressful.



As the afternoon was well advanced, only four visitors crossed us, otherwise the trail was deserted and the parking lot was largely empty



## Peru

giant birds, with a wingspan of up to 3m, were circling in the air. Initially, the impressive condors sailed below us along the cliff and screwed up ever higher with increasing thermals until they were circling before our eyes. Finally they disappeared from our field of vision, because they went into the mountains in search of food.



After an hour of observation we left the lookout and drove off towards *Arequipa*. We did not choose the shortest route like the all the tour buses, but took the road along the canyon, further west and then south into the mountains. Up to *Huambo* the road was freshly paved, but then the track became increasingly bumpy and corrugated. The magnificent views of the surrounding mountain landscape and an active volcano left the bumpy ride fade into the background.



In the hills we encountered a Peruvian motorcyclist on the roadside who asked for help. He had suffered a flat tire, but was not in possession of a pump nor had he proper tools on board. A spare tube he had thankfully with him so that we could help him with our tools and compressed air. After some additional bumpy kilometres we were finally back on the Panamericana and thus in hectic and busy traffic. The last one hundred kilometres to *Arequipa* were handled in less than 1 ½ hours.

# Peru

## Arequipa

The morning was spent again with maintenance work, bringing dirty clothes to the laundry, filling the gas cylinder, washing the car, rotating wheels, etc., and in the afternoon we visited the city centre. *Arequipa* is one of few cities in Peru with a beautiful, well-preserved historic centre.

Its most famous attraction is the monastery of *Santa Catalina*. The huge abbey has been tastefully restored and a large part is open to visitors. A small and enclosed area is still inhabited by a few Dominican nuns.



In a subsequent stroll through the streets and alleys of the old town, past the bustling *Plaza de Armas*, we got to know some more quarters of *Arequipa*.



# Peru

## The Grave Towers of Sillustani

These interesting ruins were on our way to *Lake Titicaca*. The people of the *Collas*, which lived in the area before the Incas, buried the dead in simple, circular stone towers. However, after the Incas had conquered the land, they took on this kind of burial, however, they built the towers in their skilful construction with large, seamless assembled stone blocks. The difference between the original towers and to ones built by the Incas in the extensive grounds is clearly visible. The location of the cemetery on a hill, with the *Laguna Umayo* in the background, was scenically very impressive.



In the vicinity of these graves, we remarked some typical local farms. These were built like small castles with several individual buildings, wickets and turrets. Surrounded by a stone wall, the courtyards were reminiscent of a fortress. For good luck, funny bull figures of baked clay were sitting everywhere on the roofs or above the entrances.



## Lago Titicaca

The huge lake is at 3800masl and is, with an area of 8288 square kilometres, the largest freshwater lake in South America. The larger part of around 5,000 square kilometres, belongs to Peru and about 3300 square kilometres is located on Bolivian territory. In addition, the Lake Titicaca is the highest waterbody in the world with commercial shipping traffic. Regular cargo services between *Puno* in Peru and the piers in

# Peru

Bolivia has long ago ceased. The existing boat traffic today is primarily for tourism.

*Puno* is the starting point to visit the floating islands of the *Uros*, the traditionally resident population of the region. We had found a place to stay in a campground outside the city, and therefore took a taxi to the port. The boat, which would take us to the islands, took off after the minimum number of ten passengers was reached. The journey started through a wide reed belt. At the end we saw hundreds of little houses, mostly built of reeds. The floating islands had been created from this material for the various groups of residents. Our boat landed at one of the family islands and we were welcomed by the head of the clan. The visits were organized such, that each of the islands received guests about once a week. This ensured that the business and the associated revenues are distributed fairly among all. The bottom of the island was covered with fine, straw like reeds and was therefore pleasantly soft and easy to walk on. As we found out, however, many of the residents suffer from rheumatism, as the reeds absorbs moisture and dries poorly. We were informed how the reed islands are built and that they must be renewed regularly. Everything is made of reed, growing in the belt along the shore, and is even used as fuel for the simple stoves. In this context, the leaders explained to us that fire brings a big risk with it, because it only takes is a single spark, to set the dry material on fire and destroy an entire island. The women took us into their homes and gave us an insight into their way of life. At the same time they offered their handicrafts for sale in order to supplement their income slightly. With one of the reed boats we reached the nearby main island. There, above all, the infrastructure for the catering of the visitors, and shops to stock up on souvenirs, were besides the church and school. The specialty in the restaurants were trout from Lake Titicaca, which were held in large



# Peru

underwater nets as live stock. By motorboat we went back to the port of *Puno*.



On the way along the lake towards the Bolivian border, we became aware of the gigantic proportions of the lake. With its length of 178 km and a width of 67 km, the Lake Titicaca is more than 15 times larger than Lake Constance. After we had crossed the border, we setup camp for the next two days in Copacabana, a tourist town on the Bolivian lakeshore. Despite the beautiful weather, however, it was not to think of a bath, because the average temperature of the lake is a cool 9 °C.



# Bolivia



## Bolivia

On the way to the capital we had to take a ferry across the channel of *San Pablo de Tiquina*. The vehicles are not transported by a large ship, but are loaded onto one of the many barges that cross the narrow canal. Actually, a bridge could have been built a long time ago, but the plans always faced local resistance, because that would have made the many ferry companies unemployed.

Then we continued to follow *Lake Titicaca* and passed the Museum *Titi*. Among other things, the history of the expeditions with the typical reed boats, as they have always been used on Lake Titicaca, is presented there. The lakeside workshops had already built *Thor Hyerdahl's* reed rafts, the most famous being the *Kon Tiki*, which proved that long ocean voyages were possible in this type of ship.



Through the dry plateau we reached *El Alto*, the district high above *La Paz*. In order to avoid the traffic chaos in the big city, we drove around it on the south and thus reached the *Hotel Oberland* in *Mallasa*. Not only does this hotel offer some parking spaces for overlanders, but the location is "only" at 3200 meters above sea level, which makes the climate a lot more pleasant. Here you meet other travellers and those who have withdrawal symptoms can enjoy typical Swiss cuisine in the restaurant.

# Bolivia

## La Paz

Although it's known that we are not much attracted by big cities, we were planning to stay a few days in *La Paz*, because we wanted to carry out a comprehensive service and check on our car. We stayed at Hotel Oberland, in a region of La Paz that is a few 100m lower. The city itself is between 3500 and 4100masl while our campsite in *Mallasa* is "only" at 3300m with a very pleasant climate.

Monday morning we drove to the garage of Ernesto Hug, a Swiss who lived in Bolivia for 35 years and runs a car workshop in the higher part of the town. First, it was clarified what work would have to be done. It soon became apparent that in addition to the actual service a few repairs were due. The clamping mechanism of the alternator had come loose and the locking screw had ground away a portion of the V-belt pulley. Moreover, since the fastening of the compressor of the air conditioning was loose, we had to accept that these were consequences of the preventive water pump change back in Switzerland. Exactly these components had to be removed for changing the pump and were evidently not reinstalled correctly, thus another botched, which we had been foisted from the so-called Land Cruiser specialist. Because spare parts in Bolivia are hard to find, the pulley was quickly made by a nearby turner. All the service and repair work finally took three full days. Fortunately, the garage had plenty of space, so that we could stay camped on site.

At the workshop, well-known among travellers, we met Sandra and Michael. The two Bernese were travelling in a Mercedes Sprinter camper and had to schedule a stopover at Ernesto to repair a broken leaf spring.



# Bolivia

After everything was done to our car, we moved back to the Oberland. With Gerd, a German who lives in *La Paz* since many years, we booked a tour through *La Paz*, or rather, above *La Paz*. With one of the six existing gondola lifts, which provide access to the city, we hovered up to *El Alto*. 6 more lines are planned for the years to come to connect the individual neighbourhoods as a complete public transport network. The ride high above the roofs allowed many interesting insights into the streets and backyards. From the highest part of the city, *El Alto*, we enjoyed the impressive view down to the sea of houses. As every Thursday a huge market took place in this district. This was carried out and visited mainly by the indigenous population, which lives mainly in *El Alto*. The offer covered just about everything from what is needed for life and much more. On the edge of the market, some shamans had set up their stalls and offered its customers help for any situation. The service consisted of a mixture of doctor, life coach, lucky charm and fortune tellers and consisted of, for us, bizarre-looking rituals. In front of the huts all sorts of herbs and other things were burned and the patients were treated with the resulting smoke and all kinds of incantations. With another cable car, which runs on top of a wide road, past multi-storey residential buildings, we let ourselves be transported over *El Alto* and received a further idea of the size of the market taking place below us.



# Bolivia

After we arrived at the lower-lying city centre, we continued on foot. Only just in one road buildings from the colonial period are preserved, the rest of the city centre was architecturally not really attractive, however, interesting with its bustling and lively operation, and worth seeing. The *Plaza Murillo*, the central square of the city, was a disappointment for us and, in our view, a real eyesore. Right next to the beautiful Parliament building stood a half-destroyed house, on the opposite side was another, dirty black, unkempt building and in the background was the ugly, towering, modern government palace under construction, which further marred the sight of the square. Apparently, for the construction of a new building sufficient funds was available yet so for the historical buildings.



The next the cable car ride took us up to *Killi Killi*, a vantage point that offers a 360 ° panoramic view over the city centre. A heavy rain shower forced us to seek shelter under one of the covered pavilions. After the brief nightmare was over, we went back to the centre to visit the famous witches market. In this neighbourhood every conceivable means of aids is sold. In the shops dried llama foetuses hung over a huge range of herbs and packaged panaceas which should help pretty much for or against anything.



After all these impressions, and the interesting explanations and stories of Gerd we were finally happy to return to our quiet and manageable car.

Meanwhile, some other travellers had gathered at the Oberland, including Uwe and Tina, who we had met in *Cuzco*. As always, if several

# Bolivia

people are together, all had something to report and we enjoyed the time in good company. In between we took a stroll to the nearby *Valle de Luna*, a small park with erosion landscapes. After many similar landforms that we had already seen so far on our trip, this park has not particularly impressed us. Although it offered interesting rock formations and deep cracks, accessible with wooden walkways and bridges, however, it was a rather basic attraction with regards of the size and location in the residential area. For the residents of the big city of *La Paz*, however, it is definitely a welcome destination and we were just happy to stretch our legs on the walk without getting tired.

## Salar de Uyuni

For a few months, we had been in contact with Trix and Sascha, friends from Switzerland, to see if our paths will cross somewhere. They were travelling from Buenos Aires to Bolivia and just like ourself, wanted to visit the *Salar de Uyuni* and the lagoon route. With some aiming and adjusting we were able to organize a meet-up in *Uyuni*.

On the way there we got really into a speed check. With a modern radar gun, we were measured at 100 instead of the permitted 80 km/h. First it was said, that Ueli had to drive back 40 km in the police car to deposit the fine of 300 Bolivianos (about 50 CHF) on a bank. After some discussion, the police offered us a reduction to 100 Bolivianos, paid cash and without a receipt - a rogue who thinks evil.

After an overnight stay off the main road we met with our friends in Uyuni at the agreed time. Until Sascha and Trix arrived, we were able to do some errands and visited the nearby outdoor train cemetery. At least a dozen of old, rusting steam locomotives and rail cars were deposited there and is one of the main tourist attraction. After we greeted our friends duly, the adventure on the *Salar de Uyuni* could begin.



# Bolivia

The salt lake is one of the largest of its kind and expands to about 110 x 150 km from. With an area of 10,000 km<sup>2</sup>, this is about a quarter of the size of Switzerland. From *Colchani* we drove out to the salt desert, and came to the Dakar Monument after a few kilometres, which had been built of salt blocks and recalls the many times the famous rallye was racing across the *Salar*. Right next to it was a flag forest with national flags of all nations with participants taking part in a Dakar Rallye. Among others Switzerland was one of them, one that was even quite dominant. Very close by we visited the supposedly oldest salt hotel in the region. Everything of this building, even the facilities and decorations were made of salt blocks.



The impressive drive across the white, seemingly endless plain of the *Salar* brought us to the island of *Incahuasi*. All islands are hills that are protruding from the salt flat and some are covered with countless cacti. Many organized tours use *Incahuasi* as a destination and spend the night there. Therefore, there was a lot of traffic and we decided to go to *Isla Pescador* about 20 km further. When we arrived in the late afternoon, we looked for a sheltered place to stay. We had the quiet and peaceful place to ourselves and witnessed an incredible sunset.



In the morning we drove back to *Uyuni*, because Sascha had to refuel again before we went on the lagoon route. At the island *Incahuasi* only a few tour vehicles were parked, most of the cars were already travelling south at this time. Therefore, we took some time to explore the island and enjoyed the beautiful white flowering cacti whose slender silhouettes shone in the morning sun.

# Bolivia

On the open *Salar* we stopped again to shoot the obligatory and well-known funny pictures. Because of the white expanse the photographer can position objects behind each other to create completely unreal size relations.



## The Lagoon Route

Normally, this route can be started directly from the *Salar*. This, however, requires fuel for at least 500 km. Due to the high altitude and the difficult driving conditions it has to be reckoned with greater consumption than usual. Despite the extra jerry cans Sascha was concerned to make it all the way, which is why we chose the route via *San Cristobal*, where he could refill again.

Until about *San Cristobal*, we drove on a great gravel road and progressed well. This changed abruptly behind *Alota* when we turned on a minor side track to shorten part of the way. A narrow, in the sequence stony and very slow track led us towards the main route. Right in the middle of the short cut, we had to cross a river. For us, the about 40 cm deep and 20 m wide stream bed was no problem, however, Sasha's Toyota van with limited ground clearance, came to its limits from time to time.



We needed a good two hours for the few kilometres until we met the main route at the *Laguna Hedionda*. Shortly after we looked for a place to

# Bolivia

stay in the lee of a hill, at the *Laguna Chiar Kota* also named *Laguna Negra*. On a slope, directly at the lake, the wind blew a little less strong, and the place had amazing views of the lagoon and the surrounding mountains. In the evening we were again rewarded with a spectacular sunset. No sooner had the sun disappeared, however, it suddenly became bitterly cold.



The morning sun's rays reached our camp very early, so it was rapidly getting warmer. To make getting up and breakfast a little more comfortable, we gladly took advantage of the warmth of our diesel heater, which, fortunately, properly worked even at this high altitude.



Our next interim destination was the *Laguna Colorada*. The track to get there led through impressive mountain landscapes, and past saline lakes where wading groups of Andean flamingos searched for food. The track was mostly easy to drive, but had repeatedly sections with nerving corrugations. At the *Arbol de Piedra*, the stone tree, we stopped for a lunch break. Besides this about 5 meters high stone sculpture, more impressive rock formations can be admired in the area.



Soon after we reached the *Laguna Colourada*. With its snow-white borax deposits, the orange coloured water and the almost black translucent freshwater lagoon it lives up to its name. The brilliant blue sky and

# Bolivia

colourful mountains all around made this place a unique scenic highlight of this route. The northern viewpoint over the lagoon offers an impressive overview of the magnificent landscape. On the south shore of the lake a headland jutted far out into the lake and gave us the opportunity to watch flamingos and other water birds up close. Staying overnight at the lagoon itself is not allowed. However, as the wind grew stronger during the afternoon, just like on the day before, staying in open terrain along the lake would have been very unpleasant. Situated just south of it, we found a wonderful parking space in a well-protected canyon. We even enjoyed sitting outside in the warming sun and sipping an aperitif.



The night was bitterly cold, and in the morning the thermometer was reading  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$ . During the afternoon the sun had shone relatively long on our place, but in the morning we had to wait quite a long time until we got the first warming rays. Despite the cold temperature the Land Cruiser was launched without effort, however it sputtered and smoked strongly, until the engine was reasonably warm. The ensuing route took us up to almost 5000masl, revealing once again a free view of the *Laguna Colorada*.

The situation with the Bolivian customs in this area had been a little confusing since quite some time. Although a border post exists on the southern border of the lagoon route, it was only prepared to clear people. In order to bring the car officially out of the country, we had to drive up to a customs station near the geysers *Sol de Mañana*. This was only a few kilometres away from the route, so we decided to take the

# Bolivia

detour in order to complete the formalities. With a height of 5033masl this is probably one of the highest border stations in the world. Both for us and our car this meant another record altitude. Talking to the customs officials, we learned that the work and life at this altitude was difficult and tiring for them and they are always happy when they change shift after a few weeks. After a few minutes the necessary formalities were done, so that we could leave Bolivia without difficulty.

On the way to the geysers we saw several large snow fields off the track which consisted of quirky, sharp edged snow sculptures. These forms arise when the snow sublimates in the dry and cold air, which means it directly evaporates from the frozen state.



We reached the geothermal field *Sol de Mañana* eleven o'clock, an ideal time to experience this special landscape without large crowds. Most of the organized tours visit the place to enjoy the sunrise and then drive on. The area offers almost all kinds of geothermal elements such as bubbling mud pots, hissing steam and water fountains, coloured pools and steaming streams. In addition, the surroundings shone in all rainbow colours due to the various deposits.



From the geysers it was not far to the *Laguna Chaviri*. A hot spring surfaced at the shore and is caught in a pool. When we arrived, about 10 tour vehicles were parked and the pool was packed with tourists. Since it was foreseeable that they would move sooner or later, we cooked ourselves a vegetable soup for lunch and waited. Shortly after noon, all the groups had disappeared and we had the place to ourselves. The 40 °

# Bolivia

C warm water was very relaxing after the days of dusty tracks and cold nights.



Passing the *Desierto Salvadore Dali*, a sandy area strewn with large boulders that resembled paintings by Dali, we came close to the *Laguna Verde*, the last one along the lagoons route. Again, we looked for a somewhat sheltered place to stay because the constant blowing wind was strong and very cold in this region. Set back from the main road we settled on a small plateau and enjoyed the view of the surrounding mountains. The place was once again over 4300masl and we expected another cold night.



The temperature of  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  was enough to freeze the water pipe of the outer tank. Thanks to the insulation installed on the pop-up roof, the temperature dropped to just over zero degrees inside the car even without heating. Our equipment with a thick down duvet and warming merino underwear made it easy for us to endure the cold, which can easily reach  $-20^{\circ}$  and more in June and July.

The sun reached our camp at half past seven, warming the air again soon. We were not rushed to move on, because as we knew, the *Laguna Verde* shows its typical green colour only from around 11 AM, when the sunlight reached the correct angle. When we arrived, the lagoon was already populated with the guests of several tour operators. We had seen from our accommodation point, all the vehicles that roared down the valley towards the lagoon and enveloped the whole area in thick dust. Due to the tight schedule of these tours, it was obviously not possible to visit the places at the ideal time. In any case, the vehicles left

# Bolivia

the lagoon, before the sun was in the right spot and once again we had the place to ourselves. The green colour in the *Laguna Verde* is caused by the high arsenic content in the water. The flamingos seem to know that this substance is toxic, because while in the adjacent *Laguna Blanca* many of the birds were looking for food, none were seen here.



To the border it was only a few kilometres. On the Bolivian side, we got the exit stamp in the passport, the customs office was not staffed, as expected. Luckily we had done these formalities the day before, otherwise would have had to drive all the way back. No sooner had we crossed the border into Chile, we drove on a splendidly constructed tarmac road which took us in under an hour to *San Pedro de Atacama*. Since the Chilean border post right on the border with Bolivia was also vacant, we had to do the entry formalities in *San Pedro*. Within a short time, we had the entry stamp from the Immigration Department in the passport and the temporary import permit of the car in our pocket. We then were for the first time acquainted with the food check of the Chileans. The official checked our inventories and pulled all the fresh food in open packages as well as vegetables and fruits away. Original packaged meat and cheese we were allowed to keep.

# Northern Chile



## Northern Chile

### San Pedro de Atacama and around

*San Pedro*, a bustling little town in the desert with its many small shops and charming restaurants, offers a welcome contrast to the remote and almost deserted areas of the *Altiplano*. The village lives almost exclusively on tourism, as the surrounding area of *San Pedro* offers many attractive opportunities. Most visitors travel without a car, and therefore use one of the many tour operators on site to explore the area. After the peace and seclusion of the past days we enjoyed it, along with Trix and Sascha, to go out in the lively place to eat and spend entertaining evenings.

One of our excursions took us to the nearby *Valle de Luna*, yet another "Valley of the Moon." There we met, to our surprise, Nadine and Patrick [www.flizzontour.ch](http://www.flizzontour.ch), we had met in Mexico. In the evening there were quite a lot of tourist buses on the road to the valley, with people who wanted to enjoy the sunset. Visiting one of the caves was almost an adventure, because this turned out to be much longer than expected and above all it was pitch dark. For once, we were so grateful for the people who carried their mobile phones, because with the built-in flashlights they shed light on the dark hole and uneven trail.



On the way to *Calama* we passed *Toconao*, a village in the middle of the arid desert, which, however, was in a surprisingly green valley. Fruit trees grew in the narrow canyon and vegetables too are grown

## Northern Chile

successfully. Various rock engravings are to see on the slopes above the gorge and the climb to the rim allowed a view over the large salt lake in the plain.



Through the extremely dry Atacama Desert, completely devoid of vegetation, we came to *Calama*. The town lives from the surrounding mines and offers no major sights, however, it was a good opportunity for shopping. The big department stores offered an unusually large selection at cheap prices. For the last evening with Trix and Sascha, we had stocked up with Argentinean beef steaks and Chilean wine.

## To Iquique and Back Again

We said goodbye to the two Bernese with a heavy heart, hoping to meet again soon. Once again we looked around for new tires. But in *Calama* we had again no luck to find what we wanted, all the dealers would have to order the tires from *Santiago*. So we decided to wait until we got there, unless we would find it in the duty free zone of *Iquique*. The planned tour of one of the largest copper mines in the world we had to skip, because the tour on that day was already booked. Since we would pass *Calama* again, we registered on the waiting list for the next week.

We left the city towards the coast. There we moved into a nice overnight spot right in the rocks on the shore. That the environment was full of rubbish was a pity but we had become accustomed in the meantime. Anyway, it remained for us incomprehensible why the locals discard their shoes, clothes, furniture, etc. in the nature. Fortunately the coastal fauna seemed to be in tact despite all the mess, because in the rock pools



## Northern Chile

in front of the beach, we saw beautiful starfish and various other marine life and on the island, about 100 meters off-shore, we observed a variety of seabirds.

Further along the coast we came to *Iquique*. Here, the barren desert reaches down to the water and large dunes pile up just behind the city. In the campground we settled in we met Peter, a buddy from the Swiss Safari Rally Team. Talking to him over a cold beer, we learned that he was looking for new tires too, however, the dealer in *Iquique* had also ordered them in *Santiago*. The city offered, in addition to its spectacular location between the desert and the sea, a few pretty rows of houses and shops around the *Plaza Prat* and a kilometre-long, well-maintained seaside road with a small fishing port. *Iquique* is known for its duty free zone. We had hoped to find cheap tires there and be able to buy a new tablet computer. But we couldn't find here the BF Goodrich tires we prefer, and the tablets were about 20% more expensive than in Switzerland, even though duty-free.



The journey inland led along a wide valley which runs parallel to the coast. In this area, saltpetre was previously mined on a large scale. One ruin of the former mining operations after another can be seen from the road. The remains of the Humberstone Mine were converted into open-air museum, which gave us an interesting insight into this important and money-making industry of the past. The exhibition shows, beside the rusting corrugated iron buildings and few preserved machines, the still existing accommodation and facilities for the more than 800 workers and employees. Chile was, thanks to the saltpetre, for a long time the



# Northern Chile

world's biggest supplier of fertilizer. However, the synthetic production of nitrate made the raw material superfluous and led to the closure of all mines.

A side trip took us to the small town of *Pica*, located on the slopes of the Andes. There, thanks to the ideal climate, the best citrus fruit of Chile are grown. It actually turned out, that around *Pica* an extensive production area for citrus fruits has been established. The farmers benefit from the generous water resources in the otherwise arid environment. At the same time the sources of thermal water supply the various baths in town.

Before we began the long drive back to *San Pedro*, we visited the *Cerro Pintado*. Along a ridge, huge petroglyphs can be seen. They are meant to be about 2000 years old, and showed next to animal and human figures, above all, many geometric patterns. Again and again we noticed also huge "Swiss cross" on the hill side, as if the Helvetii have immortalized themselves long time ago.



When we were driving away from *San Pedro*, we have seen many areas with bright red flowers along the road. We wanted to have a better look at these blossoms and found surprising that on closer inspection some tiny, countless flowers were growing. Although we had heard that 2017 was a particularly good year to experience the blooming desert. However, there was always talk of the central part of the Atacama, where the particularly lush flower carpets appeared. Obviously, the *San Pedro* region had received enough rain to sprout the plants and let us marvel at the colours.



# The Northwestern Argentina



## The Northwestern Argentina

### Across the Andes to Argentina

Getting to the *Paso Sico* took us first to the south along the *Salar*, then the road climbed slowly but steadily. With *Socaire* we reached the last village in Chile. We visited the small, beautiful church and enjoyed the magnificent views down to the salt lake. Thousands of blooming lupines formed a blue carpet in the otherwise barren landscape. Via a spur road we came up to the *Lagunas Miscanti y Miniques*. The landscape around these lakes strongly reminded us of the lagoons route in Bolivia. As the place can be reached in a day trip from *San Pedro*, many people were on the walking trails.

Shortly after, the asphalt gave way to a well driveable gravel road. Everywhere along the road towards the pass, we saw numerous construction crews who were working on the road and sent us on detours. The work indicated, that the pass road will be paved throughout in the foreseeable future, at least on the Chilean side.

A next scenic highlight on the route was the *Salar Tolar*. Although the wind was blowing at gale force across the plain and took our breath away, the magnificent landscape compensated by far for this inconvenience. Actually we had planned to spend the night at the *Salar*. But even at the relatively sheltered spot we had chosen, the wind was



still raging with unpleasant strength. Since we still had enough time to look for something else, we moved on.

## The Northwestern Argentina

At over 4500m we reached the summit of the pass and soon after arrived at the border station in 3800m elevation. After a cold night we headed towards RN52 which led over the parallel *Paso de Jama*. 50 km on the well passable dirt road, across the plateau, the landscape was beautiful and very impressive.



Once on the main road, we went even faster ahead, because the road leading up to the descent into the *Quebrada Humahuaca* is mostly flat across the plain. We passed the snow-white dazzling surface of the *Salinas Grandes* where salt is mined in almost 4000m.



The descent to the lowlands was leading through spectacular eroded landscapes with all kinds of colours and shapes. In countless bends we lost more than 2000 meters elevation in a short time. The lower we came, the higher the temperature rose and when we reached *Purmamarca* the thermometer had climbed to over thirty degrees.

In the camp we met a young Argentine family from *Mar del Plata*. We got along well right away and had interesting conversations about God and the world. During the get-together we decided to have an *Asado* together, the famous Argentinean grill orgy. We had already bought a well over 800g Entrecote double and contributed it to the meal. Our



# The Northwestern Argentina

neighbours came back from the butcher with a sirloin of almost 1.5 kg, and some sausages. The young Argentinian, already a master of *Parilla*, introduced us to the Argentine style of BBQ. On the smallest embers he grilled the meat for more than an hour until it had a nice crust on outside and was tender as butter.

## Humahuaca

*Purmamarca* is known for its *Cerro Siete Coloures*, the mountain of the seven colours. In the soft light of the morning we visited the eroded landscape, located directly outside the town. In fact, the hills shone in all shades of colour, from green to red to all possible ochre and yellow tones.

The subsequent journey through the *Quebrada de Humahuaca* led past more colourful mountain slopes while the valley floor glowed with lush greenery. Our eyes enjoyed the huge pastures, lined with tall, slender poplars. The sight of lush vegetation was after the weeks that we spent in the barren Andes, quite soothing.



In *Tilcara* we visited the market and supplemented our food stocks again with fresh vegetables and fruits. In *Humahuaca* we reached the northernmost point of our trip. The small tourist town is famous for its church. At 12 o'clock a mechanical statue of *San Francisco* appears on its outer wall to give the waiting people his blessing. With reverence, the faithful visitors crossed in front of the wooden statue, which seemed a bit strange to us, as not religious viewers.



# The Northwestern Argentina

## Salta

*Salta* is said to be one of the most beautiful cities in Argentina and we didn't want to miss it. Our campsite was a bit outside the town, so we started our visit by bus. The historical part of the city is relatively small and did not meet our expectations. The streets around the main square, with church and parliament buildings, invited to stay and also had some well-preserved colonial buildings. However, once we walked away from this centre, *Salta*, like most other big cities, was chaotic, with heavy traffic and lots of shops.



The return trip to the camp gave us an extensive city tour. We boarded the bus exactly the same stop, where we had previously dropped out. Instead of driving directly back to the suburbs, the bus served in a big loop first all neighbouring districts to land back at the same spot after a good half hour. Finally, the trip was still going towards the campground and we had literally experienced in a convenient way large parts of *Salta*.

## National Park El Rey

About 180 km southeast of *Salta* is the small National Park *El Rey*. He was given the name of the estancia, which previously operated in this area a cattle ranch and cultivated agricultural products. A 45 km dirt road took us into the heart to a beautifully landscaped campground that is free of charge. We met Monica and Gabriel from Buenos Aires, our only neighbours. They had 14 days of vacation and had taken their little camper all the way to the Northwest of Argentina. The whole trip to return home would, as they told us, be a good 5000km long. For Argentines nothing extraordinary, because if they want to see their huge country such distances cannot be avoided. We enjoyed the day with our new friends and of course an *Asado* was prepared in the evening. Gabriel also mastered the art of *Parillada* well and the meat portions were again measured more than generous.

# The Northwestern Argentina



The next day we visited the parts of the park accessible by car. First we drove on a narrow dirt road to the *Cascada los Lobitos*. The resident river otters we were not to be seen and of tapirs, obviously present, we saw only the footprints. Even without these animals the landscape with lush vegetation once again was incredibly beautiful.



In *Rio Popayan* we met Monica and Gabriel again. At the ranger station, there was no official camp, but it was in the planning stage and should soon be set up. However, the Ranger offered us to stay next to his house. In *Rio Popayan*, which flowed only a few minutes' walk away, we saw swarms of large fish. Until the year 2000, the river was a popular fishing paradise. After that, fishing was banned and the severely depleted fish stocks recovered soon.

Since the temperature had risen to about 30 degrees, we decided again to go back later to the river, but this time in a bathing suit. Even if the water flowed slowly at this point, and was also quite warm, the cooling was still glorious.

## On the way to Cafayate

After leaving the National Park we drove west on small roads. Following a river, the route led through impressive landscapes that reminded us of the south-eastern United States. In a cattle-guard across the road we discovered a cow who was stuck between the steel bars. Unfortunately, we saw that there was no way to free the animal from his predicament without causing any more damage. But we could at least

# The Northwestern Argentina

report the issue to the people on a farm, 20 km down the road, so that they could take care of the beast.

Past the *Dique Cabra Coral*, a huge reservoir, we reached the main road, but turned soon after towards the mountains. The pass in 3200masl also formed the border of the National Park *Los Cardones*. The park got its name from the countless columnar cacti growing in this region, the *Cardones*. It also has some landscapes to offer, one of the highlights was certainly the *Valle Encantada* with its rock formations. Unfortunately, it is not allowed to camp in this wonderful area.



Therefore we continued the same day to *Cachi*, located on a pleasant 2300masl. According iOverlander there should be a nice place to stay outside the village, in a small side valley. When we got there, we discovered with joy, that Nadine and Patrick of "Flizzontour" had already set up camp in this very place. They had Viola, a friend of Nadine, on board, who accompanied them on a part of their trip. We spent a funny evening together and had to tell lots of stories once again.

From *Cachi* our route led southward along the famous *Ruta 40*, with more than 5000 km, the longest road in the world. The 40 starts at the Bolivian border and leads down to *Tierra del Fuego*, so this is probably not the only section that we will travel on this road.

The changing landscape is marked by dry areas and a green river valley. Only a few small villages line the route. Fortunately the traffic remained low, because the track was very dusty and often narrow and winding. A scenic highlight was the *Valle Flecha*. The impressive, arrow-like rock formations, which had given the area the name, stuck out sharp and high off the ground. Soon after we arrived at *Cafayate*, and therefore at the northern end of the largest wine-growing region of Argentina.

# The Northwestern Argentina

## The Ruta 40 Southwards

The route usually follows the course of the Andean to the South. The landscape changed again and again from desert-like areas to green sections. When passing through the *Cuesta de Miranda*, a beautiful mountain range, the weather threw a spanner in the works. The sky was overcast and it was raining off and on, so that we did not see much of the surrounding landscape. A short time later we found a nice campsite and when the weather cleared in the evening, we took the opportunity to stretch our legs on a short hike.



Our original plan to cross the Andes over one of the high passes to Chile, we, unfortunately, had to give up. All the passes still had winter closure and were not passable.

Therefore, we decided to keep driving south on the *Ruta 40* to *San Jose de Jachal* and from there to bypass the great city of *San Juan* on a backroad. There was hardly any traffic and since this road ran much closer to the Andes, the landscape was correspondingly more beautiful. The route led past the *Cerro de Alcazar*, a mountain range in shape of a castle from the Middle Ages, and brought us to the area of the *El Leoncito* National Park.

## El Leoncito National Park

The description of the small, little-visited national park sounded promising and a visit was likely worthwhile. We arrived at the park and its beautifully landscaped campground early in the afternoon. The weather was at its best and offered exploring the surrounding area on a hike. This National Park was originally also an *Estancia* and the traces of the former settlement were still everywhere. It will take a while until the signs of humans will be completely gone and nature has fully recaptured its space.

## The Northwestern Argentina

The walk took us to a small waterfall, which was not necessarily to be expected in the otherwise very dry area. The associated stream formed a small valley, where the path continued along. Under a bush we discovered a couple of wild guinea pigs. To see these cute animals in its original form, whose original home is South America, was surprising. So far we had known them only as popular pets and in some countries for food.



Due to the beautiful and cloudless weather, we took the opportunity to visit a very near stationed astronomical observatory in the evening. We got a chance to look in the clear, starry sky through one of the set up telescopes. One of the present astronomers turned the telescope again and again on new constellations, planets and nebula and gave appropriate explanations about them. Although the available equipment was not a giant telescope, it revealed objects in the universe, which we had not seen with our own eyes before.

# Central Chile



## Central Chile

### From Argentina to Chile Across the Paso Cristo Redentor

During the winter season, roughly from April to December, the *Paso de los Libertadores*, also called *Cristo Redentor*, is the only pass south of the *Paso Sico*, and *Paso de Jama* near *San Pedro de Atacama*, that is open. It can happen at times that the road must be closed during a large snowfall, but this does not occur very often thanks to the existing tunnel. The smaller passes, which would be more interesting and scenic, usually open about early December.

We met the main road RN 7 at *Uspallato* and followed this through beautiful landscapes towards the *Paso de los Libertadores*. Often, we had a view of the 5 and 6 thousand meters high, snow-capped peaks. The highest mountain in South America and at the same time the highest outside of the Himalayan range, the *Aconcagua* (6960 m), kept hiding in clouds and was only partially visible, but we still imagined its immense size and height. The crossing over the actual pass was not possible this time of year, so we had to use the 4 km long base tunnel. A few kilometres after the tunnel exit we reached the common border station for the Argentina exit and Chile entry formalities.



# Central Chile

## La Campana National Park

In countless bends the pass road is leading down to lower elevations. While at the pass cold and windy weather prevailed, it became rapidly warmer and the environment green. Soon we drove through vernal, flourishing landscapes, the roadsides were covered with coloured poppies, or *Amapola* as they are called in Chile. In the plain we saw now more often orchards and vineyards.

We settled in a lovely campsite just outside the *La Campana* National Park and were, as so often, the only ones there. Relatively early in the morning we drove into the park because the weather promised to be hot and the planned hike to be exhausting. On a path we walked steadily uphill to a lookout point, which revealed the view of the valley, where a large number of Chile palm trees grow, one of the main attractions of the park. The endemic palm is up to 25m high and has a very massive trunk. The trees had almost been wiped out because from their juice, a syrup or palm honey was produced. For this, the bark had to be peeled away from the base and the top of the palm are cut off, which led to the death of the tree. Thanks to the establishment of the National Park *La Campana*, the Chile Palms are now protected and thrive again in large numbers.



Along the hike we noticed repeatedly *Yucca* plants whose beautiful flowers shone in a unique turquoise blue. A short detour into the woods ended at one of the most beautiful palm groves of the park. The trees here were huge and formed an impressive group. The mighty trunks were up to 1.5m thick and tapered only in the upper part, therefore, smaller palms, which already grow with the thick trunk from the ground, seemed a bit out of proportion. After about two hours we reached the *Cascada Cortadera*. The waterfall itself was not very impressive, the scenery, however, and now in spring, the many blooming plants were worth the climb anyway. Above the falls we

## Central Chile

enjoyed a break in the shade and cooled the hot feet in the creek. We met a group mountain bikers who had taken the same path and also made a rest at the waterfall. We talked with them about our trip and were given good advice on what we should see in Chile. The bikers looked forward to the thrilling downhill and we too got downhill faster, but needed but well over an hour before we were back at the car.



## Valparaiso

For the visit of *Valparaiso* we didn't want to take our own car to the city. Therefore we had chosen a campground in *Limache*, from where we could reach the centre in just over an hour by Metro. From various sides, the city tours "Tour 4 Tips» have been recommended. These tours, guided by young people, are free, yet a tip was expected. We met at 10:00 in the *Plaza Sotomayor*, where the tour guides were already waiting and were easy recognized by their orange T-shirts.

The tour was offered in Spanish and English language, and we joined the English-speaking group, as this was a bit smaller. The first part was on foot through the quarter, before we boarded a public bus and drove up to the *Plaza Bismarck*. This point was chosen to enjoy the beautiful view of the city, unfortunately the prevailing morning fog prevented a good view. We continued on foot down to the *Parque Cultural*. It surrounds the former prison, which confined countless political prisoners during the terrible time of the Pinochet dictatorship. Today, the building complex is available to Chilean artists for exhibitions, concerts etc. Along narrow alleys, past countless *Murales*, wall paintings for which *Valparaiso* is famous, we went back to the centre. Finally, we

## Central Chile

boarded one of the old trolley buses and ended the tour where we had started.



The afternoon we used to explore the neighbourhoods on our own. On small lanes, which are only accessible on foot, we reached different viewpoints and kept going to the *Bellavista* neighbourhood where many more murals can be admired. The history of the murals began at the time of the reign of terror of Pinochet. They were the only way to express the anger of the people, without risking to be prosecuted for it, because the artists were anonymous. These illegal activities, from the perspective of the former government, were highly dangerous, therefore the sprayer developed strategies that allowed them, to produce even large paintings within a few minutes on the walls through teamwork. The tradition of these paintings, now for a good reason accepted art, means many modern works of art throughout *Valparaíso* are on display, alongside with the old *Murales*, which were partially restored. At the foot of the hill, below *Bellavista*, we went shopping for fresh food for our dinner at the market, before we drove back with the Metro.



# Central Chile

## Santiago de Chile

The main reason for the visit to the capital *Santiago* was to finally shop for new tires for our camper. Since Peru we had repeatedly unsuccessfully tried to find a replacement. With our demands in Chile we were always confronted with the statement that the tires would be ordered in Santiago. Based on this information, we assumed that the desired tires should actually be on stock there. As a possible address of *Supermercado del Neumatico* was mentioned, so we dropped in there. We found the huge building, and the at least ten seller booth in the reception area looked ever promising. However, the disillusionment came when we asked for our preferred tire model, they didn't have them on stock. But after a call, we got good news: At the store in the city centre 8 tires would be available. We reserved five tires, and drove the fastest route to the specified address. Behind an unassuming entrance a huge hall is hiding a dozen work places. After we had paid by credit card, the new rubber was fitted, and an hour later we were on new tires, which would hopefully keep again for more than 60,000 km, or at least until the end of the trip. The owners of this tire business left us with a little special feeling, because on all the walls were religious images with biblical quotations and while waiting we were covered with religious texts and a DVD. Apparently the people were members of a sect and tried to convert their customers as they are waiting. However, all this didn't matter to us, because we had finally found our new tires here and yet at a reasonable price. For those who are themselves in the situation of need in Chile, the contact points on the Internet are: [ventas@sdn.cl](mailto:ventas@sdn.cl) or [www.sdn.cl](http://www.sdn.cl), From other travellers we have learned that this company can get off-road tires, reliable with sufficient lead time, even the most exotic dimensions, such as truck tires.



After we were rid of this concern, we headed to a camp south of the city from where we wanted take a bus to the centre the next day. We knew

# Central Chile

that, just like in *Valparaiso*, in Santiago city tours of the company [www.Tours4Tips.com](http://www.Tours4Tips.com) are offered as well.

Punctually at 10 AM we arrived at the *Museo de Bellas Artes*, where the tours start. Since this time the English-speaking group was already quite big, we joined the Spanish speakers because it only had five people in the group.

Right at the beginning of the tour we plunged into the market halls of the city. From the almost purely touristy *Mercado Central*, the main attraction was the hall itself, an old steel structure with many trendy restaurants but little market, it went over the *Rio Mapocho* to the *La Vega Chica* and *La Vega Central* markets. There the true market life of the city played out. There was hardly something you could not buy here. The vegetables were fresh and the meat selection gigantic.

By Metro then we drove to *Cementerio Central*, the Central Cemetery, where over 2 million people are supposed to be buried. Since the early 19th century the remains of urban residents were buried here, no wonder the space is getting tight. The cheapest tombs are housed in multi-storey facilities with niches, of which there were hundreds of rows with thousands of tombs. As we found out, these niches are even used multiple times, whenever only the bones of a corpse are left, they are pushed together and dumped at the back of the vault, which creates space for the next family member. A large part of the cemetery was reserved for the wealthy families who were buried in quite huge, beautiful mausoleums. Even some celebrities of the country had found here their final resting place, including the former President of Chile,



## Central Chile

Salvador Allende, who was overthrown by a military junta. Whether he had actually committed suicide, as claimed, or was killed in the presidential palace in the bombing by the Chilean Air Force, the guide could not say with certainty.

### Southwards, But With Detours ....

After the big city bustle in *Santiago* it was time to disappear back into the natural beauty of the Chilean Andes. Along the mountain range is one national park next to the other. The first one we were headed, was the *Riserva Nacional Rio Los Cipreses*. Despite the beautiful surroundings, the visit was for us a little disappointing, because beside the cashing of the admission fee we received little information about activities in the park, only two or three short trails have been proposed to us. However, the campsite was beautifully located and beautifully designed and next to a small group of campers we had the spacious site for ourselves. Unfortunately, the solar heated shower was closed for unexplained reasons, but that didn't embarrass us much. Our own solar shower was after three hours in the sun heated to a temperature that we even had to add cold water before using it.



Back on the highway to the south, we drove through the middle of the fertile Central Valley, which is also known as the fruit basket of Chile. Besides all kinds of fruits in this region also many good wines are grown. We wanted to get an impression of the production methods of wineries in the *Valle Colchagua* and therefore planned a visit to one of the wineries. The selection of possible producers who welcome visitors, was huge. Spontaneously, we left the motorway in *San Fernando* to follow one of the many signposted wine routes. After about 2 km driving, the

## Central Chile

beautiful entrance to an apparently elegant estate caught our attention. Our choice was made and after we arrived at the reception we received a private tour of the facility from one of the employees. We learned that the *Casa Silva* is one of the oldest wineries in Chile, and that it was founded in 1892 by a Frenchman. Meanwhile, the fourth generation of the family produces wine and they own more than 10,000 hectares of vines spread across the region. They grow all major grape varieties and process it into high-quality wines. For tasting on site, we were a little early, and Ueli still had to drive. However, we wanted to prove the quality of the wines, thus stocked our "wine cellar" with a few bottles for this purpose. We were not disappointed, each of the wines from *Casa Silva*, whether red or white, was outstanding.



After that, we moved back towards the Andes, into the valley of the *Rio Claro*, where we wanted to visit the National Park *Siete Tazas*. A first hike took us through the mountains and the valley along the *Rio Claro*. Again, the spring with lush green meadows, colourful flowers and flowering shrubs was omnipresent. Back from the hike, we could not believe our eyes when we encountered Trix and Sascha at the Visitor Centre. We were thrilled about the reunion. The National Park remained closed next day because it was Election Day. So we decided to drive a few kilometres



## Central Chile

and get in a campground outside the park. This was an ideal starting point to visit the main attraction of the national park, the *Siete Tazas*. The "seven cups" appear as a series of pools in the canyon of the *Rio Claro*, which are connected by waterfalls. The trail runs above the river and gave a view of the bright blue ponds, fed by the crystal clear waters of the *Rio Claro*, which has given the river its name. We enjoyed the get-together with our friends and agreed to meet again in the evening after individual plans for the next day.



A side trip to the town of *Molina* gave us an opportunity to replenish our food supplies before we dipped back into the wild. Our next destination was the *Riserva Nacional Altos de Lircay*. The park was once again one of the many in the valleys of the Andes. The 3km long track from the entrance to the campsite was only permitted with 4x4 vehicles. In fact, the dirt road was very steep and partly washed out, but could be handled easily with our Land Cruiser. The weather was for once overcast, thus the temperatures on 1300masl rather frosty. Towards evening the sun came out and we enjoyed our aperitif outdoors, in the pleasant warmth. The night, however, was very cold.

Our hike the next morning led along the valley, further into the park. Beautiful forests with large oak trees and *Coigue*, or southern beech, in their bright green spring dress, delighted the eye. Again and again we heard the drumming of woodpeckers, and we were able to observe some of the up to 45cm big birds with their black plumage and bright red hood on dead tree trunks. At the end of our walk we reached a vantage point, which revealed the views into the spectacular mountains. The still substantial amount of snow on the heights were a sure indication that we were already a few thousand kilometres south of the equator. With

## Central Chile

more than 20 kilometres in the legs we reached after about 7 hours hiking the camp again and were first greeted by a fox. The *Guardaparque* had already announced it, because the animal was a regular guest at the campsite, where from time to time he got hold of some food stuff.



On *Lago Cobun* we wanted once again to stay a few days and take advantage of the beautiful lakeside campground and its good infrastructure. Sascha and Trix had this idea too and we spent a wonderful time together with plenty of good food and drinks in interesting discussions about how we could improve the world, or even save it. In the evening Sascha took out his guitar and we were treated to an exclusive concert of the two friends.



A day trip took us to the upper valley of the *Rio Maule*. Initially green and springlike, with increasing altitude the landscape became rather

## Central Chile

wintery. At the top, on the border with Argentina, at over 2000m above sea level was still plenty of snow and the landscape looked almost arctic because of the almost complete lack of vegetation.



On the way back we parked our car and walked, carrying the swimsuits, into a sidevalley where hot sulphur springs invited. Unfortunately, we were disappointed, as the spring flood had swept away the bridge, which would have led to the natural pools. The walk through the beautiful river and mountain scenery was, after all, a pleasure and well worth the effort.

A little further down the valley we could make up our bath in the *Termas El Medano*, another hot spring, even though this was not quite as warm, "only" 32 °C. But the pools were crystal clear and the water did not smell of sulphur.



On our drive to the south, now on our own again, we stopped at the *Salto del Laja*, the largest waterfall in Chile. Once again, we had not realized that our visit to this popular destination fell on a weekend. Only the large number of visitors, warned us of this fact. However, since we stayed very close, we postponed the walk to the waterfall to the Sunday morning and were able to dodge the crowd elegantly. The *Salto del Laja* with a width of 100m and a height of 50m was really impressive, because



# Central Chile

the river had a lot of water from the melting snow in the mountains, so that the water masses were roaring and shot spraying over the rock steps.

## Chile's Small South

The area between *Los Angeles* and *Puerto Montt* is often referred to as Chile's Small South or as Lakes Region. The beautiful area lies between the Panamericana to the west and the Andes to the east and is home to some national parks, beautiful mountain landscapes with natural forests and numerous lakes. The region thus offers ideal conditions for exciting hikes and camping in the countryside.

Our first stop was to the *Tolhuaca* National Park. Much of this area was severely affected by a forest fire about 15 years ago and was still not accessible. The southern part of the park with the *Laguna Malleco*, however, provided some opportunities for short walks along the lagoon. When we arrived at the local campsite, we faced 50 tents on the site. However, the park ranger assured us, that the people in a weekend event for students would leave in the evening. Despite the large number of visitors we met hardly other people on our walk and when we came back, everybody was packing up. As predicted, in the evening we were actually the only remaining guests.

The walk the next day led through a beautiful forest straight up to a viewpoint, which enabled a broad view of the lake and the mountains. After descending, the trail followed the shore to an impressive waterfall at the outlet of the lake. Again, due to the melting snow, a large amount of water rushed in the 50m lower pool, lined with basalt walls. On an evening walk to the lake, we were hoping to spot some of the many bird species found here. However, the number of birds was small, but the setting sun conjured a wonderful atmosphere over the lagoon.



## Central Chile

On the way to the national park we had bought fresh vegetables in a beautiful and well-stocked *Fruteria* and on a street stall gorgeous strawberries were offered. So we could draw from the plenty in our kitchen. We opted for a strawberry and asparagus salad and cabbage wraps. Well, the combination of spring-like and winter may seem incongruous, but every course for itself was a treat. Even when cooking, flexibility was often required and the menus had to be adapted to the offer.

On the drive from the national park, which still led through impressive scenery, we met on the roadside a *Caracara*, a bird of prey. It hopped leisurely and unhurried down the gravel road, eyeing us curiously. As we later discovered, we would get to see countless *Caracaras* after this first encounter, because the species is very common in South America. After almost two hours we arrived at our next destination, where only a little later Trix and Sasha appeared to our delight. Together we planned a nice hike in the near *Reserva Nacional Malalcahuello*. Since we had now two cars available, it was possible to park one in advance at the end of the hike and drive with the other to the starting point.

Right at the beginning we walked up to a pass through the ash landscape of *Lonquimay*, an active volcano, who covers the ambient over again with new material. There was still much snow in the shady areas and before we reached the highest point, we had to cross two large snowfields. The landscape looked like on the moon, the grey areas showed no vegetation and were interrupted only by the white snowfields.



After crossing the pass we went down the other side in a steep descent and the view opened on the volcano *Llaima* and its neighbours in the distance. Another sweat-inducing climb through mixed forests of primitive *Araucarias* and pale green southern beech, called *Coigue*, took us on a second pass. After a well-deserved lunch break we took the descent of 800 meters in attack. Again and again, the path led through snowfields. As a fact we were not travelling alone in this area, this was

## Central Chile

shown by fresh tracks, which, by looking at the shape and size, could only be from cougar. On one hand, we were glad not to meet the shy cat face to face, on the other hand, it would of course be unique to be able to take a photo of this animal. But the impressive views of the surrounding volcanoes and the valley offered wonderful subjects for souvenir pictures.



Next, we headed to the National Park *Conguillio*. The north entrance to the park, which was actually quite near our current location, was still closed. But we had heard from other travellers that driving around on the eastern bypass of the mountain is very interesting and scenic, so we chose this "detour" to get to the *Conguillio*. In fact, we crossed, especially in the area of *Icalma*, one beautiful landscape after another. Magnificent river valleys alternated with impressive mountains and wild jungles. Despite a lot of corrugated and bumpy dirt roads this route was definitely worth the detour.

Shortly after we set up our camp, Nadine and Patrick, the "Flizzers", appeared once more. They had recently come back from Argentina to Chile to further drive south. As always, we had a fun and entertaining evening and a lot to tell. In the morning we drove up to the National Park *Conguillio*. Again, some of the trails were still covered with snow and therefore closed. But soon we found a route that was passable. This led parallel to the *Lago Conguillio* through sparse *Araucaria* forest. Spring had not yet taken over at this elevation and nature was only tentatively green. On the way back, along the lake, we arrived at the beautiful, black lava beach and over and over again enjoyed the spectacular views of the snow-covered *Sierra Nevada*. Before we sat back in the car, we added a hike to one of the largest and oldest *Araucaria*. This evergreen trees, also called Andean pine or snake tree, are among the oldest tree species in the world. Growing spherical cones, with large brown fruits were an important part of the food for the indigenous people of Chile and are very popular even today. Trough beautiful forest, along a stream, the

## Central Chile

trail led higher up. After about an hour walk we reached the mighty tree that is about 50m high and around 1800 years old.

On the way back we made a stop at the *Laguna Verde*, which is surrounded by a black ash landscape. The green trees of the forest and the bright white, snow-capped *Llaima* volcano formed an impressive contrast to the otherwise barren landscape. The area left a hint of the forces of nature that had led to the utter devastation of the valley floor when the volcano erupted. But we were even more impressed to see how nature manages to recover in the most desolate lava flows within a short time.



The next leg took us to the region of *Pucon*. This popular tourist resort was for us definitely too busy and populated, which is why we chose a campsite a few kilometres away. We found a place right on the *Rio Trancura* and enjoyed the glorious sunshine. Unfortunately there was a change in the weather overnight, so we had to postpone the planned hike in the near *Huerquehue* National Park. However, we took it easy, because on Sunday there would be too many people on the trails and a rest day never hurts.

On Monday the weather had cleared again and we went at once to the end of *Lago Tinquilco*. A bumpy, narrow road with a river crossing demanded again a good ground clearance of the car. The only parking at the trail start was luckily still available and saved us a 2 km long walk. From the beginning, the trail climbed steeply through the forest. As altitude increased, the outlook down to the lake and on the smoking *Villarica* Volcano in the background was impressive. After about 500 meters gain we reached the *Lago Chico* in the middle of the forest. A short leg took us to *Lago Toro* and soon after the *Lago Verde* made the trio finally full. After a short lunch break we took the descent back to the valley under the feet.

## Central Chile



Before we set out towards *Lago Calefquen* and then to Argentina, we wanted to take a drive through the border mountain valleys east of *Pucon*. On small corrugated roads we drove through green valleys with steep slopes. In this area, mainly *Mapuche* people live, the original inhabitants of Chile. Marginalized and deprived of their ancestral lands, these people engage in humble farming to make a poor living. On the north shore of *Lago Caburgua* we found a magnificent camp spot at the lakeshore. Except a few cows, but they respectfully kept their distance, we were alone until we heard a dinghy approaching. Two men got ashore and greeted us warmly. They told us that they were going to pick their two grandchildren, which were delivered by the school bus just above our camp. The house of the family stands on the opposite shore and is only accessible on foot or by boat.

Via *Villa Rica*, where we again bought fine bread in the German Bakery, we drove the next day to the *Lago Calafquén*. This time of year not much was going on in the famous tourist resort *Coñaripe* and only one campsite was open. At the end of December, when the Chileans have holidays, the popular area will be full of guests. A few kilometres from *Coñaripe* are the most beautiful hot springs in Chile, if not of all South America, the *Termas Geometricas*. We planned our departure so, that we would arrive at the door opening, at 11 AM. Thanks to our early arrival, we had the whole place for nearly an hour to ourselves. At the upper end of a narrow canyon, hot water flows from the rocks into a total of 20 different sized and manmade pools. The cooling water is replaced from time to time by boiling hot spring water and once the temperature has dropped to 45 °C, the pool is released for swimming. The vegetation in the narrow valley was lush and green, and the walls are covered with various ferns and at the edge of the creek *Nalca*, giant rhubarb plants with leaves as big as umbrellas, thrive. In between the pools, the well-known Chilean architect had built connections and bridges that formed, with its red colour, a wonderful contrast to the green. We moved comfortably from basin to basin and enjoyed the swim in different warm water. Around

## Central Chile

13 o'clock the number of visitors increased slowly, but we had wonderfully relaxed and moved on.



We didn't want to take one of the usual routes, to return to Argentina. An interesting alternative is the ferry from *Puerto Fuy* across the *Lago Pirihueico* to *Puerto Pirihueico* from where it is only a few kilometres to the Argentine border. After arriving in *Puerto Fuy* we asked about available space on one of the ferries for the next day, a Friday. Unfortunately, both possible connections were already fully booked, because apparently many Chileans like to spend their weekend in Argentina's *San Martin de los Andes*. However, we were informed that four spots would be set aside for emergency trips of emergency vehicles on each crossing. These are kept empty until just before departure, and if not needed given to standby vehicles.

The trip across the narrow sea costs about 30 CHF for two people and a car and takes 1 ½ hours. The scenic passage reminded us of trips along the Norwegian fjords. The area along the *Lago Pirihueico* is not accessible by roads and is therefore uninhabited. Except for two small huts we saw no traces of civilization on the shore, only virgin forest. After arriving in *Puerto Pirihueico* all vehicles were rushing to the nearby border, resulting in a long queue at the customs station. Since there is only traffic on this road when the ferry arrives, the border station is only staffed with few officers, thus the progress is a bit slow.



When it was our turn, the departure formalities were completed quickly and we took the few kilometres to the Argentine side under the wheels. Since the vehicles arrived there individually, there was no waiting.

## Central Chile

Again, the process was flawless, no forms had to be filled and no fees to be paid. The food check was completely left out, so that we even brought the fresh tomatoes on board easily across the border.

There were about 40 km left to *San Martin de los Andes*, where we were joyfully expected and welcomed by our friends Cristina and Edgardo. We had met them in *Arequipa* in Peru, where they had used the same campground as us on their holiday trip.

# Patagonia Southbound



## Patagonia Southbound

### San Martin de los Andes

The location of *San Martin de los Andes* is already in Northern Patagonia, therefore from here on we report in an extra Patagonia chapter, which describes both regions, the Argentine and the Chilean side.

*San Martin* turned out to be a lively, almost alpine tourist centre, beautifully located on *Lago Lacar*, surrounded by impressive mountains. Also here, at the beginning of December, not much was happening, but this would totally change a few weeks later.

The very first evening Edgardo kept his promise given in *Arequipa*, to serve us a typical Argentine *Parillada*, when we visit him. For us still unfamiliar for Argentina, however, that about 10 o'clock at night, no one seriously thought of food. But we had a lot to talk about and the emerging hunger could also be held at bay with one or the other beer. The fire was already alight, when two other guests joined us, Rosana and Marcelo, good friends of our hosts who were also invited to the dinner. The BBQ was not setup outdoors, but in the kitchen, built into the wall, like a fireplace, but at convenient working height. We admired the patience and the passion Edgardo put in preparing the meat.



The next day we were all guests at Marcelo and Rosana, and Marcelo proved that he too is a master of *Parilla*. Apparently the perfect preparation of meat has been placed in the cradle of the Argentines. We

## Patagonia Southbound

were the longer the more convinced that Argentina is definitely NOT the right country for vegetarians and blue cross members.

Sunday we spent with Cristina and Edgardo on nearby *Lago Melinquina*. In glorious sunshine and warm temperatures we sat all afternoon in the shade of the trees and deepened our friendship. How exhausting it was for us, to communicate all day in Spanish, we realized each evening. Although we now mastered the language quite well, our shortcomings were clearly revealed, especially when discussing more fundamental topics. But thanks to the intensive discussions with our friends we also realized that we achieved great progress in these few days.



## The Ruta de Siete Lagos

On the route further south the *Ruta 40* crossed a magnificent area, characterized by many small and large lakes and crystal clear rivers. Unfortunately, the weather had changed and the mountains were often in fog and dampened the otherwise bright spring colours. We had decided not to go to *Bariloche*, but to go back to Chile via the *Paso Cardenal Antonio Samoré*.



At the border we encountered the first time a larger traffic queue. Despite the many people and vehicles, the clearance was progressing rapidly. After waiting about 45 min., the actual formalities had been completed in no time. As always, it was first to pick up the exit stamp at the *Immigration* and then deliver the TIP of the car to the *Aduana*.

## Patagonia Southbound

The Chilean border post was nearly 40 km behind the actual border. There, too, a lot of cars accumulated, but the rush was also handled expeditiously. Pick up an entry stamp at the immigration and getting a new TIP at customs and all this free of charge and without filling any forms. Only the usual declaration for the food check was necessary, yet the actual check by the officials was fast and rather superficial. Of course, by now we knew how we got away the best. We always had something to give, either half an onion or a banana, and voluntarily listed the food we carried, which wouldn't cause any problems, so the officials did not come up with the idea to search for more groceries.

Shortly after the border, we experienced once again a nice example of South American generosity. We passed a factory where mineral water was bottled. As our drinking water tank was nearly empty, we asked there if we could fill the tank on a tap. One of the employee called the boss, and he took care of us. Of course, he was ready to fill our tank and he told us to drive the car across the lawn directly to the bottling plant. While 40 litres were flowing through a hose into our tank, we conducted a lively discussion about the factory, the Chilean politics and other topics. The boss told us with pride that their water is already exported to some countries and that they wanted to win Europe as a market too. We assured him that we would definitely buy the water of the *Puyehue* source after our return to Switzerland should we discover it on the shelves of a supermarket. When questioned by Ueli, the owner told us that in the whole filling process, except a few manometers, no additional measuring devices are installed, everything is controlled manually, not least to keep the control of the system in case of power failures. Finally, we were presented, next to the free water for the tank, a few extra bottles of mineral water. We thanked him for this generosity and promised to recommend their products on. If someone wants to know who is the spendable firm, here is their webpage [www.aguamineralpuyehue.cl](http://www.aguamineralpuyehue.cl)

# Patagonia Southbound

## Valdivia and Surroundings

The continuing bad weather with low clouds and often abundant rain accompanied us all the way driving to the coast in *Valdivia*. In fact, there we met at much better conditions. However, the next morning we were woken by gale-force winds that buffeted our camper. We even had to close the roof so the wind did not tear it to shreds. Around noon, the weather calmed rapidly and we set out to explore the peninsula northwest of the city. From the bumpy road the view on the Pacific coast offered wide beaches and cliffs. In *Los Molinos*, a small town, known for its seafood restaurants, we bought a bag full of mussels at one of the local fishermen for our planned dinner.



The famous brewery *Kunstmann*, a company founded by German immigrants, attracted a lot of visitors with its range of German food and its beer tours. The place was crowded and the menu contained little really German, so we gave up the planned small meal and beer.

Locals had discouraged us from shopping at the fish market of *Valdivia*, since apparently the offered quality was not always the best. The visit there was worth it anyway, because in addition to a huge variety of fish, all sorts of other sea creatures were offered for sale. In addition, in a large part of the market wonderfully fresh vegetables and fruits were sold. In the water behind the fish stalls some massive, fat sea lions, were waiting for their share. Judging by the size and weight of the animals, it looked like they quite often got their treats.



## Patagonia Southbound

With a ferry we crossed over from *Niebla* to *Coral* and followed the coast on a good paved road. Ever again, the road offered a clear view of the sea and the coast until after *Chaihuín* when we turned to on a narrow dirt road that led inland. The track rose steeply up and then just as steeply downhill again and it got worse with every kilometre. On the steep areas it had deeply eroded trenches, so we soon drove at walking pace using the low gears. On top of that the track was always overgrown with bushes. Just before *Hueicolla* the surface became slightly better, but the road was still narrow and overgrown. To cap the adventurous journey, a river crossing waited for us before reaching the road to *La Union*. The water was no more than 50 cm deep and the gravel river bed didn't present any major difficulties, but with a width of a good 50 m the passage was spectacular.



At the beautiful beach of *Hueicolla* we strengthened ourselves with a picnic after the adventure, before we drove further inland. The dirt road was at the beginning a lot better, but we also had to engage all-wheel drive in steep sections, because the dirt track was completely softened by the rains of the past days and deep tracks had formed. In a gradient, a local Toyota Hilux was stuck and blocked our way. The passengers were fitting snow chains to get the vehicle out of the mud. That could be fun! The fear to get stuck as well when trying to start in the ascend, proved fortunately unfounded, as our Land Cruiser mastered the slippery, deep ruts without problems, not least thanks to the recently installed new tires.

At almost a thousand meters above sea we looked for a place to stay. In the middle of an open forest we found a sunny, level place, overgrown with moss and lichen. As we learned later, the forest had been destroyed by a forest fire about 80 years ago. The remaining tree trunks of the time of the fire now loomed like skeletons silvery shimmering in the air. The wind was strong across the plateau and the temperature had dropped significantly. This gave us trouble to heat up our Coleman Oven to get

## Patagonia Southbound

enough temperature to bake the prepared moussaka. However, with a little patience, we could finally enjoy our dinner.



After a cold night with temperatures around freezing, the sun could slowly generate some heat. Our overnight stay has been just outside the nature reserve. In the small visitor centre, we received interesting information about the park. Directly at the car park we started a walk, which led to one of the ancient *Alerce* trees. The *Alerce* or Patagonian Cypress is one of only two species that are listed in the Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. The species is growing only in the south of Chile and Argentina and because of their very popular timber, the entire stock of this tree was virtually eradicated. The remaining *Alerce* are now under strict protection. After about  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour walking up and down we reached the mighty tree. According to the description, it has a trunk diameter of over 4m and is be over 3500 years old. We were almost in awe of this Methuselah, who would have a lot to tell, if he only could speak.

## Lago Llanquihue

Back in civilization, we went to *Frutillar* on *Lago Llanquihue*. Like many other villages in this region *Frutillar* had been established by German immigrants. However, from the originally German-inspired architecture not much was left, except a few houses with a European impact. What stood out were numerous signs with names of hotels, restaurants and shops that were clearly of German origin. What the



## Patagonia Southbound

descendants of immigrants have also adopted for the better, are the bakeries that produce fine bread, something we had to take advantage of.

On the eastern shore of the lake, we found a campground right on the shore, overlooking the mighty *Vulcan Osorno*. The *Osorno*, with its typical conical form and the glaciated summit, belongs to the most beautiful volcanoes in South America.



A day trip took us to the National Park *Vicente Perez Rosales*. First we wanted to look at the *Petrohue* waterfall. Unfortunately it is marketed as a good source of income in the first place, although it is actually part of the national park. Especially foreign visitors are asked to pay large, because instead of 1000 COP for locals, they asked us 4000 COP (about 8 CHF) per person. Since we had already paid for the parking lot, we cancelled the visit of the waterfall.

At *Lago Todos Santos*, which we reached via a dirt road, we wanted to actually take a walk. According to information on the spot, much of the lakeshore is privately owned and therefore is not accessible. Most other officially marked trails were difficult to complicated to hike as all walks are one way and the return transport from the destination would have to be organized. On the way back we nevertheless took the opportunity to take a short walk along the way around the *Laguna Verde*.



## Patagonia Southbound

The next morning the weather promised nothing good! After two sunny days, the sky was overcast and it was raining, partly strong. Shortly before *Puerto Montt* the weather cleared. In the city itself we went shopping to replenish our supplies, otherwise there was not much to see for us. In *Angelmo*, a village just outside however, we visited the well-stocked fish market and enjoyed in one of the overlying restaurants a fine lunch. The portions were once again so large, that we could do without dinner later.



## The Island of Chiloé

With one of the ferries we crossed in 30 minutes over to the island of *Chiloé*. This island is especially known for the many 17th and 18th-century wooden churches, who were appointed to the UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000. The churches were built during the Christianization of the island by the Jesuits and Franciscans and consist largely of native cypress and larch wood. The agricultural areas of *Chiloé* often reminded us of the Swiss midlands. On our drive across the island we visited some of the picturesque, small fishing villages, and in each of the villages, at least one of the wooden churches is to be admired. The weather was, not unusual in this region, very changeable. The change from pouring rain to bright sunshine often happened so quickly that we waited for a shower to end in the car and were able to get out shortly afterwards with dry feet and a blue sky.



# Patagonia Southbound



*Castro*, the largest town on the island, was founded in 1567 by the Spaniards and is the third oldest city in Chile, continuously inhabited since its founding. One of the attractions of *Castro* are its multi-coloured *Palafitos*, stilt houses built along the shore by fishermen. Many of the houses had been devastated by an earthquake and subsequent tsunami in the 1960<sup>th</sup>. Some of the *Palafitos* were not affected and have been lovingly restored and converted into hostels or restaurants.

With *Quellon* we reached not only the southern end of the island, but also the official end, or depending on the perspective, the start of the Panamerican Highway. Until we discovered the marker and signs on the coast in *Quellon*, we were not aware that the Pan-American Highway, by definition, "only" led from Anchorage in Alaska, up to this point on the island of *Chiloé*.



# Patagonia Southbound

When we arrived in *Quellon* we took first care of the ferry crossing to *Chaiten* on the Chilean mainland and could easily book a spot for the next crossing, two days later. Just before we went to the island, the *Carretera Austral* had been interrupted by a massive mudslide south of *Chaiten*, which blocked the onward journey to the south. To bridge this interruption, a bypass ferry service had been set up by the government. We were able to book the free tickets for this detour, together with the ferry crossing and so already secured a place for the next leg at the same time.

## Pumalin Nature Park

We were still chased by poor weather. The ferry reached *Chaiten* around midnight in pouring rain. We drove a few meters away from the pier and parked somewhere on the beach. In the darkness we had no idea where we had landed, but we were tired and just wanted to sleep as soon as possible. We woke up between some bushes on the beach and the view was just as gloomy as the night before. Nevertheless, first we drove along the *Carretera Austral* northwards to the ferry dock in *Caleta Gonzalo*. The whole area until well after *Chaiten* is part of the private nature park *Pumalin*. The meanwhile deceased, former owner of the sportswear brand The North Face, Douglas Tompkins, had years ago started to buy large tracts of land in Patagonia, with the intention convert the land to natural parks and thus protect unique landscapes. The features planned and designed by him offer excellent infrastructure for walking, sleeping and camping, also for longer stays.



## Patagonia Southbound

But the most amazing facilities could not challenge the bad weather. However, we didn't want to be too much discouraged and undertook a short hike through the rain forest, which proved its name just right, to a wooded area, where a group of large and ancient *Alerces* or Patagonian cypress trees stands. Although the walk was short, it was enough to be soaked to the underwear, despite the rain jackets.



The next day promised some pleasant weather, so we went to the valley of the *Rio Amarillo*, in the eastern part of the park. The vegetation was lush and incredibly diverse after all the rain. Especially the huge, rhubarb-like *Nalcas*, whose leaves are up to 2 m in diameter, impressed us mightily. As we reached the end of the valley, we were amazed by the views of the glaciers in the surrounding mountains. The road that leads there, should only be driven with smaller vehicles, preferably with four-wheel drive, as some severe slopes have to be overcome along the rocky road.



When we came back to *Chaiten* in the afternoon, we enjoyed a few hours of sun on the beach, which made the waiting for the bypass ferry in the evening a little more pleasant. The nightly passage along the coast brought us to *Puerto Raul Marin*. We were quite privileged because we were allowed to sleep in our camper.

# Patagonia Southbound



## Northern Part of the Carretera Austral

The *Carretera Austral* is one of the highlights of a Patagonia trip. It leads from *Puerto Montt* 1000 km south to *Villa O'Higgins*. Large sections of the track are now paved, however, the farther to the south, the more often gravel roads prevail. The *Carretera Austral* is the only road that opens up the south of the Chilean Patagonia and not for many years. It was only in the 1970s, when the construction began from the north, and only in 1994 the route to *Villa O'Higgins* was opened.

After a six hours night trip, the ferry arrived in the morning at five o'clock in *Puerto Raul Marin*. It was still pitch dark, thus we decided to park on a level spot near the pier and went back to bed for a few more hours. Despite the continuing gloomy weather, in daylight it turned out, that we had landed in a beautiful place. We saw mostly untouched beaches and forests as far as we could see. The road that brought us back to the *Carretera Austral* near *La Junta*, was in the beginning leading through pristine wilderness, while near the main route agricultural land dominated again. How little developed the area is, we realized when wanted to buy some basic food stuff. We had to scour three shops for ordinary whole milk, to finally get to buy the last two ¼ litre packs. After



we got our fifth flat tire just before *Chaiten*, the tire had to be patched up. As before, anywhere in South America, this service is readily available and it was obvious that the people at the workshop perform this work

## Patagonia Southbound

on a regular base. Anyway, after the short stop we were on the road again and the tire kept the air.

Along the estuary of *Puyuhuapi* the *Carretera* was closed for several kilometres due to construction. But again a bypass ferry had been set up on which the site could be circumnavigated. Due to the continuing heavy rains, waterfalls were tumbling down from all the slopes and all rivers were in full flood. Even if we'd have preferred to drive through this impressive landscape in bright sunshine, the water that came crashing and roaring over the steep cliffs impressed us. They gave the landscape another, not less impressive, face.

In the beautiful and well-equipped campground *Las Torres del Simpson* we spent a pleasant evening. Nacho, the owner of the place, invited us to *Mate* tea and told us the whole story and the rituals around the *Mate* drinking. The ubiquitous standard drink of the *Gauchos* and many Patagonians, is an infusion from the finely cut leaves of the *Mate* bush and is traditionally drunk from a gourd with the *Bombilla*, a metal tube. After the interesting comments we were entertained by Nacho and his wife Sandra with Patagonian folk songs and guitar accompaniment.



In *Coyhaique* the weather cleared at last. The city is a major supply centre for the people around and offered us the best and most affordable opportunity to replenish the food and fuel supplies again, before we took the most isolated part of the *Carretera Austral* in attack. Although it was no longer raining, the clouds hung still very low in the mountains of the National Park *Cerro Castillo* and blocked our views of the imposing peaks.

A trip to *Puerto Ingeniero Ibañez* was worth it especially thanks to the waterfalls of *Rio Ibañez*, who were incredibly impressive by the high

## Patagonia Southbound

volume of water. To stay we looked for a place at the end of the road to *Puerto Levican* on the shore of *Lago General Carrera*, the largest lake in Chile. The wind raged here too, but the site was a bit protected by the surrounding cliffs. For the return trip to the *Ruta 7*, the *Carretera Austral*, we had chosen the parallel road and it turned out that this was scenically even more varied than the already spectacular main route. Through a deep, narrow canyon, past several lakes we finally reached the *Carretera* again. On this we drove back a couple of kilometres to visit the nearby *Manos de Cerro Castillo*. Under an overhanging cliff, only reachable on foot, the *Tehuelche*, the indigenous people of Chile, have left some handprints on the rocks, approximately 8 to 10 thousand years ago. On display are pictures of child and adult hands, which have been produced as red and ochre outline on the rocks in a kind of spray technology.

From *Villa Cerro Castillo* on the *Carretera* was again a gravel road, at the beginning quite wide, and covered with coarse gravel. For us, the driving was not a problem but the many cyclists who wanted to experience this adventure, had to fight hard and we didn't envy them by any means. Along the route there are barely any homes anymore and if, they were mostly dilapidated huts, long time gone and seemed inhabited. Just before *Puerto Rio Tranquilo* we met again the shores of *Lago General Carrera*, which we had left in the morning.



# Patagonia Southbound

## The Marble Cathedrals

From *Puerto Rio Tranquilo* boat tours to the marble cathedrals are offered. The ride along the shore to the impressive rock formations took half an hour. What awaited us there, was enormous. Over time, the water had cut deep caves out of the marble rocks, some large enough to enter with the boat. The water polished walls shone in every imaginable blue and turquoise tones and reflected in the water of the lake. We were there with the agency *El Condor* and, *Nomen est Omen*, indeed we saw, after a long time, once again a condor circling above us. During the outward journey to the *Catedral de Marmol* the waters were reasonably quiet, the return trip to the port ended as a true rock and roll event. The wind had once again freshened up and the boat struggled through the meter-high waves of the lake. Not too long after our return the storm sirens sounded to indicate that the boat tours were discontinued due to high winds.



## The Southernmost Part of the Carretera Austral

The track led further south, past glacier-blue lakes and crystal clear rivers. At the *Rio Baker*, we found once again a really nice pitch with fireplace and the weather allowed us to cook our beef tenderloin over the embers of the campfire.

## Patagonia Southbound

The luck with the weather, however, was short-lived, because the very next day, the landscape was lost again in dreary grey. In *Cochrane*, the last major town on the *Carretera* we again topped up our food and then drove towards *Caleta Tortel*. This place, originally founded by loggers, most people still live mainly from the timber industry, was created without roads. Access by car is possible, however, the actual village is only reached on wooden boardwalks. Kilometre long boardwalks connect the individual houses and the few public buildings, such as schools, health centre, etc. By now, simple hostels and restaurants supply the increasing number of tourists.



To go further south, we had once again to take a ferry which took us in about an hour to *Rio Bravo*. Since the connection is part of the public road system, the transportation is free. We stayed on the pebble beach of the *Rio Bravo*, a few meters from the river and were amazed when we found out in the morning that our car was standing in the water. Due to heavy rains the *Rio Bravo* had risen about half a meter overnight and had inundated the shore. The drive to the end point of the *Carretera Austral* was drowned in the rain. Only in *Villa O'Higgins* we enjoyed a few hours of blue sky again.



We were not surprised that the majority the return trip took place in heavy rain, the weather was definitely not on our side. Therefore we were travelling slow and had time to observe the surroundings, and we discovered shortly before arrival at the ferry the Land Cruiser of Dela and Mark just off the road. We had met the two in northern Ecuador and were happy to meet them again. There was still plenty of time until the departure of the ferry and we sat down for a chat with them. Since they

# Patagonia Southbound

were basically travelling in the same direction, there was a good chance to meet again further south. Before *Cochrane* the weather cleared at last and we spent a sunny afternoon at the *Laguna Esmeralda* on a beautiful wild camping spot.

## Patagonia Park

The Patagonia Park is another project of the former North Face owner Douglas Tompkins. In addition to the area around the Pumalin Park, here he had also bought large estates and turned the land into a nature park. Near the present-day visitor centre, Tompkins had built a villa for himself and his wife, who still lives here temporarily. Douglas Tompkins himself, who died in a kayaking accident several years earlier, is buried in a small cemetery not far from the villa. In this facility, the amenities reflect the high quality standards of Tompkin. All buildings such as visitor centre, restaurant, guest houses or toilets were built of high-quality, natural materials. Unfortunately, the planners were, in our view, not big motorized camping lovers, because the truly generous landscaped places were inaccessible by vehicles, which was a real shame. A tour of the camping facilities also made it clear that this was dimensioned so huge that the sanitary facilities were in great distance to the designated campsites.



Once it became clear that we had to find another place to stay, unfortunately, we took at least the opportunity to make a nice hike in the area of the Visitor Centre, before heading towards *Paso Raballo*. The gravel road led through a beautiful valley, and past several lakes on whose banks we observed some wading flamingos. Otherwise, the landscape, compared to the lush, green forests along the *Carretera Austral*, was surprisingly dry and barren. We had planned to stay at the *Camping Casa Piedra*, still belonging to the *Parque Patagonia*. Here again, however, we could not use the car at the actual campsite, but were forced to park about two hundred meters from the toilets on a cramped

# Patagonia Southbound

parking. We would have accepted without further ado, as we can do without infrastructure. But when the park ranger passed by around 10 PM and wanted to collect the full fee of 16,000 pesos, we found it somewhat exaggerated. We moved 1 km up the road and parked in a meadow by the river.

Next morning the weather was much worse again and came up with an overcast sky and shrouded mountains, we gave up the planned hike and drove right up to the border.

## Lago Posadas

After we crossed the border, we drove down to *Lago Posadas*. On the east side of the Andes, the area was now increasingly dry and the countryside often reminded us of the southwestern United States or to areas in Mexico. In the small town of *Lago Posadas* we were looking for an opportunity to buy fresh meat and were sent by locals to a shop in the village centre. In fact, we met a bright, tidy business with small meat counter. The owner of the store made clear to us that he was blind and we have to help him a little. Despite his handicap, it was no problem for him to detach for us the shoulder from half a lamb professionally, we only had to read the weight on the scale and name the value of the bills when paying.

Arriving at the lakeside, we first visited the *Arco*, an impressive stone arch on a small rocky island, a few meters from the shore. Very close, we finally found a wonderful camp spot, sheltered behind rocks and not even twenty meters from a beautiful cove with a sandy beach and a fire



## Patagonia Southbound

pit. Previous visitors had left a stack of hardwood, so we decided to properly cook on fire once again. The amber was enough to bake an Epiphany cake in the camp oven, to BBQ the lamb shoulder for two hours over low heat, instead of cooking a tagine, and finally heat up some lake water for a hot shower. In between, we enjoyed an aperitif at this wonderful place right on the beach, because thanks to the sun and with the fire behind us, the temperature in the wind-protected corner was pleasantly warm.

### Los Glaciares National Park

A scenically little impressive drive brought us to the northern part of the National Park *Los Glaciares*. In the small town of *El Chalten* we parked at a designated parking lot near the visitor centre. Next to us were already four other Swiss vehicles parked. Among others we met Carla and Boris, who were also travelling in a Land Cruiser. As it turned out in our conversation, we had shortly met them on a weekend trip to the Appenzell region about three years earlier. This re-meeting at a completely different place made us realize once again how small the world is.

About 35 km behind *El Chalten* we visited the *Lago los Desiertos*. During the trip to the lake the sky was overcast and the mountains only appeared for brief moments. However, the closer we got to our goal, the more the weather cleared and gave a view of the gigantic mountains with their mighty glaciers. On the way back we walked to the impressive waterfall *Chorillo del Salto*, who delivered imposing volumes of water, thanks to the extensive rains recently.



The weather forecast for the next days was good, so we planned two hikes. The destination of the first was the *Laguna Torres*, from where we had a clear view of the needle of *Cerro Torre*. At the sight of this vertical rock pinnacle we wondered how the climbers managed to climb to the summit. For us, unimaginable and also for the climbers always a great

## Patagonia Southbound

challenge. The landscape is permanently changed, the farther we followed the valley, until we came through dry, almost desert-like landscape and later the trail ran through increasingly dense southern beech forest. Then we arrived at the shore of the lagoon on the moraine of the former glacier, we faced the mighty glaciers that reached the lake on the other side.



The next morning started cloudy and but when we arrived at the *Mirador Fitzroy*, the clear view to the summit of *Fitzroy* left us almost breathless. Even for us mountain spoiled Swiss this landscape with its rock towers was most impressive. Many other visitors also wanted to admire this spectacular environment, therefore, there was a busy traffic on the trails. We met a large number of mainly younger tourists who were on a multi-day trip, dragging gigantic backpacks up the hill.



After a good 250 km drive we reached the southern part of the *Parque Nacional Los Glaciares*. In contrast to the northern part, which was free to enter, we were, as foreigners, once again asked to pay a considerably higher entry fee compared to the locals. The main attraction in this, otherwise inaccessible sector, is the *Perito Moreno* glacier. The enormous ice flow pours over a width of several kilometres into the *Lago Argentina*. The ice walls with a height of 40-70 m rise vertically from the blue-grey water. On impressively landscaped metal boardwalks we could follow the glacier and admire it from different angles. Ever again it banged and cracked in the ice, a sign that everything was in constant motion. We hoped with a little patience and a good dose of luck, to observe the calving of the glacier. We turned our attention to a place where small

## Patagonia Southbound

chunks of ice repeatedly plunged into the depths and the whole ice tower made a rather unstable impression. After several minor crashes, it crashed again after about half an hour, when a 20m high block of ice fell forward, collapsed and dropped into the water. Ueli was ready with the camera and was taking several shots of the spectacle. After this impressive natural spectacle we went along the lake back to the car.



## Tierra del Fuego, the Land of Fire

Our tour went ever more towards the southernmost point of the trip. In *Punta Arenas*, the largest city in southern Chile, we had again a great shopping opportunity. In the usually small stores, fresh food, especially fruits and vegetables is barely available, quite expensive and due to the long transport distances often of poor quality. The large supermarkets in *Punta Arenas*, however, were well stocked and offered a wide selection at reasonable prices.

To get from the mainland to the island of *Tierra del Fuego*, we had to use a ferry services once again. The next crossing was scheduled for the next morning, so we had plenty of time to explore the centre of *Punta Arenas*. The city with 126'000 inhabitants is located on the Strait of Magellan and is the southernmost major city in the world. As in most Latin American cities, the most important and worth seeing buildings are arranged around the central square. Not to be overlooked was the great monument to the famous navigator Ferdinand Magellan.



## Patagonia Southbound

After spending a night right at the ferry pier, we were the first in the cue at the ticket office in the morning, which has been beneficial, since we had no reservation. Fortunately, they had tickets for spontaneous customers, so we got our sailing without problem. The crossing to *Porvenir* takes about 2 hours and cost with our small car about 80 CHF.

*Porvenir* is the main town in the Chilean *Tierra del Fuego* and is the only bigger settlement in the region. The gravel road along the Magellan Street passed through a barren, flat landscape. The whole area is settled very sparse and we hardly met other vehicles. On recommendation, we stayed at *Lago Blanco*, a remote, quite big lake, where we met two other campers. Unfortunately, we could not enjoy the fantastic scenery long, because as so often in the evening a strong wind picked up and after an aperitif in the sun we soon withdraw into our shell.



From *Lago Blanco*, it was not far to the border at *Paso Bella Vista*. Again, the cross-border traffic was on a small scale, thus we proceeded quickly, the completion of formalities designed on both sides were done in no time. The Argentines performed neither a food nor a vehicle check.

We stayed for two days with Graciela in *Rio Grande* one, because we needed once again a hot shower and Internet connection to bring us up to date regarding world affairs. Then we took the last leg to the *Fin del Mundo*, the end of the world, under the wheels. Almost exactly a year and half after we had started at the northernmost point of our journey, we had now reached the southernmost point in *Ushuaia*. The small but important town for the region lives primarily on tourism, and we had expected to find here several travellers like us, which was not the case. Most visitors arrive by plane or by bus to *Ushuaia*, and a large proportion of tourists use the city just as a base for an Antarctic cruise.

# Patagonia Southbound

## The Tierra del Fuego National Park

Before the start of our own cruise to Antarctica, we had a few days time left. These we wanted to spend in the *Tierra del Fuego* National Park, located just outside the town. In *Ushuaia* itself only parking lots can be used for overnight stays, however, we preferred the nature. We settled for two nights in a simple campground in the park, where we enjoyed once again the company of some other campers. Our neighbours were a family of *Cañada de Gomez*, with whom we immediately got on very well and they offered us to visit them when we get close to their home. In addition, we met, for the third time, Hanni and Matthias, who also made a stop here with their Landrover Azalai.

The beautiful landscape offered several hiking trails that we wanted to use. A shorter trail led to the official end of the *Ruta 3*, which has its starting point in *Buenos Aires*, about 3000 km further north. A longer walk led along the estuary, populated by a multitude of birds, and through the southernmost sub-Antarctic forests. We wanted to make this hike in the opposite direction to end up in camping again, so we had to find a way to get to the starting point. We placed ourself on the road and tried hitchhiking. After a few minutes we were picked up by a car and were amazed that we were guest of a young couple from Switzerland, which was travelling with a rental car.



Back in *Ushuaia*, we are happy to accept the invitation of Natalia and Marcelo to take a warm shower at their house. With the help of other Argentinian friends, we had previously been in contact with Naty via

## Patagonia Southbound

email and she had made the first investigations for an Antarctica Tour for us. The two lived in a small apartment in the city, which offered no place for guests. Since we had our own house, this was not a problem,



we even found a parking space on the neighbouring property. A few people were there renovating the house and we asked them if they would make the free space available to us. We learned, that the building should be converted to the new

city office for the ruling party of the president. We got the permission to stay overnight and even to park the car during our Antarctic trip.

# Antarctica



## Antarctica

We had previously started to research for a trip to Antarctica. We found only a few last minute deals on the shorter and therefore cheaper routes. For longer trips, which include also Falkland and South Georgia, there were more places available. However, these trips cost, even as a last minute, still from 10,000 USD per person but last 19 to 22 days.

We finally decided to go on a classic 10-day trip to the Antarctic Peninsula on the “Atlantic Ocean”.

The Atlantic Ocean was built in 1985 as a RoRo vessel for a service between Japan and Russia. Later it was remodelled in Russia to become a casino and entertainment vessel, but this brought no great success. The current owner is the Danish Albatros Expedition company with extensive experience in the Arctic. The Atlantic Ocean was completely renovated in 2016 and is now a comfortable cruise ship and ice worthy polar cruiser in Antarctica. The nearly 200 potential passengers are looked after by 150 crew members, composed of sailors, hotel staff and the expedition team. On our cruise there were 150 passengers on board.

The Antarctic peninsula is jutting out of the continent, opposite the southern tip of South America. This location allows expeditions to the Antarctica as offered today. All other land masses in the Southern Hemisphere are much further away from the southernmost continent, so that even the journey to the continent alone would take about a week. Since the Antarctic Peninsula also boasts many interesting and worth seeing places and an exciting wildlife, it is target of more than 90% of all expeditions starting in Ushuaia. In addition, there are options to fly to the Antarctic continent and board a cruise ship there. These trips, however, are targeting mainly well-heeled people with little time, because prices start at about USD 16'000 per person.

# Antarctica

## Day 1

In the afternoon of the first day, we went on board the Atlantic Ocean. After the ticket and passport control we were allowed to enter the port area, where our vessel was moored. After a swiftly carried out check-in we were escorted to our cabin and settled ourselves for the trip. Although we had booked the cheapest category, the room was furnished with private bathroom and spacious beds and offered every comfort.



We were pleased that Hanni and Matthias had booked the same trip and they also came on board shortly after our arrival.

Even before departure, we had to participate at the safety briefing and complete an evacuation drill. From the deck we could observe that on other vessels in the harbour the same procedure was taking place, because without these preparations ships are not allowed to depart. Next, the warm, Antarctica suitable jackets were distributed to the passengers. They are part of the package and can be kept at the end of the journey.

Through the quiet Beagle Channel we went out to the Drake Strait and enjoyed our first dinner at best nautical conditions. Long time after we went to bed, the sea became a little bit bumpy, a sure sign that we were travelling in some the most difficult and turbulent waters of the world. We had heard that ships, which sailed in December through the Drake Passage, experienced waves up to 17 m high. Of this we were fortunately spared, still it happened, that in the cabin our belongings were thrown off the table to the floor.

# Antarctica

## Day 2

During the night we entered the Drake Strait and felt the rising seas. Nevertheless the crew emphasized that we were having a quite calm crossing. The excellent breakfast buffet in the restaurant we enjoyed together with Hanni and Matthias, and we still had to get used that we were not travelling on solid ground.



The day was filled with presentations. After a presentation on sea birds, we were informed about the behaviour of visitors to Antarctica on a mandatory information of IAATO (International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators). It became clear that staying in this region is very highly regulated and that really much is done to ensure that the approximately 40,000 visitors each year have little impact on flora and fauna.

After we tried on the rubber boots for the land excursions, we visited the bridge. The technical facilities seemed rather old-fashioned, these were apparently not renewed since the construction of the ship. In an interview with the Russian captain we learned interesting details about the history of the Atlantic Ocean.

After dinner we had the opportunity to watch an exciting film about the Shackleton's Antarctica expedition carried out in 1916.

## Day 3

After breakfast, we received another mandatory information, the Zodiac briefing. Here, the security measures and the boarding and exit procedure, were explained. Then all the visitors had to bring their outdoor clothes and all items that should be carried to shore to an inspection and cleaning. This was to ensure in particular that no one would carry any foreign seeds with his equipment.

# Antarctica

During lunch we reached the South Shetland Islands and thus we had survived the Drake Strait safely and without seasickness. A clear indication that the landmass had to be close, was the increasing number of seabirds that accompanied the ship. In a lecture on the geology of Antarctica was explained, to our great surprise, that millions of years ago a subtropical climate had ruled in this desert of ice, as evidenced by fossil finds of various species of dinosaurs. The average global temperature was then about 20 °C higher than today! Another unexpected information was that active volcanoes still exist on this continent.

By the expedition team, we were called for the first scheduled landfall at *Yankee Harbor*. Thanks to the quick and smooth passage we had reached our first destination well ahead of schedule and thus gained time for an additional land excursion. For the first time it showed what strict and tight planning was necessary to organize excursions ashore with 150 people in the shortest possible time. The guests were first divided in two large groups, which were further divided into subgroups to prevent chaos in Mud Room. The Mud Room is the dressing room near the exit, where we changed from the onboard clothing to the warm and waterproof outdoor equipment.

At 6 PM, the first group of ten was brought ashore by a Zodiac. Before leaving the vessel, each guest had checked out using the ID card so that the crew knew at any time whether anyone was on or off the vessel. After a final check of the equipment we were funnelled through a disinfectant tub to disinfect the boots. We came to enjoy first a Zodiac cruise. Past a group Wedell seals, the most common seal in the Antarctic, which lay on the beach of the sheltered bay, we crossed over to a mighty glacier, which we followed through the whole bay. In the diffuse light of the sky the blue of the ice shone particularly impressive.

During the subsequent landing on the beach, we were once again pointed out the rules of conduct. The organizers of Antarctic tours are obviously aware that their business can only be secured in the long term through a sustained protection of the environment. For example, it is strictly forbidden even to pee somewhere during shore excursion; in an emergency, the visitor is brought back to the ship to use the toilet there. The members of the expedition team were present everywhere, on the

# Antarctica

one hand to answer questions, on the other hand to ensure that no one ignored the temporarily installed barriers or violated any other rules. Thanks to these measures, the animals have no fear of humans and can be observed at close range.

About 4,000 pairs of Gentoo and Chinstrap penguins were nesting on the shores of the bay. Their simple nests, built of stones, covered up the slopes to high. The youngsters had hatched some time ago, had quickly put on weight and size and were not easy to distinguish from parents on the basis of colour. Individual animals from the densely populated colony waddled unabashedly around between the visitors and were not bothered by our presence.

Well after 8 PM we were driven back to the ship. Dinnertime was adapted to the new program and only served at 20:30.



## Day 4

In the morning the ship sailed through on a glassy sea between the islands, passing shimmering blue icebergs of varying size. In Foyr Harbor we dropped anchor and got ready for a Zodiac cruise. The ride in the calm waters brought us to sheltered bays, fringed by glaciers, seals were relaxing on drifting ice floes and penguins were darting past the boat. Although fog banks partly obscured our view of the surrounding glacier-covered mountains, the impressions were simply spectacular.

# Antarctica

Our boatman took us to the wreck of an old whaling ship, which had been towed to a the sheltered bay after a fire outbreak. Four sailboats were moored to the wreck and spent the night there. We learned, that the people, guided by an experienced skipper, sailed for a month in the region of the Antarctic Peninsula. We didn't feel the cold temperatures thanks to our good equipment and despite the cloudy yet calm weather we could have spent much more time on this trip.



Back on board, a presentation on wildlife photography in Antarctica was offered or we had time to relax until lunch. While we enjoyed our food, it was as always excellent, the crew weighed anchor and started the journey towards Danco Island. The passage in the calm waters ran in sight distance off the coast, and again, past countless icebergs and glaciers.

Before we went on land on the island, another Zodiac tour was announced. From the ship, we had already seen whales in the distance and it wasn't long, three humpback whales appeared close to us. After the skipper had turned off the engine, so as not to disturb the whales, we drifted closer and closer to the powerful animals. They moved little, because they were obviously at rest. This condition is known as "logging", because they looked like drifting logs. Some Gentoo penguins accompanied us in the calm water and in some distance swam a group of Minke whales, a relatively small species with a brownish tint.



After landing on Danco Island we climbed the steep hill on which the Penguins had established their colony. We wondered why the animals go through the trouble of breeding high above the shore and the long,

# Antarctica

steep path to the water and back. The answer was simple and logical: the higher hills are the earlier they are free of snow after the winter and for the successful reproduction of the birds, it is important that they can start breeding as early as possible. We observed the parents coming back with food from the sea and their difficulty moving up to their young who were already hungry begging for food. For us the ascent had been worthwhile because the views of the large bay was gigantic.



## Day 5

Being part of the first group this morning, we landed on a small island opposite the Port Lockroy station. In a bay, several skeletons of whales were laying on the beach and a large colony of Gentoo penguins was established there. The animals were very tame, they waddled freely between and around us visitors and looked at us seemingly curious. Again, the young were already well developed. But before they can take their first swimming attempts in March, they need to replace their fluffy baby feathers with the waterproof plumage of adults.



We were ferried to the research station Port Lockroy. This is no longer in operation, but has been converted into a museum, which gave a good impression of the life of the former scientists in this inhospitable region. The natural harbour of Port Lockroy originally served as a whaling port and later the British as a base for military operations in the Second World War. In 1962, the research station was abandoned and left empty. Thirty years later, England was given the choice by the Member States of the

# Antarctica

Antarctica Treaty to demolish the facilities and transport the material away or to restore it. It was decided to preserve the historic building and converted it into a museum. At the same time the southernmost post office and gift shop in the world was established there. During the summer months, the station is operational and a popular destination for Antarctica tourists who can post their postcards from there. The proceeds from the store and the post office finance the preservation of the site.



After a nearly windless morning we experienced hours later a violent storm with winds up to 80 km / h in the Neumayer Channel, a narrow Fjord enclosed by high mountains. This meant that our trip to Cuverville Island was somewhat delayed and when we arrived there, the hopes of a shore excursion were smashed. Still, wind up to 30 knots blew, too strong to guarantee the safety, so for the first time we had to stay on board.



# Antarctica

## Day 6

During breakfast we arrived at the Paradise Bay, a well-protected and glacier lined bay. Despite light rain we boarded the inflatables and were driven to the nearby Argentinean Brown research station. Unlike Port Lockroy, this is still an operational research station of Argentina. The buildings themselves were therefore not accessible and also the crew was not to be seen. Slightly above the station we climbed up a steep snowfield and could from there race down for pleasure on the seat of your pants. The ubiquitous Gentoo penguins populated a small colony in the area.



On the subsequent Zodiac cruise through the bay there was a lot to discover again. In the rocks we observed a large colony with Blue Eyed Shags, a cormorant species, who had built their nests on rocky outcrops. The birds breed usually 3 eggs and feed the young with fish and crabs. The young birds in the rocks were close to fledging, almost as large as the parents. On some of the icebergs we could watch resting Crabeater Seals. The diet of these animals isn't, unlike their name suggests, crabs, but mainly krill. Similarly to whales, they filter the feed with their special teeth from the water.



When we were leaving the bay we met a large cruise ship. According to the rules, Antarctica cruise ship shall only carry max. 500 passengers on the board, and take no more than 100 at a time on shore excursions. Therefore, the scope of these large vessels, as opposed to smaller ships, is severely limited. Passengers are limited to just looking at the imposing landscape.

# Antarctica

Our ship was to reach the southernmost point of our trip. Through the Lemaire Channel, one of the scenic highlights, the captain had to reduce speed, because this is at the narrowest points only about 1.5 km wide. The narrow passage lined with glaciated, high mountains, whose summit we could unfortunately not see, because of the low hanging clouds.



As soon as we had the narrows behind us, the ship arrived at Port Charcot and anchored. The goal of our next boat tour was a bay called Iceberg Graveyard. By ocean currents, icebergs are herded together at this location to an iceberg cemetery and melt slowly. Several thousand of the white-blue shimmering giants in all shapes had gathered here. One of them had been wind-shaped to an at least 20m height sculpture with three delicate arches, standing behind each other. The environment offered photo opportunities without end. To our great surprise, in a quiet bay we were received by the hotel manager and his crew, and they served us hot chocolate with Baileys.



After that we headed to the nearest landing site. Even from a distance we noticed the red and green coloured snowfields. Our guide explained that these colours were caused by snow algae and are completely natural. In various colonies all three penguin species found in the northern Antarctic were nesting: the wide spread Gentoo or donkey penguins Chinstrap penguins and the rarer Adelie penguins. Of the latter we got to see only a handful. The only elephant seals, we saw on our trip, were in this bay, several juveniles who had not grown yet the typical trunk. Although not yet fully grown, the animals were, with their several hundred kilograms, pretty impressive.

# Antarctica



## Day 7

The sky was overcast, and without the protection of the many islands along the Antarctic Peninsula, the ship rolled sharply. We had been warned the night before that the ride could be choppy.

As the arrival time at Deception Island was scheduled for around noon, we were able to sleep in for once and did not appear at the breakfast buffet until about nine o'clock. The annular bay of Deception Island consists of residues of a sunken Caldera with several kilometres in diameter. The area still has some volcanic activity, therefore the water temperature in the bay is about 10 °C. Through an entrance, only about 400m wide, the captain maneuvered into the almost circular bay. The wind was still blowing with more than 40 knots, and therefore a landing was out of question. The vessel was sent drifting by the strong wind, thus the captain decided to leave the bay again.



Our mission leader developed quickly an alternative plan and promised another landing attempt elsewhere later in the afternoon. When we arrived at Anna Point, the storm still howled so strong that we could hardly keep on the feet on the observation deck. It was obvious that in these conditions, lowering the inflatable boats was not possible. Thus the last opportunity for a shore leave was lost. After all, the wind had blown away the clouds and the sun left the dazzling white glaciers and the mountains behind us shine. The ship turned towards the Drake Strait

# Antarctica

and thus left the protection of the Antarctic islands, which could be felt by noticeably stronger movements on board.

Early evening, the so-called Polar Plunch was held. The idea is to take a dip into the icy waters of the Arctic Ocean. In good conditions this action would have taken place at a beach on Deception Island, but since the last shore leave had to be cancelled, the crew filled to the pool with fresh sea water, so that the incessant masochists still came to their cooling. Meanwhile, we preferred the heat of the sauna.

The evening was filled with an interesting talk about the role of humans in the Antarctic, from the first explorers to the beginning of tourism. In 1820 several sailors explored the Antarctic continent, after the first whalers came to the area, at the end of the 19th and early 20th century, the first expeditions took place in the Antarctic. Only in 1911 the Norwegian Roald Amundsen reached as the first explorer the South Pole.

## Day 8

The journey through the Drake Strait is called "Drake Lake" if the sea is exceptionally calm, but more usually it is a "Drake Shake" as strong waves are almost always to be expected. Such as in December 2017, when the waves grew sometimes to 17m or higher. In such conditions, the kitchen crew would certainly not complain about too much work. As on the outward journey, we were lucky enough to be on the "Drake Lake", so both times we enjoyed a smooth ride.

To keep the otherwise action-free return trip interesting, the expedition team organized more interesting lectures and films about Antarctica. So on this trip we not only got to know an incredibly impressive area, but also received a lot of exciting and well-founded information on all conceivable topics relating to the white continent.

We also took the time to talk with other passengers or retreated into the cabin to read, write, and edit images.

# Antarctica

After dinner the expedition team organized a quiz night. After we divided into groups, it was our task to answer 50 questions about our trip. Our Swiss team was brave and we finished at the end in the good fourth place.



## Day 9

At night it was quite rough sometimes. Our cabin was near the bow so that we could hear the waves pounding against the hull. For safety reasons the portholes had to remain closed, thus the crew had shut the breastplate lid from the inside, as it could not be ruled out, that destructive waves could come up to this level.

After breakfast we cruised past the infamous Cape Horn. The captain had received permission from the Chilean customs crew stationed there to approach the island within three nautical miles. Despite the fog-shrouded view, the view of the tossed island was very impressive. We could hardly imagine what the sea looks like here in a storm, as the water lashes the shore like this even when the waves are calm.



## Day 10

Thanks to the quiet crossing the Drake Passage again, the ship was again ahead of time. However, the allocated time window for the arrival at the port of *Ushuaia* had to be strictly adhered to, therefore the Atlantic Ocean

# Antarctica

chugged with minimum speed towards the Beagle Channel. As planned, we reached the harbour in the early morning. Following saying goodbye to the crew and other passengers we were soon off board and dragged our luggage through the city to our camper.

# Patagonia Northbound



## Patagonia Northbound

### Estancia Harberton

After we had landed back on the mainland, it was from now on always to the north. Before we definitely headed in this direction, we planned a trip to the southernmost point of our journey which is approachable by car. About a two hours' drive south-east of *Ushuaia* is the former sheep farm *Estancia Harberton*. The huge ranch, situated on the Beagle Channel, was founded in 1886 by the British missionary Thomas Bridges. The family tried to protect the habitat of the local natives of *Tierra del Fuego*, the *Yaghan* or *Yamana* Indians. For a better understanding between natives and immigrants, Bridges co-authored with his son a dictionary to *Yamana* language. The ranch, which even today is still family-owned, was gradually transformed into a private nature reserve and opened up for tourism.

The gravel road to the *Estancia* leads initially along a river valley where traces of beaver living here can be seen everywhere. The animals were introduced in 1946 as fur animals, and reproduced unhindered due to the lack of predators. Now they pose a threat to the native trees. With their dams, they change the rivers and the landscape sustainably. Arriving at the Beagle Channel, we reached the land of *Estancia*



*Harberton*. We picked up the necessary camping permit from the visitor centre and drove another 10 km to the *Rio Camboceres* where a large area is available for camping right on the Beagle Channel.

# Patagonia Northbound

We spent the afternoon exploring the surrounding area and watched the myriad of birds in the pools and on the beach. On the beach of the canal, we deposited a stone that we had picked up one and a half years before on the beach of the Arctic Ocean. So we carried out the plan to place a stone from the most northern point of our trip at the southernmost point and take from there also another stone as a souvenir.

Shortly before it was dark, the Atlantic Ocean cruised past us on its way to the next adventure in the Antarctic and woke fond memories of the just experienced Antarctica trip.



## Torres del Paine National Park

The *Torres del Paine* National Park, we had deliberately omitted on the way south, assuming that it would have less visitors on our return in February.

However, until we reached this destination, it was necessary to drive several hundred kilometres north. In quite long daily stages we reached again *Puerto Natales*. There we once again topped up food and filled the diesel tanks. However, the staying overnight in town was not possible because either the campgrounds were overcrowded or unsuitable for our car. So we had no other choice but to keep driving towards the National Park. Here the next surprise awaited us, because the direct access road to the southern part of the park was closed for road works. So we carried on for a few kilometres on the "usual" yet longer route. Near the *Lago Sofia*, we finally found a place to stay.

After several rainy days with low clouds we were delighted by much better weather. Before we finally reached our destination, we experienced more evidence of how small our world is. The first surprise we experienced at the viewpoint from which we first looked at the *Torres*

# Patagonia Northbound

*del Paine*. A Canadian couple explained that they had seen our vehicle more than a year ago in Washington State and that they had recognized our car again immediately when we arrived at the parking. They were meanwhile also on the road in a VW camper and more recently arrived in Chile. After a long conversation that let revive the memories, we drove to the park entrance. We paid the entrance fee of 24 CHF per person and at the same time were informed that the entire northern part of the park, that's where most of the hiking trails are located, is not accessible due to flooding.

So we had no other choice than to drive in the dust of many other cars and buses on the main route into the park. After all, the weather was in our favour. The mighty *Torres* had a few small clouds around the peaks, but considering that the mountains are actually seeing only a few days per year, we were very lucky. At the *Salto Grande*, an impressive waterfall after all the rain, we went on a short hike, which allowed different views of the mountains. That *Torres del Paine* is one of the most popular destinations in Chile, showed up at the countless visitors and the carparks being clogged with buses.



Past lakes and through dry steppe landscape, we reached the end of the road at the *Lago Grey*. The planned hike to the viewpoint was rained off, because the bridge over the river was also closed due to flooding and the trail thus inaccessible. At the nearby Hotel we sneaked cheeky to their viewing platform and got at least glimpse of the lake and the huge Grey Glacier in the distance.



# Patagonia Northbound

On the way back we got the second surprise regarding "small world". We crossed a Land Cruiser with Swiss license plates and Myrta believed to have recognized Brigitta and Paul Böhlen. Ueli turned quickly around and followed the Toyota until we caught up with it. In fact, it was the two friends from Switzerland. The reunion was great and we had a lot to talk about, too much to just talk on the road side. We therefore decided to spend the evening together. In the national park itself there are, except for an expensive campground, just three gravel parking places to stay, so we decided to stay at the viewpoint outside the park. We met there again, as agreed, and spent a hilarious, exciting evening together.



The next morning started quite overcast and a few drops of rain. The evening before, we had still seen the *Torres*, in the morning though they were hidden in the low-lying clouds. We too have the right to be lucky with the weather every now and then.

## Perito Moreno National Park

After a few hundred kilometres through the endless pampas of Patagonia we turned on a gravel road to the west, with the aim of *Perito Moreno* National Park. The name could easily confuse in this area, because in addition to the National Park there was the famous glacier to the south and a small town to the north of the same name. The namesake, Francisco Pascasio or Perito Moreno was an Argentinean geographer and anthropologist who explored large areas of Patagonia, and he also was politically active and founded, among other, schools for the poor. To honour the man's popularity, several places were given his name.

Initially the track went through similar *Pampa* landscape like many kilometres before, but approached more and more the Andes. In the visitor centre, we obtained information about camping and hiking and were advised by the Park Ranger in detail and competently. After the

# Patagonia Northbound

crowded and expensive national parks in the south, we experienced here the exact opposite, friendly and interesting information and also free visit to the park and camping. The campsites were so spacious that we didn't even see the four other campers who, according to the ranger, were on site.

We settled on the beautiful *Lago Burmeister*. Although the place was well protected from the wind, it was bitterly cold and it was raining again and again. In the morning the temperature was two degrees and slight sleet greeted us.



As soon as we had driven a few kilometres out from the valley, the weather cleared and the sun came out. It was still cold, but the wind had decreased significantly. The route to the north of the park led past a small lake where many birds were seen and a large herd of guanacos was grazing. The surrounding mountains were sugared almost to the base from the nightly snowfall.

To get an overview of the landscape, we climbed up to the *Cerro Leon*. On a steep, narrow path we overcame the 400 meters up to the summit. The strenuous climb was worth it as the view of the surrounding lakes and mountains was terrific. Far below, in the middle of the huge plain, we could just see our car. The weather had meanwhile deteriorated again and we were afraid of being rained out. Luckily we came much faster down to the plain, and we reached the car without getting wet. The temperature had not risen above 9 °C throughout the day and we decided to camp in the open, sunny *Pampa* instead of spending another cold, wet night in a narrow valley.



# Patagonia Northbound

## Cueva de las Manos

The cave of the hands is not really a cave, but there are many rocky outcrops, which protect the underlying paintings perfectly against wind and weather. Thanks to this situation, it is that the rock carvings created in the period from 7000 to 1000 BC have been perfectly preserved to this day. The impressive cultural monument is located some 200 km from the nearest town away and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site 1999.

High above the beautiful canyon of the *Rio Pinturas* we admired on a length of about 200m thousands of images of hands in all sizes. These were applied in a kind of spray technique with different mineral paints as a negative image on the rock wall. The hand was placed on the stone and the colour injected directly from the mouth about it. In addition to hands many images of animals were to be found, especially guanacos, which had a very great importance for the former inhabitants of the region. "



## Carretera Austral to the Second

The stretch of *Perito Moreno* northward offered no major highlights. We therefore decided to go to *Chile Chico* directly along the Andes to get from there again on the *Carretera Austral*. Our plan was to ferry to *Puerto*



# Patagonia Northbound

*Ibañez*, but we noticed when we arrived that this was already booked on days out and there was a long waiting list.

Since we did not want to linger in *Chile Chico*, we changed our plans and drove along the shores of *Lago General Carrera* towards *Cochrane*. The track was quite dusty and offered quite a bit of corrugations, but the ride along this huge lake was more than worthwhile. Thanks to the wonderful weather we enjoyed the view of the grandiose landscapes, which in contrast to the way south weeks earlier had little or only clouds shown on the trip. On the *Carretera Austral* now prevailed for much more traffic and wherever the road was not paved, this led to large amounts of dust the dry weather. However, we gladly accepted this into account, and enjoyed the sun and warm temperatures.



At *Villa Santa Lucia* we passed the place where in December the huge mudslide had buried parts of the village and a long stretch of the road. The main street was still blocked and army and contractors were deployed to eliminate the thousands of cubic meters of mud, what should take several more weeks.

On a well-developed road we drove through imposing mountain ranges up to *Futaleufu*, an emerging tourist destination especially for rafting, fishing and hiking enthusiasts. Not far from the town we crossed once more the border into Argentina. Even at this remote border crossing was now taking much longer, so we had to wait almost an hour at the end, until we were able to complete the formalities. The queuing less at the Argentine border station a few kilometres further and it only took a few minutes until we had completed our entry stamp in the passport and the temporary import permit for the car. A funny incident had however almost prevented our entry, because somehow our data in the system of customs authorities were suddenly nowhere to be found. Even after we insisted that we had crossed into Argentina several times before our data was not found. Finally it turned out that the officer had entered *Suecia*

# Patagonia Northbound

(Sweden) instead of *Suiza* (Switzerland) when searching for our details. We all had a good laugh at the end.

## National Park Los Alerces

The *Alerces* National Park is especially for the Argentines a popular destination and there was still holiday season, thus we met many visitors. However, it soon turned out that a large part of the tourists were on day trips, so we easily got a seat on one of the camp spots.



We took two walks to experience the magnificent landscape. The first walk led on a steep, strenuous path up to the beautiful *Laguna Escondida* and for the second, somewhat shorter walk we followed the river to the crystal clear *Lake Menendez*. The long lake is divided by the *Torrecillas* glacier into two arms and is known for its abundance of fish. We were impressed by the ice-covered mountains and the dense *Alerce* forests around the waters.

## Colonia Suiza

The trip further north was now characterized by a varied landscape with deep blue lakes and distant mountain ranges. After only a few hours we reached our next destination, the *Colonia Suiza*. The small town is located a few kilometres west of *Bariloche* and is, as its name suggests, founded by Swiss. Today *Colonia Suiza* is a popular destination for tourists from nearby *Bariloche* and offers especially many souvenir shops, restaurants and a small market with arts and crafts and food booths. Switzerland is

# Patagonia Northbound

still very present with Swiss flags and coat of arms of the Cantons on the chalets and street names like "Lucerne" and "Zurich". We haven't met any Swiss ancestry but we tasted both the "*Cerveza Valais*" as well as the "*Cerveza Colonia Suiza*", both products of local microbreweries.



## Hike in the National Park Lanin

On the way north, we met again with our friends in *San Martin de los Andes*. We enjoyed the days with these cherished people and this time got to know Cristinas sister Graciela and her husband Carlos from Buenos Aires who spent two weeks holidays.

For Sunday Edgardo had organized a hike in the national park *Lanin*. Carlos drove us all to the starting point at the *Laguna Verde*. Early in the morning fog patches hung still partly on the slopes, but they broke up soon and made place to a bright blue sky. The trail to our destination, the volcano *Achen Niyeu*, led through a beautiful forest with large and dense *Coigue* forest who offered pleasant shade. Soon, however, we left the forest and had the first time our goal in view. The bald cinder cone of the volcano was quite impressive and when we arrived at its foot, we soon realized that we had a hard climb ahead of us. About 400 meters we scrambled up the steep path, with each step forward we took in the soft volcanic ash, we slipped again a half back. Once at the crater rim, we stopped for a short break and enjoyed the view of the distant, snow-capped volcano *Lanin* and the far-lying below *Laguna Verde*. Once again, we had to cope with a short climb, until we finally reached the summit. The view in all directions was terrific. Rocks and lava fields shone in all colours and formed a strong contrast to the green slopes and the steel-blue sky. To complete the picture, three Condors appeared above us, circling for a short time and then disappeared in the distance.

# Patagonia Northbound

After a well-deserved lunch break we started the descent. This was compared with the sweaty climb, a real pleasure, because in the soft ash we could "surf" with giant steps towards the valley and 20 minutes later we were standing at the foot of the volcano. The way back to the car seemed to us all much longer than the way there, because we felt the strenuous climb our legs. When we finally arrived, we enjoyed first a cold beer from the camping shop before we drove back to San Martin.



## Provincial Park Copahue

From San Martin we drove mostly on side roads that ran often near the Chilean border, to the north. The track was very varied, sometimes following a river valley, then led alongside a lake and very often through sparse forests with magnificent *Araucaria*. After passing the *Lago Aluminé* we finally reached the Provincial Park *Copahue*.

In *Copahue*, a place that is known for its sulphur springs, we took a short hike along the *Rio Agrío*. This beautiful little river that had eaten into the former lava fields, fell over several waterfalls. The sparse vegetation was dominated by *Araucaria*, this evergreen primeval trees that grow everywhere in the area. To stay, we found a very nice wild camp spot at *Lake Caviahue*, surrounded by several huge *Araucarias*. All the stones on the lake shore were stained rust-red, a consequence of iron-rich water, which is supplied from the surrounding mountains.

# Patagonia Northbound



In the evening a heavy thunder storm developed and the mood at the lake changed continuously. Black clouds, overcast with rain veils were lightened by gaudy lightning, a double rainbow stretched across the lake and the day ended with an impressive sunset. From our protected location we were able to watch the weather phenomena in peace and with the best view.



Shortly after leaving in the morning we visited one of the most beautiful waterfalls in Argentina, the *Salto del Agrío*, before we got back on the main route north.



# Argentina's North-East



## Argentina's North-East

### On the Way North

On our drive to the north we heard in the right front wheel repeatedly metallic crunching noise. A first inspection let suspect that something had gone wrong when changing the brake pads in San Martin. Despite checking and setting the noise had not disappeared, and as the wheel a few times also slowed unexpectedly, we feared a greater harm. In *San Rafael* we therefore looked for a garage and the mechanic quickly realized that the outer wheel bearing had collapsed. The wheel had been conducted only by the inner bearing and the brake calliper, which led to the symptoms. With luck we had after all made it this far and since we had the necessary spare parts on board, the damage hours was fixed after

2

½.

Thus we had the first really serious problem with the Land Cruiser in the nearly two years that we previously were out. At nearly 90,000 kilometres driven, we got never stuck. Except for a few minor little things we had up to this point only performed service work. We were more pleased once again to be on the road with a robust, reliable Land Cruiser and we hope that he will not let us down in the future.

Due to the repair work it was quite late before we could continue. Since there was no convenience accommodation in the city itself, people in the garage suggested us to go out into the *Cañon del Atuel*. After half an hour we reached the canyon and found a pitch in a camping. As it was already dark when we arrived in the evening, we had not realized to what a beautiful landscape we had landed. We were under magnificent trees, right on the river, which was embedded in glowing red rock bands. We drove through the canyon, up to the reservoir. When we saw that this barely contained water, we were no longer surprised that the river was little more than a trickle through the gorge. The water power plant

## Argentina's North-East

which we passed, has been out of service for quite a while because of lack of water.



## The City of Mendoza

Due to information from other travellers, we were convinced that when we would arrive in *Mendoza* the festivities of the annual wine festival would still be in full swing. But unfortunately it turned out that we had missed the fantastic parade through the streets of the city by a few hours. After all, we saw some of the participating *Gauchos* in festive costumes and their wives, also on horseback and in beautiful clothes, on their way home. Nevertheless, we enjoyed our day off in *Camping Suizo*, particularly because we met there once again Karl Heinz and his Colombian bitch *Lisi*.

The next day we had a chance to be taken to the city by the camping owners and we had look at the centre of *Mendoza*. The centre of the famous wine-growing region of Argentina surprised us, especially with the many shade trees along the roads, which provide pleasant temperatures even on hot days. From the roof terrace of the *Centro Civico*, a modern office building, we had a fantastic view of the city and the Andes mountain range. It was also striking to see how many green spaces were available in the city. After a long bus ride we were back in the campsite where we ended the afternoon with a relaxing aperitif in

## Argentina's North-East

the shade of the trees. In the evening Ueli prepared a wonderful beef tenderloin on the grill.



## National Park Sierra de las Quijadas

After several hours of driving through a flat landscape, which initially consisted of huge vineyards and gradually passed into bushland with no sign of civilization, we reached the National Park *Sierra de las Quijada*. It was founded in 1991 and is best known among palaeontologists for its fossils and dinosaur tracks. At Edgardo's place we had seen pictures of this national park in a book about Argentina and decided to stop off here.

On a road we could drive a few kilometres to the park and take a few short hikes from there. This led to various viewpoints, from where the impressive rock formations of this particular landscape, were good to see. Unfortunately, hikes to the formations itself were only possible with a guide. The park was especially memorable, because here we got three new animal species before the lens. First, we met one of walks on an incredibly well camouflaged stick insect with a baby. Myrta would never have discovered the animal if it wouldn't have moved. The ingenious camouflage let the insect look like a thin twigs, lying on the floor, only on closer inspection the fine legs and the head were visible. On the way to the campsite, we discovered three *Maras*, who are apparently quite common in the area. The cute animals were about the size of a small dog and but when sitting remembered of a hare, walking it looked more like a small deer. Finally, when we set up our campsite, Ueli nearly tripped over a rattlesnake. Although we had already been on the road in many areas where these snakes are native, this was the first one we got to face on our trip. First it hid in the bushes, but then crept unexpected and not at all shy under our car before it disappeared

## Argentina's North-East

into the bushes again. In conversation with the *guardaparque* it turned out that our discovery was anything but ordinary, he himself had not seen any in this park.



## Sierra Cordoba

In *Merlo*, a bustling city full of tourists, the tarmac road rose above to a pass in an altitude of 1300 meters. When we reached the top we had a beautiful view down to the huge plain, which we had previously traversed. After the pass, the road turned into a narrow dirt road in direction of *La Cruz*. The winding route through a barren plateau was like a roller coaster ride and for the 70 kilometres to a reservoir we needed nearly three hours. However, for the bumpy ride through untouched landscapes we were compensated with magnificent views into the distance. At a lake we found a beautiful camping spot on the waterfront. Countless birds populated the shore and could be observed at close range. We spent a wonderfully quiet evening surrounded by nature.



## La Cumbrecita

In the middle of the *Sierra Cordoba*, European immigrants have created a paradise. Ever since the first generation arrived in 1934, the people planted thousands of trees and gradually built a settlement in the barren mountains. Newcomers were obliged to build their homes in European architecture. This buildings are shaped in the style of chalets or timbered

## Argentina's North-East

houses and form the image of the village image together with a dense forest with numerous species of trees growing in the area. In addition, a clear mountain stream flows through the small town and several hiking trails lead through a shady forest. In ecotourism oriented *La Cumbrecita*, many restaurants, souvenir shops, microbreweries and hotels, all built in European style, have settled. The Argentines seem to have great pleasure in this exotic world for them, because even out of season and on a weekday hundreds of visitors were travelling here. Anyway, all the parking lots were full when we left again in the afternoon.



## Villa General Belgrano

The town of about 6,000 inhabitants is a popular tourist destination too. Even today mainly former immigrants or their descendants from Germany, Austria, Switzerland and northern Italy live in the town. Accordingly, the offer in the restaurants and souvenir shops is very European, albeit more or less adapted to the taste of the Argentineans. The architecture and the names of the restaurants are very reminiscent of the German-speaking countries in Europe. The annual festivals like



# Argentina's North-East

the beer festival or Oktoberfest, the Vienna Cake Festival and the Chocolate Festival attract crowds of people from all over Argentina.

## Cordoba

As always, we left our camper out of town, back in *Villa Gen. Belgrano* and took the bus to the centre of *Cordoba*. The owner of the campsite had indeed warned us that the town was pretty dead on Sunday. However, since we were not planning to go on a shopping spree, but simply to see the sights, we let not stop us. But eventually we realized that not only the business, but really everything, including restaurants were closed and the streets were practically deserted. In addition, the pedestrian zone was blocked by a huge construction site. After about two hours walk we had seen in any case enough and boarded the next bus to *Villa Gen. Belgrano*.



## Cañada de Gomez

A place name which very few travellers or tourists in Argentina are aware of. Also, we had never heard of this town before we had met the Cabrera family in *Tierra del Fuego* National Park. They had travelled to their vacation destination in the 3000 km distant Patagonia with the self-built motor home. We got very well on with Silvio, Vanesa and their children right away. As we passed on the way to Brazil in their vicinity,



## Argentina's North-East

we called in as agreed with them and they invited us to spend a few days with them. They inhabit a small house in the medium-sized city of *Cañada de Gomez* and shared it generously with us by unceremoniously quartering the children with their aunt and uncle in the neighbourhood and so freed a room for us.

What we experienced in the care of the Cabrera's in the following days, was another incredible example of the Argentine hospitality. Soon we and our car were known around the neighbourhood, not least because Silvio and his friend Juan Carlos connected us to the local media. On one of the mornings we were invited by the local radio station to a live interview, as we noticed from later reactions, the program must have been followed by many people. On the same day a reporter from a small local television station came by to record a short show with us.



Finally, we followed Santiago, a childhood friend of Silvio, to the fields out of town and shot a documentary about our trip. Santiago is the producer of an award-winning television show. The program reports about just about everything that has to do with adventure, travel and motor sports and is broadcast nationally. At the end of the recording it was not only a little adventure for us, because on the ride on the dusty dirt roads a large stone had smashed the oil pan on Santiago's car. He was not dissuaded from his task, but shot calmly the planned scenes with us. When everything was in the box, we hung his broken car on the Land Cruiser and towed him to his home.



## Argentina's North-East

During a joint dinner Vanesas uncle Omar had shown us two knives he had made by hand. We were absolutely delighted with this beautiful knives and wanted to see the making more closely. Omar invited us to his small workshop and explained to us how he his obtaining the raw material such as wood, horn or bone for the handles and steel from various sources, such as old machetes, used steel disks of agricultural machines or old knife blades from everywhere. From all of these materials, he manufactures with simple tools, with a lot of passion and cleverly new knives in all sizes and for different purposes. He was committed to this craft, after he had lost a leg in an accident and then could no longer pursue his former work. He runs his work with passion, we were aware at the latest when he showed us his collection of knives and knew to tell a story to each piece. When he told us how he saw a blade made of Damask steel for the first time, he had tears of emotion in his eyes. He gave us the two of his precious jewels as a present, which now decorates our kitchen in memory of this good-hearted and friendly person.



The wife of Omar, Elida, runs a small corner shop next to the house of our hosts. We were not only repeatedly amazed about what was to buy in this corner shop, but how many customers every day were doing their shopping in this tiny *Tienda*. The offer covered all the needs of daily life, and whatever was not available, Elida could get a very short time.



Juan Carlos, the friend of Silvio invited us to his house and proudly showed us his self-built motorhome, based on a 54-year-old Mercedes intercity bus. With great skill and attention to detail he had converted the huge thing. If he goes with his family on tour, he is not afraid to take

## Argentina's North-East

the gem also on rough roads, though slowly as he said, but without fear of braking it.

Early in the morning when Myrta was still asleep, Ueli accompanied Silvio to his workshop. Before he opened it at eight o'clock, he allowed himself a coffee in one of the bars in the city centre, a meeting place that many people visit before work. Silvio's friends showed keen interest in us and our trip and after we had been presented in the local media, even our *Tortuga* was recognized when we drove through the city. It was a wonderful experience to see how people live together here in the province. They know each other, and invite each other for dinner and, above all, spend a lot of time talking to each other in person.

It is certainly the case that *Cañada de Gomez* has not much to offer for travellers. But you only need to have one friend there, and you will receive a warm welcome and will be received with open arms by the city and its residents. We saw many examples of this hospitality, including a jewellery shop that visited Ueli on the recommendation of Silvio in order to repair his charm. As it turned out, the owner was a Swiss emigrants in the third generation, whose family, like some others came originally from *Mendrisio* in the canton of Ticino. He was pleased to meet travellers from his old homeland and issued us the repair costs as a "*Regalo de un Cañadanense*". Another time, we had to replenish our drinking water supply. Again, the owner did not want money from us, she only wanted to have a look inside the meanwhile famous camper of us.

## Predelta National Park

Our friends, the Cabrera family, accompanied us up to *Victoria*, a small town in the delta of the *Rio Parana*, which is connected by a bridge to the



## Argentina's North-East

big city of *Rosario*. In one of the many restaurants that specialize in the tasty fish from the river such as *Dorados*, *Surubí* or *Pacu*, we enjoyed the last few hours with our hosts.

The little-known *Predelta* National Park we visited mainly because we found there a place to stay. The park, located on a tributary of the *Rio Parana*, is accessible only to one point by road, visiting the other regions the river landscape is possible only by boat. After the many national parks with often high prices for foreigners, we were pleasantly surprised that we didn't have to pay for either the entry nor the camping.

After we had set-up ourselves, there was still enough time for a short hike through the wetlands, swamps and alder forests landscape. Many day visitors took advantage of the nice weather for a picnic by the river or a walk. The park ranger, however, had predicted on arrival, that we probably were the only guests who would stay overnight. In fact, all the visitors were gone until shortly before sunset and we enjoyed a very quiet night, accompanied only by the occasional calls of nocturnal animals. When it was quiet, we saw, to our great joy, for the first time a *capybara* very close to us. They exist only in South America and belong to the family of guinea pigs and are the largest, today living rodent in the world. *Capybaras* can grow up to 70kg and up to one meter long and over. They live in and around water and feed mainly on grasses and aquatic plants.



# Argentina's North-East

## Esteros del Ibera National Park

This 13,000 km<sup>2</sup> National Park is a complicated structure of several individual parks and private nature reserves that are to be merged in the future into one unit. Access to this, after the *Pantanal* in Brazil's second-largest wetland in the world, is possible only at a few points. We chose the lesser known *Parque San Nicolas*, on the northwest side of the area to access the park. From the small town of *San Miguel* a 30 km long dirt road led out into the pot flat landscape, first through agricultural areas and productive forests where mainly resin was harvested, then by ever more natural areas. Just after the start it began raining like cats and dogs and we were glad that the surface on the track was sandy and not muddy. The water collected in the deep ruts splashed high on both sides over the window and the wipers ran at full speed. Two crocodiles and numerous *capybaras*, which used the road as a berth had to make room for us so we could pass.



When we got to the targeted campsite, it turned out that this part of the national park was another protected area established by Douglas Tompkins, the North Face founder. The buildings and grounds of the campground shared the same dignified features as the previous Tompkins properties. As the park rangers explained to us, this area of the *Esteros del Ibera* was handed over to the Argentine National Park Administration by the Tompkins Foundation just over a year ago.

Next morning we were surprised with a bright blue sky and a pleasant cooling wind, which gave the landscape a completely different appearance. We took the opportunity for a first walk through the surrounding area. A grassy path led through the flat countryside, past forest islands and small ponds. Because of the heavy rains the day before the trail was often knee-deep under water. Thanks to the warm weather

## Argentina's North-East

and equipped with our Teva sandals, wading through the flooded zones was downright fun.



In the afternoon we drove the seven kilometres out to *Puerto Carambola*, located on a large lagoon. The trip there was a great experience. As soon as we left the camp, we were able to observe caimans, which dragged a dead *Capybara* into the water. As it looked, and later confirmed by the *guardaparque*, the animal had rather died of old age than a victim of the crocodile attack. The relatively small caimans could only be dangerous for very young *capybaras*. On the way to the lagoon we met hundreds of *capybaras*, often reluctant to give way to our car. Countless birds populated the swamps and islands of grass and we even got to face a few *Venados de las Pampas*, shy and rare marsh deer. Having reached the end of the road, we stopped for a longer break and enjoyed sitting in the sun and watch the animals. Especially the *capybaras* were not shy, and approached us to within a few meters and obviously had great interest in our Land Cruiser.



On the way back we stopped to take another of the signposted walks to a pond. Here too, many waterfowl were seen and even a kingfisher was diving for food.

## Argentina's North-East

Another access road to the heart of the National Park offered the portal *Cambyretá* which was also only be reached via a 30 km dirt road. This part was originally part of the Tompkins property. The beautifully landscaped campground was unfortunately useless for us because the access road leads through private land whose owners had prevailed that only days visitors may use their roads. This meant, for the three years after construction the well-developed campground has never been used by visitors.



This meant for us that we could drive to the national park and to the end of the track, but then had to leave the park for the night. Our stay in this part of the park offered some unusual animal encounters. During the trip, we had the enormous good fortune to see an anaconda. With about 2.5 meters in length, it was still small, but nevertheless already an impressive animal. We got out of the car to watch more closely as it comfortably crossed the sandy road and elegantly disappeared in the water of the nearby pond. In addition, we met here again crocodiles and many birds and *capybaras*. We felt like in a zoo, just without cages and



## Argentina's North-East

fences. It seemed to be the day of snakes for us, for on the trail through a forest islands, Ueli discovered a tree snake but paid a hellish respect for these reptiles. This elegant, slim, beautifully coloured animal remained on a branch just at head height above the trail we were walking on. Fortunately it retreated after a short time and permitted free passage.

Since the beautiful campsite *Monte Rey* was not available, as already mentioned, we had to leave the park to find a place to spend the night. At the *Rio Parana*, we finally arrived in a private camping. This was not particularly nice and had pretty run down infrastructures, but was directly above the river. In addition, we got interesting animal neighbours again. In the darkness a fat toad took advantage of the artificial light and chased successfully insects. And the following morning we saw monkeys that did gymnastics in the trees above us.



## The ruins of San Ignacio Mini

On the edge of the village of the same name, we visited the ruins of the largest Jesuit mission of this area. The mission was built in the 17th and early 18th century. The buildings at the opposite end were partly well preserved and gave an idea of the impressive dimensions of the system. Up to 8,000 inhabitants have lived there during the heydays. The



## Argentina's North-East

population was composed of the missionaries and native *Guarani*, which should be converted to Christianity in the mission. After the Jesuits were expelled by the Spanish from South America in 1767, the Indians left the place and the city remained uninhabited.

# Paraguay



## Paraguay

### Ruins of the Jesuit

The Jesuits were not only in Argentina established, but at the same time some missions were built in today's Paraguay, three of which we wanted to visit. The well preserved ruins of *La Santísima Trinidad de Parana* have the largest church of all Jesuit missions. A large part of the walls have been preserved to this day, so we got a good impression of the former size of the building. The many reliefs on the sandstone blocks are evidence of the craftsmanship of the builders and are very impressive.

Only 12 kilometres further on were the ruins of *Jesús de Tavarangue*. This facility was built with the same floor plan as the ones visited before, that is, all the buildings were arranged around the large central square. Several rows of residential buildings for the Indians on the one side, in the centre the main church and adjacent the buildings of the Jesuits. Both



# Paraguay

the ruins of *Jesús de Tavarangue* and the *Santísima Trinidad de Parana* were appointed UNESCO world heritage site.

A little further to the west, away from the Ruta 1, was another relic from the time of the Jesuits, the Mission of *San Cosme y Damián*. Unlike the other, ruins of these buildings were rebuilt in part and the population still uses the church today. We visited the facility on a Sunday morning and were surprised about the many parked cars and motorcycles until we realized that a service was in progress and the faithful evidently had gathered from all over the area to join.

## National Park Ybycui

In the rather dull landscape in southern Paraguay the small National Park offered some variety. A small remnant of the original forest was placed under protection and made available to the public. Some short walks through the lush vegetation to hidden waterfalls were posted.



We were especially fascinated by the many different butterflies in all colours, on flowers and leaves. The largest and most beautiful butterflies that were there to be admired, rarely sat down thus photographing it unfortunately was impossible.



# Paraguay

## Escaping the Easter Crowd

As we expected that on the Argentinian side, especially at the *Iguazu* waterfalls, a lot of people would be on the road over the Easter weekend, we had decided to go to Paraguay. We spent the long weekend "under the protection" of the campsite *Hasta la Pasta*. Marion and René, a German-Swiss pair operate this haven of peace, which has a very good reputation among travellers since many years. The site is located near *Altos*, a small town which mainly became famous because it was the home town of the music group *Los Paraguayos* that had been popular in the 70s in Europe. Throughout the region of *Altos*, many German-speaking immigrants have settled, which was especially obvious at the weekly Saturday market in *San Bernardino*. The offering consisted mainly of sausage and cheese, produced to original recipes, we also saw a lot of sellers hawking German old books and records. We took the opportunity of course to stock up once again with European style food.

On Monday, a service for our Land Cruiser was due. Before we could go to the workshop, we had to get the parts needed in the nearby town of *Itaugua*. In Paraguay, no problem, because our Toyota model is well known there. For just about 100 CHF we bought 2 oil filter, the diesel main and pre-filter, an air filter, 11 litres of engine oil and two new windshield wiper blades. René had recommended us to have the work done by Erich, also German immigrant who lived in his beautiful property near the *Hasta la Pasta* for many years. Although he is now retired, the former trucker still likes to work on cars and enjoyed working on our car. In addition to the usual routine work he soldered also the broken bracket of the expansion tank.

After the Easter holidays were over, it was time to say good bye, on the one hand to Marion and René, they really care for the welfare of the Overlander, on the other hand also to the new friends from Germany and Switzerland, which had, just like ourselves, had spent the long weekend here.

# Brazil's southeast



## Brazil's southeast

### Iguazu Waterfalls

Having been on a trip to South America without visiting the gigantic waterfalls of *Iguazu*, is like a journey to Switzerland without visiting the Matterhorn.

We decided to visit the falls from the Brazilian side first. For this we selected the *Camping Paudimar*, close to the National Park entrance and next morning took the bus to the park. In the lobby we could buy the tickets with a credit card at a ticket vending machine and so avoid the queue. However, the number of visitors were moderate, and we could already board the first bus to rode to the inside of the park.

At the *Hotel das Cataratas* we got off and followed the footpath along the gorge up to the *Garganta del Diablo*, the "Devil's Throat". Along the way we passed various viewpoints and got a first impression of the powerful waterfalls. Countless small, cute *coatis* populated the area around the walkways, attracted by the visitors, who feed the animals. At the climax, the *Garganta del Diablo*, where huge masses of water fall over the rocks into a cauldron, we reached the end of the trail. On the platform which offered the best view on the "Devil's Throat", it was advantageous to put a raincoat on, to prevent being soaked to the underwear. We did not go on the boat trip to the foot of the falls, after we had seen how close the boats pulled in to the waterfall, because we did not want a full shower.



## Brazil's southeast

Much couldn't probably be seen in this mist and also impossible take pictures.

After we returned to the starting point by bus, we visited the nearby Bird Park. The generously laid-out zoo was set-up in a jungle, thus was very natural. The birds shown, lived mostly in large walk-in aviaries, which let the visitor almost forget to be in a zoo. Nevertheless, of course, we hoped that we would get to see many of these birds even in the wild.



The next morning we left our belonging at the camping and a van chauffeured us to the Argentinean side of the falls. Already at the entrance, we noticed that the Brazilians access is much better organized. Only just one of six ticket counters, was open and self-service machines were not available. At least it was possible to pay the juicy entrance fee of 500 ARS about 25 CHF per person by credit card.

From the entrance, we walked to the train station to take the train to the *Cataratas*. From there started two trails, one to experience the falls from below, the other are passed above the falls. Both had their appeal because they offered very different perspectives on the water masses. In contrast to the Brazilian side, the viewpoints had to be tackled by foot here. Overall, we walked about 6 km, although we used the narrow gauge railway for the route to the starting point to the *Garganta del Diablo*. An approximately 1km long jetty led across the broad, flat upper *Rio Iguacu* before we were directly above the "Devil's throat" in which, thousands of cubic meters of water per second plunge. Here too, a rain protection was an advantage not to be completely soaked. For all the beauty and the overwhelming impressions of this natural spectacle, the information was alarming to us that 40 years ago the river water had flowed crystal clear. The large-scale deforestation in the headwaters has

## Brazil's southeast

promoted the erosion so that today the carried sediments ensure that the water is the colour of chocolate.



In wet places along the way, thousands of butterflies collected. They fluttered as coloured clouds through the air and often landed to the delight of people on the visitors. We identified more than a dozen different species in all colours and sizes. At 16:00 we were picked up at the entrance and went back to the camp across the border.

### Our conclusion and tip:

It is worthwhile in any case to visit both sides of the park, because the outlook of the falls vary by location. The Brazilian side of the visit is recommended in the morning to take advantage of the better lighting conditions, while the Argentinian side is ideal rather in the afternoon. We also had the impression that afternoon fewer people were onsite, where we had generally lucky enough to meet not overly many visitors. The falls are most spectacular with high volume. We were lucky to experience the falls with very high water volume what is rather unusual in the season we have been there.

## Towards the Southern Coast of Brazil

Since we hadn't planned to travel to the very south of Brazil, we made our way towards the coast. Wide open landscapes are used for agricultural purposes, with corn and soybean being cultivated in the first place. We drove through hundreds of kilometres of hilly areas on comfortable 600 to 1000masl and passed small or medium-sized town

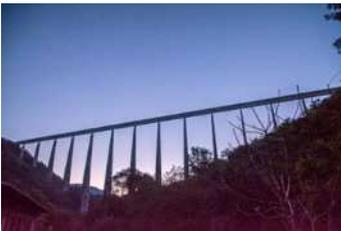
## Brazil's southeast

again and again. The area often reminiscent of Europe, although the natural native vegetation often highly deviated from our part of the world.



With *Treze Tílias*, thirteen Lindens, we visited a small town which was founded by an Austrian and where the traditional Austrian architecture is maintained to this day. A stroll through the town, which seemed pretty dead for a Sunday, we got the impression that we were in the Tyrol.

By chance we had chosen a campsite to stay, that what just below the *Viaducto 13*, a 500m long viaduct that was built in 1978, with 143m the second highest railway bridge in the world at the time. It was part of the long disused railway line built by military units to transport the grain harvest from the hinterland to the ports. Today, countless trucks transport the crop on the road to the ports!



We had seen many theme roads marked on our map, the Wine Road, the Romantic Road and the Symphony of a dirt road. The names sounded tempting and seemed to us worth a detour. We did come past a few wineries along the Wine Route indeed, the *Rota Romantica* led through villages with German influence, but what is romantic for Brazilians, was certainly not a big highlight for us. After all it seemed to succeed to boost the local tourism industry, because *Gramado* on the route was well visited. The city was founded in the early 20th century by German and Italian settlers and lives because of the great climate and proximity to the large city of *Porto Alegre* mainly from tourism. Attractions are above all since 1973-annual the Film Festival.

## Brazil's southeast

### The Canyon Fortaleza and Itaimbezinho

On the drive over the plateau, almost 1000masl, we visited two impressive canyons. The *Canion de Fortaleza* we reached via a spur road from *Cambara do Sul*. At the end of the road we had to walk a few hundred meters before we could look down into the largest canyon in Brazil. The walls are several hundred meters almost vertically down to the bottom of the gorge. Numerous waterfalls cascade from the cliffs into the depths. The vegetation on the plateau consisted primarily of scrubby grass and bushes, while in the valley bogs, dense jungle growth, offering a habitat to numerous animals. On the way back, a short hike led past an impressive waterfall again to the edge of the canyon, revealing a different perspective to the depth.



On the descend towards the coast we arrived at *Cambara do Sul* and soon after at the second known canyon in the area, the gorge of *Itaimbezinho*. There are several hikes signposted to see this natural spectacle from different angles. We followed the edge of the canyon and had a first look into the depths of the canyon and on the opposite waterfall that fell over the wall into the deep gorge. A longer walk took us along the canyon and offered almost at the end of the trail again spectacular views of the lower course of the gorge. The warm updraft large raptors and vultures took advantage to sail along the rockfaces.



To reach the coast, we had to overcome almost 1000m difference in height between the high plateau and the sea level. The good road led in countless switchbacks down to the coast plain.

# Brazil's southeast

## Reunion with Friends

Angie and Chris, along with another couple from Switzerland, had started in early 2018 with their Steyr truck camper a trip to South America and were currently travelling on the Brazilian coast. We had been in contact with them and arranged a meeting at the *Barra do Ibiraquera*, where we arrived in the pouring rain. We spent some wonderful days together and enjoyed it, to be back together with old friends to discuss past and future, to cook together or take walks together through the beautiful coastal scenery.



After another day in *Ibiraquera* we drove together southwards. The stages were shorter than usual because the two travel in general much slower and more comfortable than us. We were happy to be guided by her pace, and enjoyed it to be a little more leisurely underway, after the many kilometres we had covered up to here. As Chris and Angie have been travelling the coast a bit longer, they knew some nice places to stay, where we spent more days together.



## The Fishermen of Laguna

Near the city of *Laguna*, a river empties into the sea, and its north shore is popular with local fishermen. We actually met many men with litter nets, standing in knee-deep water. Especially the way they catch the fish was unique, because they were supported by large dolphins. The

## Brazil's southeast

animals were swimming from the sea along the shore and drove the fish to where the men were waiting for a rich catch. Once one of the dolphins showed up just before the fishermen, they threw synchronously the net



into the water and managed to catch fish quite successful. What we could not find out was whether they would without the help of dolphins catch fewer fish and why the dolphins at all working together with the fishermen.

In the pretty old town of Laguna we enjoyed a well-deserved drink in the warm sun.



## Urubici, the Siberia of Brazil

The road to the high plateau *Urubici* rises from sea level to almost 1500m and leads through the *Serra do Rio do Rastro*. With increasing elevation, the tropical forest was replaced by *Araucaria* forests. A viewpoint on the road gave a clear view of the mountain road, which winds its way steeply up in countless switchbacks.

The small town of *Urubici* is located over 1000masl, which is quite high by Brazilian standards. Thus, in the winter the temperatures can drop correspondingly low in this area and even snow is possible. A cold record was 1996 measured  $-17^{\circ}\text{C}$  at the highest point of the community, on the *Morro da Igreja*, with 1822m it is the highest mountain in Brazil. Therefore many Brazilians from the tropical north drive in the winter months to *Urubici*, hoping to see and feel once in a lifetime real snow.

## Brazil's southeast

The most striking building in *Urubici* was his rather futuristically designed church. The village itself exerts a certain central function in the agricultural region. Nearby, some hikes are signposted to beautiful waterfalls, but the scenic highlight of the *Morro da Igreja*, remained unfortunately closed because the access road was temporarily closed due to road construction. In good weather, the mountain would not only allow great views of the coastal plain, but also on a special rock formation with a large hole. So we only drove to *Noiva* to visit of the waterfall *Cachoeira Vêu*, which was located near the access road.

Our trip ended at the edge of the plateau in the *Serra do Corvo Branco*, from where switchbacks lead down to the coastal plain. To build this road, the sandstone rock had to be cut 90 m deep. The spectacular route is a popular destination, so it was not surprising that a lot was going on during the weekend.



## Blumenau, a Bit of Germany in Brazil

Through landscapes that were very similar to the Jura in Switzerland, we reached *Blumenau*. The city with about 300,000 inhabitants, by Swiss standards, a large city, was founded in 1850 by German immigrants under the supervision of the pharmacist Hermann Blumenau. The streets were lined with half-timbered houses, many of which had been built only recently. Famous is Blumenau especially for its three-week Oktoberfest, annually taking place since 1984, which is the largest of its

## Brazil's southeast

kind to Munich and at the same time with up to 90,000 visitors a day the second largest festival in Brazil, next to the Carnival of Rio.

Through Chris and Angie we had made contact with Viviane and Fernando. The young couple runs a small furniture factory, which produces modern, mostly cubic custom furniture. Viviane is responsible for the design and Fernando directs the production with five employees. We loved their work and regretted that we cannot use their services for our new beginning in Switzerland.

They both showed us the tourist part of *Blumenau* with the *Vila Germanica* where we enjoyed together a beer from one of the many microbreweries in the region. Although the facility remembered something to Disneyland, the ambiance and the offer in the restaurants was pretty authentic German.

Outside the city they drive us to the end of a small valley, where we found ourselves unexpectedly in natural jungle. As it was getting dark, we drove back to Blumenau and finished the day with a joint dinner in a trendy restaurant.



## Back on the Coast

In *Ilha Sao Francisco do Sul* we met the coast again. We stayed in sympathetic Camping Tony. The next day we visited the *Fort Marechal Luz* and were quite surprised when we met there Marc and Dela from



## Brazil's southeast

Frankfurt for the third time on this trip. Spontaneously, they established themselves in the same camp and we spent a few days together.

The two even managed to persuade us one afternoon to go together to the beach and swim in the not really warm sea but of course, it was fun with them. Tony, the camp owner, spoiled us every day at noon with a cool, Brazilian drink. Although the time was a bit early for an aperitif, we accepted the offer with pleasure and drowned the delicious cocktails with great joy.



Before we left, we visited the nearby town *Sao Francisco do Sul*, which was founded in the 1658th. The old town consists of about 150 well-preserved historic buildings. After an extensive tour, we went to the ferry port and after crossing the *Baia da Babitonga* headed north.



A side trip took us to the remote village *Guaraqueçaba*, which was reached by a 80 km bumpy dirt road. The small village at the mouth of the river *Ararapira* is surrounded by several nature reserves and attracts mainly on weekends many visitors. Except on the road, *Guaraqueçaba* is also accessible with a several-hour boat ride from *Paranagua*. In the town itself there was not much to see, so we drove a few kilometres back and found a farm stay in the garden of the owners near the *Salto Morato* Nature Reserve. The simple camping was operated by Dino and his wife, who had created several small plantations in the partly cleared forest. At night we sat together around a campfire and communicated with them in a way "Portuganisch" a mixture of Portuguese and mainly Spanish. They invited us to the Brazilian version of mulled wine, that tasted quite nice, even at 30 °C. In addition, they showed us how to roast

## Brazil's southeast

palm hearts, tasty interior of palm trunks, in the fire and then enjoyed it freshly prepared.



In the morning we drove further into the nature park and hiked to the *Salto Morato*. The impressive, 200m high waterfall was in the middle of a jungle, which fascinated us with its incredible biodiversity. After that it we had to step back the whole 80km of dirt road again.



In the small town of *Porto de Cima* we put in again a "vacation day". When we arrived on Sunday afternoon, there was still raising hell, because many people from the city of *Curitiba*, a few kilometres inland, spent their weekends at the nearby river. However, in the evening only a few guests stayed at the campsite, including a young Brazilian couple we got to know a bit better. We spent the next day with the two, went swimming in the wonderfully clear and warm river and visited the evening market in near *Morretes*. There we enjoyed the offered Brazilian specialties and quenched the thirst with draft beer from a small brewery.



## Brazil's southeast

### Curitiba

On the *Estrada da Graciosa*, a winding, cobbled mountain road, we arrived to *Curitiba*. The road wound through dense Atlantic jungle to an elevation of 1000m. Despite the size of 1.8 million inhabitants, *Curitiba* is considered a city with a high standard of living, which is in particular due to the many parks, the well-functioning public transport network and the major environmental consciousness of the population. We were convinced of the merits of this city in an extended tour. In peri-urban campsite we met for the second time in Sabine and Ulrich, who were traveling with their handy MAN truck.



In *Curitiba*, we celebrated our two year journey anniversary and enjoyed the celebration in the company of Chocolate, as we called the obese, chocolate brown camping dog, and with the many free-running, constantly foraging bantams, with a glass of sparkling wine.

### Sao Paulo, Brazil's Megacity

The journey from the coast up to *Sao Paulo* was impressive. On a highway, which mainly consists of bridges and tunnels, we drove up the steep, jungle-covered slopes to almost 1000masl. The increasing elevation was also reflected significantly on the lowered temperature, which was a few degrees cooler than at sea level.

The actual city area has about 12 million and the whole agglomeration 21 million inhabitants. Thus, *Sao Paulo* is not only the largest city of Brazil, but also the third largest in the world. We had booked a Airbnb



## Brazil's southeast

room and, as it turned out, made an excellent choice. The owners of the beautiful and dignified house welcomed us very friendly and we got on well immediately with them, even if the whole conversation took place in Portuguese. Since the accommodation was in a quiet and safe neighbourhood of *Santo Andre*, it was no problem to park the car on the lawn next to the house. We've been very surprised about the dignified room we were given for just only 12 CHF / night. That even breakfast and dinner with the family were included in this price, we did not expect. We were generally treated and pampered by the hosts like good friends. To save us the 20 minute bus ride to the train station, we were driven there by car.

With train and metro we rode to the centre of *Sao Paulo* and took a long stroll through the city centre. Among others, the path led us past the *Catedral da Sé*. The mighty church, in which a religious service was in progress, was full to the last seat! Countless fair servants took care of the faithful and whoever was in need to get rid of his sins could use the service of the confessionals. We were impressed that so many people were visiting the Saturday morning worship.



Past the quaint *Teatro Municipal*, one of the few historic buildings from the early 20th century, which had not yet fallen victim to the construction boom, we went on through the lively pedestrian zone to the *Praça da República*, where a nice craft market took place in the small, green oasis. To taste the traditional Saturday lunch, the Brazilian *feijoada* specialty, we visited a small, inconspicuous, but very traditional

## Brazil's southeast

restaurant. The dish consisted of a pot of beans and boiled dried meat and a plate with porc chops, fine sausage, crispy fried bacon, vegetables and rice. Although we had only ordered one serving for both of us, from the huge quantity that was served, some food was left over.



We felt very comfortable and safe in the huge city of *Sao Paulo* despite the size and the many people and found our way through the centre quite easy. The many homeless who stayed and slept throughout the public spaces, let imagine that behind the scenes probably some people are in disarray and not all benefit from the superficial prosperity.

On Sunday we were picked up by Ueli's former work mate André and his wife Luana. Together we went to the *Mercado Municipal*. In the large, recently renovated Art Nouveau hall of 1933 whatever foodstuff you can imagine was offered,. At many stalls, we were able to taste exotic fruits or sample the various varieties of *cachaça*. For lunch we enjoyed the most typical specialty that *Sao Paulo* has to offer, one of the gigantic mortadella sandwich. This consisted of a huge bun filled with 300g finely chopped mortadella, and on request with an additional slice of cheese, and served warm. It was almost an art to eat this monster without leaving traces of grease everywhere, but it tasted great.



## Brazil's southeast

Next, we visited with the two friends the Asian district on *Avenida da Liberdade*, where people from all Asian countries operate their shops and restaurants.



Another stop was to the *Parque do Ibirapuera*. The layout of the park was designed by the famous landscape architect *Roberto Burle Marx*, who had planted the main native plants of Brazil here. Some notable buildings in the park are designed by the famous architect *Oscar Niemeyer*. Among others he had created delicate canopies, an igloo-like building, viewed from the outside a very simple design, but looking very elegant and noble inside the auditorium.



When we finished our city tour and wanted to drive to their apartment, the car's battery went on strike. André called the insurance company and only just 10 minutes later a patrol motorcycle appeared and the mechanic started the car with a booster battery. We were amazed by

## Brazil's southeast

these fast and efficient service, which probably doesn't exist in this form in many parts of the world. A funny detail was that the mechanic worked for several companies, and depending on the client, he changed the labels on the bike and his upper clothes before he arrived at the customer. After the breakdown was fixed, we let the day end with a delicious risotto and interesting conversations with André and Luana.

### Along the Costa Verde

On the old road we drove from *Sao Paulo* back to the coast. The coastal road repeatedly led past beautiful bays with sandy beaches. For people who love the beach life, this area is an absolute paradise. Unfortunately, there were not many camping facilities on the *Costa Verde*.

In *Paraty*, a small town with a well preserved Grade II listed Old Town, we inserted a stop. The whole centre of the town consists of colonial houses and several pretty churches from the 17th century. The streets were consistently paved with cobblestones. Many of the historic homes that were all painted white and decorated with colourful window and door frames, are now home to nice restaurants or craft stores. We stayed at a campsite about 3km north of the town, which offers good infrastructure, a beautiful waterfront location and very much shade under the trees. Therefore, we added an extra day to relax. To our great pleasure for the first time we had visitors: Some of the small, comical white *Marmoset*, a local monkey species.



The following route is one of the most scenic stretches of coastline of Brazil. Until shortly before the city *Itaguai* the route follows spectacular

## Brazil's southeast

beaches with offshore islands in the turquoise sea. However, also on this stretch we passed the only nuclear power plant in Brazil.

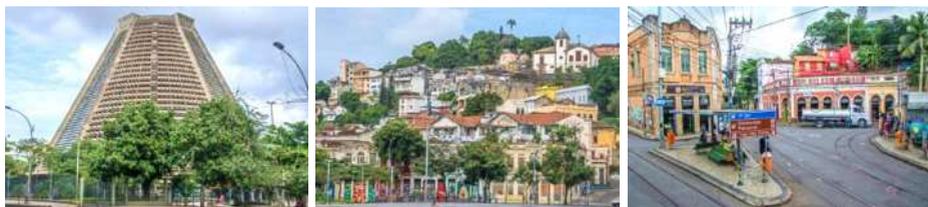
### Rio de Janeiro

Since there was no camping facilities in the vicinity of *Rio de Janeiro*, we decided to book again a Airbnb room. The accommodation was again cheaper than an average campsite and was only just 150m from the famous *Copacabana* beach and even offered the possibility to park our Land Cruiser in a closed courtyard of front of the building.

On arrival we walked to *Forte Duque de Caxias*. The fort is equipped with several large-calibre howitzers, which had protected the bay of *Rio de Janeiro* until 1992. Even today, the hill in the possession of the army, however, is open to visitors, because from the top it probably offers the best view of the beach of *Copacabana* and the opposite *Sugarloaf*.



We spent the following day in the centre of Rio. By bus we went first to the station *Gloria* and explored the surrounding neighbourhoods. With *Bonde*, one of the oldest trams in the world, which has been continuously operational since 1877, we reached the district of *Santa Teresa*, very popular among artists. On foot we went then on the narrow, winding roads back down to the city. In *Parque das Ruinas* we visited an old villa, which was never completed, but still impresses with its architecture and the existing details and is today a tourist attraction with restaurants and shops. They also offered a wonderful view of the underlying neighbourhoods.



## Brazil's southeast

Not far away, we climbed down the stairs *Escadinhas de Santa Teresa*. The fronts of the stairs were all covered with red tiles and imaginative, colourful custom pieces and when viewed from below, gave a coherent picture. Of course, here like in any tourist hot spot of the world, people had their selfies taken with the stairs in the. To get the best picture, they were even willing to stand in a queue and wait until it was their turn and could pose.

Through the cinema quarter we passed the *Municipal Theater*, opened in 1909 and completely renovated in 2009, the building is one of the most beautiful theatres in Brazil. The gilding of the dome and facade restored during the renovation was glowing in the sun and let shine the magnificent building. Other historical buildings had been built right on the waterfront, many of which serve as the seat of government, courts or marine facilities. To get back to our room, we used the modern metro, with which we travelled for only just 1.50 CHF throughout the city.



With a minibus of the National Park Service we could go directly from *Copacabana* to the *Christ the Redeemer* statue on the top of *Corcovado*. That was not quite as stylishly as riding the funicular, but we skipped the usually long queues at the valley station.

On the bus ticket it was marked, in which time slot the bus for the second stage would start. The ride was adjusted such that the next bus to the summit was boarded at the Visitor Centre without much delay. Overall, all the fun will cost about 20 CHF per person, contained therein were the return trip from *Copacabana* to the *Christ the Redeemer* and the entry fee itself. Due to the many reports we had read beforehand, we expected a huge crowd. The more we were surprised that the number of visitors was rather low on our arrival at noon. The weather was also very pleasant to us. Although the sky was not without clouds, we had a good view of the underlying city. We quickly agreed that only Hong Kong plays probably in the same league as *Rio de Janeiro* in terms of location and landscape. Both cities have a similar topography. In countless bays,

## Brazil's southeast

bordered by jungle-covered rock cones, the individual quarters are pushing up the hills and so dominate the skyline. The 360° panorama that is offered on the platform of the *Cristo Redentor* was terrific, anyway. The ever present selfie visitors brought us once again to a smile. Sponsored by Pirelli, rubber mats were laid on the floor so that the photographer could lay down on the back before the Christ statue above them to bring their friends in the best perspective into the picture. If that was too complicated, the services of a professional photographer could be used. He would position his customers and the known pictures were taken.



We did not want to leave without having seen the second, very big attraction Rios, the Sugarloaf. On Ueli's birthday we rode with the cable car to the top of the 396m high rock. There are probably not be too many visitors able to spend their special day in this magnificent vantage point. We were on the first gondola in the morning, and thus had the mountain still almost to ourselves. Here again, the entire city of Rio de Janeiro at the feet, on the one hand again the Copacabana beach, in the middle of Christ the Redeemer and around the quarters of the impressive and unique city, this time under a clear blue sky !!



## Brazil's Southwest



## Brazil's Southwest

### Back to the Highlands

After visiting *Rio de Janeiro*, we finally left the coast of Brazil behind us. Through the National Park *Serra dos Orgaos* the road rose sharply to 1000masl. The temperature dropped a few degrees and patchy fog hung in the mountains. However, when we stopped at the viewpoint of the Finger of God, a sleek, distinctive rock tower, the sky was already back to bright blue.



A side trip took us to *Nova Friburgo*, where we wanted to buy once again some good cheese at *Casa Suíça*. Swiss emigrants, mostly from the canton of Fribourg, had settled here in the 1820's. A small museum showed many historical pictures, the interesting history of the emigrant families, starting with the dramas which took place already at the crossing on sailing ships like and how the newcomers established their lives in the unfamiliar surroundings. They founded in 1980, the biggest football club in the city, the *Friburgense AC*. In 1997, descendants of emigrants started

## Brazil's Southwest

a dairy school where the production of cheese is mediated by Swiss recipes and products can be purchased in the adjoining shop.



## The Baroque Towns of Minas Gerais

Between *Rio de Janeiro* and *Belo Horizonte* are a number of beautiful Baroque cities strung together. It is no coincidence that the ancient cities with their ornate houses and churches are found in this region. In the 17th century, the state of Minas Gerais was the centre of successful gold and gem mining. Thus, the wealth obtained made it possible to invest in spacious buildings of the mine owners.

The centres of many of these places are beautifully preserved and still very beautiful. We put our route so, that we could visit the most beautiful of the cities.

## Sao Joao del Rei and Tiradentes

We checked into *Tiradentes* and explored the two closely spaced cities from there. In *Sao Joao*, the larger of the two towns, the historic core was located north of the river and invited to a interesting walk. The whole centre, where most of the interesting buildings and streets of houses were to be found, was cobbled. The quite unique little cemetery was in the middle of downtown. Since this has only room for a few graves, they were created not only multistorey, the remains must also be cleared again after five years. The Church of *Sao Francisco de Assis* was in a

## Brazil's Southwest

district on the opposite side of the river. This had a large collection of carved figures, which the gifted artist and architect *Aleijadinho*, called the "cripple", are attributed. *Aleijadinho*, who was born in 1738 as *Antonio Francisco Lisboa* was diagnosed leprosy at about 40 years of age, which caused damage to the arms and hands. However, his disability did not stop him from continuing to be an artist. He laced the tools fixed to the stub of his arms and worked on until his death in 1814. Some of the churches in the region have not only been designed by *Aleijadinho*, but also equipped with his sculptures created from cedar wood or soapstone.



*Tiradentes* made a more modest and less pompous impression on us, but it was by no less worth seeing. At the small main square, the coachman, which offered couch tours in the city, gathered. Especially impressive was the enthroned on a hill Church Sao Antonio, famous for its built in Germany Organ from the 18th century, which is still played today. The narrow streets with beautifully restored historic buildings were mostly converted into restaurants, small boutique hotels or souvenir shops that offered tasteful handicrafts.

Between the two locations, *Sao Joao* and the *Tiradentes* operates a steam train called *Maria Fumaça*, the "Smoking Maria". Since the railway line ran past our campground, we had the opportunity to see the train pass up close.



# Brazil's Southwest

## Ouro Preto

The most beautiful and most magnificent baroque city is *Ouro Preto*, a town which in the late 18th century, at the height of the gold rush, had over 100,000 inhabitants and was considered as the largest and richest city in the New World. Around the spacious *Praça Tiradentes* impressive government buildings, churches and palaces group. The site extends over several hills, which offered us new views of the individual quarters and the twenty mostly well-preserved churches. Again, the sculptor and architect *Aleijadinho* left many traces of its activities.

Unfortunately, the well-equipped and well-known mineral museum was closed at the time of our visit, so we had to do skip it.



On our ongoing journey we made short stops in *Mariana* and *Santa Barbara*, two other baroque towns. Although these also offered a wealth of historical buildings, but could not compare after the visit of *Ouro Preto*.



# Brazil's Southwest

## Sanctuario do Caraça

Situated in the middle of the wild mountains south of *Santa Barbara*, is the monastery *Sanctuario do Caraça*. Around the facility a protected area has been established, which attracts with its hiking trails, the clear streams and forests tourists from all over Brazil. Unfortunately it was not possible to camp on the grounds of the monastery, only rooms were offered to stay. This meant for us that we had to leave the place again in the late afternoon and so we only had time to visit the monastery and the church.



## National Park Serra do Cipo

Inland from *Belo Horizonte*, the third largest city in Brazil, is the *Serra do Cipo* National Park. Founded in 1984, this park protects particularly typical grass and shrub areas of this region and the wildlife such as marsh deer, anteaters and ocelots. We wanted to visit the *Bandeirants Canyon* and the *Farofa Waterfall*, which are located too far away to walk there. To cover the distance of 30 km faster, we rented mountain bikes at the park entrance.



12 km from the starting point, we reached the entrance to the canyon, where we had to cross the crystal clear river. Further penetration into the canyon was only possible if one was willing to swim in the cool water to

## Brazil's Southwest

overcome the deeper pools. Therefore, we left it to a glance into the entrance area and continued our tour. However, we were not spared of wet feet, because to get to the access path on the other side of the 50 meter wide river, we had to push the bike through knee-deep water. During the rainy season, when the water level is much higher, crossing the river is not possible.

On the way back we made a detour to a *Farofa Waterfall* where the water rushed down 240m into the valley in several stages. The break in the cool pool did well to our butts, because the long sitting on a narrow bicycle saddle was unusual for us and the ride over hill and dale strained extreme.



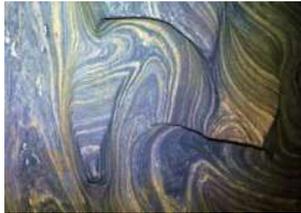
## Gruta da Lapinha

The area north of *Belo Horizonte* is known for its many caves and we wanted to visit one of them, the *Gruta da Lapinha*. Only one kilometre from the entrance we had stayed in a small, private campground. Before we went to the cave the next day, the owner of the place showed us a climbing zone only 300 m away, where her husband worked as an climbing instructor. In the middle of the forest loomed up to thirty-meter-high walls. From relatively simple routes to the very highest levels of difficulty the climbers were offered everything. We learned that people from around the world, even professionals come here, to compete in these rocks.

In the *Gruta* we were treated to a private tour. Our guide led us through the museum and told us the most important facts. As the man spoke only Portuguese, our language skills were put to the test. The accessible part of the cave was indeed only a few hundred meters long, but the

## Brazil's Southwest

rock formations that we encountered were incredibly impressive. In addition to classic stalactites and petrified waterfalls, especially the different water bodies and the sedimentary rocks in all possible forms were uniquely beautiful.



## On to the Wild West

The route from the coast to the *Pantanal* was on the most direct route about 2000 km long. The distance that lay before us, gave us an impressive indication of the actual size of Brazil. After we left *Belo Horizonte* behind us, tourist infrastructure was no longer existent. To stay, however, the free, well-equipped service stations offered overnight parking. The road led for hours or days through agricultural area, where in vast monocultures corn, sugar cane, soya and in over 1000masl coffee was grown. Where the landscape was too hilly for fields, livestock was dominant. The towns and villages were now far apart.

When we drove on the route, a nationwide truck strike took place. At all neuralgic intersections and at rest areas around larger cities hundreds of trucks were parked. The drivers were protesting against the recently significantly increased diesel prices. The rest of the road users and therefore we too were not directly affected by the strike, the friendly striking drivers let us pass through the blockades without delays.



## Brazil's Southwest

The action already lasted a week and the first serious effects were seen, because many petrol stations had already run out of gasoline. Since the trucks were all standing and thus required no fuel, diesel was yet available without any problems. We filled our tanks as a precaution, so we were prepared for the next 2000 km anyway. The supply of food and other goods that are normally transported by road, came gradually to a standstill, resulting in massive problems mainly in the urban centres though. After all, the truck driver achieved with their action, that fuel prices were lowered again.



## Emas National Park

On the long road to the west the *Emas* National Park offered a worthwhile diversion. The interior of the park, which houses some rare animals species such as maned wolves, jaguars, great anteaters etc., unfortunately, was only accessible with a guide. We had tried to organize a guide, which unfortunately failed because he got, due to the truck strikes, no fuel for his car.

So the only wildlife we could watch were the many birds living around our camp site. At least a few small routes on the dirt roads of the park



## Brazil's Southwest

were passable without a guide and in the south of the park we were able to take a walk to the crystal clear river. But the visit was worth it in any case if only to watch the many birds in the trees above our bed.

At the south entrance we were finally given a comprehensive and detailed information by a park employee on the preservation of the landscapes and the animals. He was accompanied by his pupil, a young *Pecari* which had lost his mother and has been brought up by the park ranger. Like a puppy the little boar followed his owner and welcomed us with a joyful grunt. Before we went to the campsite in the park, the ranger warned us of the that in the area of the camp space a puma mother with two cubs had been spotted in the evening before and that we should especially be careful at night. The pumas we havn't seen, but we were visited by two foxes that appeared several times in the vicinity.

On the way out we actually met some *Emas*, the South American ostrich species and namesake of the park.



## Pantanal North

After we put the remaining few hundred kilometres to the *Pantanal* behind us, we enjoyed two days of rest in a nice campsite in *Chapada dos Guimaraes*. Actually we had planned to explore the area a little closer,

## Brazil's Southwest

and it turned out that almost all the sights were on private land and therefore could only be visited with a guided tour and often for a lot of money. Since we were not ready to book a guide to visit a waterfall, our activities were limited to walks in the town. In the campground we met a very nice Brazilian family. The parents had already been travelling for a long time in all of South America and now travelled with her two little boys for three months in Brazil. We spent a good time together and one of the evenings we organized a Pizza Festival, which was well received by all. The “pizzaiolos” were busy and used everything the imagination and inventories offered.

From the plateau at almost 1000masl the road went steeply down into moist hot *Cuiaba*, a large city with over 500,000 inhabitants. There we filled our fridge again, because after this stop it finally went into the wilderness of the *Pantanal*, one of the largest wetlands in the world. The over 230'000km<sup>2</sup> large reserve is one of the UNESCO World Heritage since 2000<sup>th</sup>. Nevertheless, both the landscape and the animals that live there are facing deforestation and extensive agriculture and are at risk. Until about *Pocone*, the road was paved, then we got to the 150km *Transpantaneira*. The man made track was in good condition and many of the bridges to be crossed were even concrete. Already at the entrance to the national park we met first crocodiles, caimans, respectively. Countless birds of all sizes and species were sitting on the trees or crossed our path. The wildlife was just as varied and impressive as we expected this on the basis of travel guide books and the stories of other travellers.



After we passed *Pixaim* the track was a bit more rustic and the bridges were built only of wood. When we stopped for lunch, a Land Cruiser with Aargau license plates stopped next to us. Werner and Maggie from Erlinsbach had seen our car and stopped. From them we learned that the dirt road to *Porto Jofre* was impassable for the last 20 km because of construction work and that they had therefore to turn back. Bad news

## Brazil's Southwest



for us, because we should already be there the next day at noon, to be loaded on the booked barge.

We still tried to get through and luckily it turned out that the road had been opened. The last kilometres were actually a little rough, but the mud holes had been filled and the deep tracks could not stop us, thanks to sufficient ground clearance. We passed through with no problems and reached the dock in time after another night along the way.

We made ourselves comfortable near the river and could watch a group Hyacinth Macaws feeding on palm fruits. And there were to observe many animals, only the booked barge, which should arrive at 12-o'clock, was nowhere to be seen. In the evening we therefore drove back a couple of kilometres to try to access the Internet at the Jaguar Camp. An employee of the camp helped us contact the owner of the boat in *Corumba* by telephone. It turned out that the barge had to moor during the night because of strong winds and was therefore delayed, but should arrive at some point in the evening.



## Brazil's Southwest

We drove back to the jetty and just before 19:00 one of the crew of the *Laura Vicuña* knocked at our window and informed us that they had moored across the river and we would be picked up at 5:00 next morning.

### A Boat Trip is Fun

On time, as agreed, we were awakened by the motor noise of the dinghy. After the team had cleared the moored boats, the barge had enough room to land ashore. Within minutes they had prepared everything for loading and Ueli could manoeuvre the Land Cruiser over two wooden planks on the deck, where the crew had created room in a corner for our campers.

In total darkness, we took off and chugged down the river. As our car had been at the other end of the pontoon, thus out of reach of the engine noise, we heard nothing but the sound of water.



In countless loops the trip followed the about 150m wide *Rio Cuiabá*. From time to time we passed simple ranches, whose inhabitants live primarily from fishing. The team was active during the trip as a dealer for the fishermen. Again and again they took the dinghy ashore to take the local fisherman's catch and stored it on board in a freezer or sometimes the fishermen themselves came alongside to deliver their catch.

Before the confluence of the *Rio Cuiabá* with the *Rio Paraguay*, the trip went along the southern border of the *Pantanal* National Park. Besides a



## Brazil's Southwest



collection of buildings in which the Park Authority was housed, the landscape changed not much. This part of the park is uncrowded, because from any the direction it takes a few hundred kilometres river journey to get there. When we met the *Rio Paraguay*, in the west appeared a larger mountain range with bare rock faces, which were clearly visible despite the onset of dusk. Our captain continued driving safely even in total darkness and successfully working his way downstream.

At first light we awoke. The boat was apparently still been travelling late and had eventually moored for a few hours on the wooded shore. Soon we were underway again and the ship turned into a side arm to the northwest. It turned out that the announced cattle should be taken on board here. The pontoon was uncoupled and sideways moored on the banks and everything was prepared for loading the cattle. Then it was all about waiting again ...

As during the entire trip full-board was included, thus we were served lunch by the chef. There was, how could it be otherwise, with freshly-caught, very tasty river fish and rice.



During the afternoon suddenly the cries of the Gauchos rang out and 130 cattle were driven to the shore. They were collected in a pen and from there without delay groups of 12 were driven to the loading platform and on to the ship. Initially the animals were still very nervous, pawing and lowing uneasily, but got used quickly to the new situation.

## Brazil's Southwest



The announced six hours to *Corumbà* finally turned into nine. Again we drove into the night, the sky was overcast and there was hardly any light on the shore. We wondered how the captain could navigate in these conditions. However, he seemed to be very sure of himself and without hesitation drove down the river that he knew so well. It was already around 10 PM when the lights of *Corumbà* turned the sky red, visible from afar. Shortly before midnight, the ship docked at the shore where the animals were to be unloaded next morning. We spent the last night on the ship with the 130 additional neighbours. Again and again the cows seemed to be startled by something and rumbled on the steel deck, but quickly calmed down again.

At dawn, the crew became active and prepared the discharge. With the same procedure as when loading, the cattle were driven in groups from board. In any case, it was enough that if one of the animals found its way, all others stormed voluntarily behind it on shore. Luckily, the cattle did not know what awaited them, otherwise they would have refused destined to leave the ship.

After this part of the cargo was cleared, the crew began to clean the deck as we drove again up the river to the city. Once there, the captain had to manoeuvre the boat in tight spaces between other barges to finally reach the landing ramp, through which we were able to drive off the ship.



# Brazil's Southwest

## Pantanal South

Actually we had planned to drive the *Estrada do Parque*. This track is the southerly counterpart to the *Transpantaneira* in the north. However, we had heard in advance that the ferry across the *Rio Paraguay* would not operate before July. In addition, other travellers had reported that the track was still partially flooded. This information seemed to be right, because in the western part where we started, the water was so deep that getting through was difficult. And even if passable, we would have had to turn around at the ferry at the latest.

We drove as far into the area as the circumstances would allow and already this short trip should be worthwhile. Again and again, we drove through partly 50cm deep water, causing enough thrill, as neither holes nor stones would be visible on the submerged surface. In addition to countless water birds, caimans and capybaras we saw in broad daylight one of the rare giant anteater!! It wandered leisurely through the tall grass along the road and was not bothered when we got out to take pictures. Shortly thereafter, already back on the paved road, Myrta discovered in the meadow a full-grown tapir and a grazing swamp deer cow. So even without driving the whole route, we got our share in terms of animals.



However, we would have liked to have done without the drizzle that had softened the laterite track. Only 20 km on this track was enough to splatter the whole car from top to bottom again in red mud. While it

## Brazil's Southwest

looked cool and adventurous, it was extremely impractical, as our hands or clothes would get red marks every time we touched the bodywork.

### Refúgio Canaã

From Julio, the Brazilian, we had met in *Chapada dos Guimaraes* know, we got the tip, to visit this place. He raved about this camp, which is located at the end of a small valley on the *Rio Salobra*. So we turned a few kilometres south of *Bodoquena* on to the MS178, and followed the signs. After about 20km track through the jungle, we reached the *Refugio* and were instantly impressed by the facilities. The pitches were equipped with a private shelter with grill, sink, a gas stove, light and electricity. The toilets and showers were not only clean but beautifully designed and equipped to a high standard. In addition to the of Douglas Tompkins campgrounds in Chile we had not seen a comparable campsite in South America.



## Brazil's Southwest

We were warmly welcomed by a staff and shown the facilities. On our tour they made us meet with Esmeralda, a beautiful Hyacinth Macaw who lives on the premises. The bird loved to be carried around sitting on the arm and was reluctant to be set down again when its weight fatigued the carrier over time. Beside the generously designed facility also many animals like peacocks, turkeys, ducks, guinea fowl and a few tame *Emas*, which walked past us again and again, belonged. Countless wild birds such as macaws, parrots and toucans were observed and in the trees capuchin monkeys were hanging out.

Unfortunately the weather was still cold and overcast, so we did not swim in the crystal clear river that flowed past the *Refúgio Canaã*. Had the weather been warmer, as it was a few days ago, we would certainly have stayed longer than two days at this heavenly place.

The surroundings of *Refugio* had a lot to offer. We took a short hike further into the valley where after about one kilometre the impressive *Cachoeira Boca de Onça* crashed down from the steep rock face. The path led through dense, virgin forest along the river, passing other small waterfalls.

# On the Way to Uruguay



## On the Way to Uruguay

### Crossing the border into Paraguay

We crossed the border from Brazil into Paraguay at the town of *Ponta Pora*. As tourists, we really had to find out where and how to do all the required formalities. We could have just crossed the border like the locals, because there was no border control. In addition, it was not clear to us where exactly the national border was, as it ran through the middle of the city without any markings. We wanted to keep our papers in order to ensure that we didn't get into trouble if there were any checks inland or when leaving the country.

First we drove to the airport outside of town to get the exit stamp from the Brazilian border police, then back to Ponta Pora to register our car at customs.

Our next destination was the Paraguayan immigration authorities to get the entry stamp and finally we had to temporarily reintroduce the car at Paraguayan customs. These two authorities were also a few hundred meters apart and were not easy to find.

As at many border crossings, the *iOverlander* app was also very helpful here, because all the contact points for crossing the border could be found there. This time, the formalities took a little more time than usual, which also contributed to the fact that the Paraguayan customs were closed from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m., and the lady responsible only returned to work from shopping at 2:20 p.m.

Not far from our route was the *Cerro Corà* National Park. Apart from a lot of nature, this protected area did not offer any major sights and nor any particular infrastructure, but at least we were able to spend the night very quietly and free of charge in a beautiful forest clearing.

# On the Way to Uruguay

## Hast la Pasta to the Second

The next morning we started early and managed without difficulty to *Hasta la Pasta* camping. This time a lot was going on in this Overlander meet and there was joyous reunion with some familiar faces, among them the "Gufligers" and Karl-Heinz, which we had not expected. Wolfgang and Regine we had met here on our first visit, were also here. For this we got to know a whole new set of travellers. Many of them had taken a detour to enjoy a few days or even weeks at the *Hasta la Pasta*. The news that Rene, the owner of the campsite, had suffered a stroke a few weeks previously, we had heard the day before in *Cerro Corà* from camp neighbours who had been here until recently.



After the many kilometres driving, our car again needed some service work. First, it got a new windshield, because with the three "bullet holes" we would have no chance to pass the technical inspection back in Switzerland. After some research Ueli travelled to *Asuncion* to have the windscreen changed. All the work took just under a quarter of an hour and cost as little as 100 CHF. This made us think once more just how big the price differences in some countries are compared to the Switzerland, where you pay for a new windscreen, although for an original Toyota, over a 1000 CHF. After the necessary material for an engine and transmission oil change were also purchased, the Toyota received an extensive wash that was badly needed after driving through the red mud in Brazil.

We moved our departure to Saturday so we could stock up on the local market with good cheese, bread and sausages again. Then we were



# On the Way to Uruguay

already back on the road towards the border, once again back to Argentina.

## Rio Pilcomayo National Park

After 100km to the border, we reached the *Rio Pilcomayo* National Park, where we informed ourselves first in the Info Centre at the *Laguna Blanca* on the opportunities in the park.

A short walk to the lagoon already gave us an overview of what the area has to offer. Above all, the giant snail shells, which could be seen everywhere on the shore impressed us. Hundreds of the up to 5cm large shells lay along the muddy trail.



Shortly thereafter, a track to the camping turned off from the main road near the *Esterio Poi*. When we arrived, a tent already stood on the court, it belonged to Eduardo and Helena from *Buenos Aires*, who were visiting for short holiday trip to national parks this region. To spend the night in the tent at the prevailing cold temperatures, we did not seem very enticing, but the two not bothered. Lest they also had to spend all night in the cold, we invited them to dinner to us in the warm car and spent a nice evening together. Ueli brewing a warming "Kafi Lutz" (a light coffee with some spirit) which went down well even with the Argentines.

In the morning the unpleasant surprise - the Land Cruiser did not want to start. It had previously expressed some trouble when we wanted to start again in the morning and stuttered and smoked heavily and only after several attempts. The night had obviously been still a trace was colder than the previous ones and now it went in strike. A park ranger came to our aid and after pulling a few meters the engine jumped to happiness again. Because of the symptoms, we assumed that the problem had to do with a malfunctioning pre-heater.

Mobile again, we drove to the end of the dirt road, at the *Rio Pilcomayo*. Officially, the track was still closed, but the ranger accompanied us with

## On the Way to Uruguay

his vehicle a short distance to make sure that we could pass the trickier points well, then he let us go on alone. The flat landscape was dominated by grassy areas and palm trees and is supposed to be inhabited by many small mammals and birds. However, they were hiding in the tall grass, so that we could discover not many of them neither during the journey nor at the observation tower.



## Esteros del Ibera the Second

We have been so excited during the first visit to the *Esteros del Ibera* National Park, we decided once again to stop by there, because it was along our route. Before going to the park we stopped overnight in *Resistencia*. As it was quite cold here, we had next morning again starting difficulties. However, a few strong Argentinian helped us kindly to push the car and soon we could continue.

Shortly after noon we reached the campsite *San Nicolas* and found that this time we were not the only guests. Our neighbours, Ian from Australia, we had already seen in Cuzco. His wife, Penelope, had then



## On the Way to Uruguay

already flown back to Australia. Now we had the opportunity to get to know the two more closely.

The weather had become much warmer, because the wind had shifted to the north and brought tropical air to us. We drove again out to *Puerto Carambole*, wondering how much the water had retreated since our last visit. This brought with it that the animals were no longer staying close to the shore, so this time we have seen much less *capybaras* and *caimans*.

### The National Park Mburucuya

Due to the warmer temperatures, the engine came to life with a lot of smoke and stuttering, but without help, and we made our way to the *Mburucuya* National Park. When retracting from the camp in *San Nicolas* to the main road, we experienced a small shock moment, because the gate on the access track was closed and the usually present key we couldn't find. Our Australian friends were stuck at the gate too. We wondered what to do when, after a while, a gaucho from the nearby ranch showed up and opened the gate for us. He explained that the landowners had decided instead depositing a key, leave the gate open, generally from 8 to 18. Apparently this new scheme was only implemented half and had not been communicated with the park rangers.

The access track to today's destination was in good condition and so we reached the campsite before noon. Again we had landed in a beautifully landscaped area, this time even with Wi-Fi. However, the power supply was interrupted during daytime, so that no internet or anything else that needed electricity worked. After a lot of driving the last few days we were looking forward to do some hiking again. The *Mburucuya* Park offered the best opportunity.

The trail led past a lagoon and through dense jungle and ended up in an area with palm forest. In the distance we heard howler

## On the Way to Uruguay

monkeys again, but did not get to see them. But we enjoyed a variety of butterflies in all colours and as always heard and we saw a wide variety of birds, in addition, we once again had a visit from animal neighbours in the camp, this time it was two quite trusting foxes.



## Back to Cañada de Gomez

We wanted to reach *Cañada de Gomez* before the weekend to spend it with our friends. We divided the approximately 800 km distance to the destination in two days stages. For several hundred kilometres the scenery along the road remained the same as we had seen in the *Ibera* National Park, namely swamps and shallow, partly huge water bodies. The country was increasingly used for agricultural purposes and often we saw cows and horses up to the belly in the water and feed on grass and aquatic plants.

The targeted halfway campsite was closed and another in the city of *La Paz* no longer existed. This forced us to continue on another hour and to try our luck in *Santa Elena*. Once there, a simple and free campsite was waiting for us, right on the *Rio Paraguay*. We enjoyed the beautiful sunset over the river and the pleasant

## On the Way to Uruguay

temperatures. Surprisingly, two older gentlemen approached us, introduced themselves as reporters of a local television station and asked for an interview with us. After camera and microphone were set up, we answered the usual questions and 10 minutes later, the two were gone again. For dinner we went to one of the restaurants on the waterfront and enjoyed a generous serving of *Dorado*, the best and most famous river fish of the region. Together with a bottle of Malbec the dinner did not even cost CHF 20 for both of us.



After another day of driving we reached *Cañada de Gomez*. The joy of the reunion was great on both sides. After a warm welcome and the exchange of news we sat with our friends in front of the TV to watch the football match Serbia against Switzerland in the World Cup.

On Sunday we were all invited to *Tio Omar* and *Tia Elida* for lunch. Again, skilfully BBQ'd, we enjoyed the entire meat range that is served for a typical Argentine *asado*. In addition to the usual pork and beef, which was, as always, slowly roasted over time, were also *Trippa Gorda* (stuffed intestines) and *Chinchulines* (crispy fried intestines without filling) on the grill. It showed once again that almost everything is eaten from the slaughtered animals in



## On the Way to Uruguay

Argentina. We as omnivores were very well open also for the more exotic parts and tasted them as well.

In *Cañada de Gomez*, it proved once again how important it is to have access to the help of well-connected friends. Together with Silvio, Ueli was trying to figure out the cause of the starting problems of the Toyota. The glow plugs were really in bad shape and it seemed that one after another had given up working. In combination with the cold temperatures the engine could not be started without preheating. In Argentina the auto parts store, among many other stores were closed because, as very often, a general strike was in progress. However, Silvio learned from a friend that his wife worked in the required shop. A quick phone call and it was ready organized that we could pick up the needed parts during the lunch break at the employees home.

### Recipe: "Empanadas al Tio Omar"

Empanadas can be found actually in whole Latin America, from Mexico down to Patagonia. Although, there is probably hundreds of recipes for the popular dumplings. Each recipe will be better than any other, the fillings can pretty much include everything that is edible. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, just make sure that the filling is not too wet before stuffing.

The "secret" recipe of Omar, the uncle of Vanesa in *Cañada de Gomez*, we share below. His empanadas taste great and are intended to be representative of all other recipes.

#### TIPS:

You can also freeze excess empanadas before baking. By creating smaller size empanadas, they are very well suited finger food with aperitifs. As a meal count 3-4 regular size pieces per person. A salad fits well with this.

# On the Way to Uruguay

## Recipe

Ingredients for about 30 pieces (can be proportionally increased or decreased)

### Dough

In Latin America you can buy ready-made rounds of dough in every supermarket. In Europe, the easiest way is to buy cake dough that has already been rolled out (approx. 1200 g, rectangular). If neither is available, here are the ingredients to make the dough yourself:

750 g white flour  
350 grams of butter  
150ml of water  
1 tsp salt

Mix flour and salt in a bowl. Rub the **cold** butter with the flour into crumbs. Add water and combine to form a smooth dough. Wrap in plastic wrap and leave to rest in the fridge for at least 30 minutes.

### Filling

1 kg minced beef  
1 kg onions chopped  
2 tablespoons flour (a little more if the mixture is too runny)  
1 tsp paprika  
1/2 tsp cumin, ground cumin  
3 teaspoons sugar (you can add a handful of sultanas as an alternative)  
1 tsp salt  
1/2 tsp pepper

Brown the ground beef in a large skillet or saucepan. Then add the spices and onions and continue to sauté. Let the filling simmer on a low heat for a good half hour. Sprinkle flour on top, mix and simmer for another half hour. If necessary, season to your own taste. Let the filling cool before filling.

### Shaping and Baking

Roll out the dough to a thickness of 2-3 mm and cut out rounds with a diameter of 12 to 15 cm. Knead the leftovers back together and roll out again. The dough should be enough for about 30 pieces.

Place approx. 1 1/2 tablespoons of filling on the roundel and fold them together (should be filled to the brim). First moisten the edge with a little water and then press it on.

Bake in a preheated oven at 200 °C with top and bottom heat for 20 minutes.

# On the Way to Uruguay

## To Uruguay

After we said goodbye to our friends, we took the last stage in Argentina under the wheels. Much of it was in a region that is dominated by agriculture. The daylight hours were now quite short, the sunrise was just before eight and dawn already began at 18:00, also the temperatures were rather cool. All the more we enjoyed the magnificent sunsets that delighted us every night. We stayed for the last night in Argentina, at the dam *Salto Grande*. On a narrow peninsula there were countless, beautiful camping pitches, directly on the shore of the lake. At night it was very quiet and after another spectacular sunset, we enjoyed the rising full moon.



## The Hydro Power Plant of Salto Grande

In 1946, the two neighbouring countries Uruguay and Argentina signed a memorandum of understanding which defined the use of the *Rio Uruguay*. Only in 1974, not least as a result of the oil crisis, the construction of a joint hydroelectric power station started. With a 65m high dam, the river was dammed into a huge lake, which covers an area of almost 800 km<sup>2</sup>. The average flow through the power plant is 4640 m<sup>3</sup>/s. At full load, the 2 x 7 turbines produce almost 2 gigawatts of electricity, and thus about the same as two nuclear power plants. The flow is divided between the two countries in equal parts and ranges in Uruguay to cover more than

## On the Way to Uruguay

50% of the country's needs, while in Argentina, the produced share accounts for about 8% of total consumption.

We toured the facility with a free guided tour. We were informed with an interesting video about the history and origin of the plant and then transported by bus to the dam, where the machine house and the gigantic locks were shown.



## The Liebig's Meat Extract factory in Fray Bentos

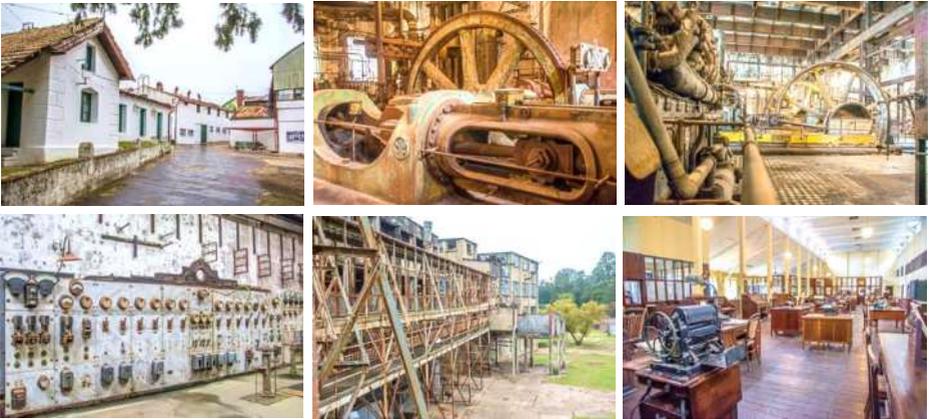
After a murky, but relaxing day off at the *Termas San Nicoras*, one of the less-visited bathing facilities in the area, we were back on the road heading south. There was not much to see in this area, however, we became aware of an industrial museum, which is even to be found on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Site and we wanted to see it.

The huge plant in *Fray Bentos* served the processing of cattle into different end products. Since 1979, the factory is no longer in operation and looked at first glance quite desolate. On a guided tour, we were able to visit some of the buildings and learned a lot about this unique plant.

In 1863, a risk-taking German engineer wanted to implement the process of the German chemist Justus Liebig to produce high-quality meat extract from fresh meat on a large scale. The masses of cattle bred in Uruguay made it possible to produce the extract

## On the Way to Uruguay

much more cheaply than in Germany. The initially small plant was expanded over time to the point that up to 200 cattle could be processed per hour. Up to 4,500 workers were deployed for this and the attached cold store had a capacity of 180,000 tons of meat. In addition to the main product, the meat concentrate, corned beef and other canned meat were also produced. The business flourished during the two world wars, when hundreds of thousands of soldiers had to be fed with high-energy food. Even today, the enormous dimensions of the factory and the associated facilities for accommodating the workers and their families are impressive.



## Nueva Helvecia

In the southwest of Uruguay is another of the many Swiss colonies in South America. 1862 *Nueva Helvecia* was established and attracted many joyful Swiss to emigrate. A tour of the site revealed the close relations to Switzerland mainly based on street names, company signs and chalet-like houses. On a stroll through the old Protestant cemetery of the town, we saw practically only grave stones with typical Swiss family names. The grandparents of the owner of the *Hotel Suizo*, the place where we camped, were also

## On the Way to Uruguay

Swiss emigrants, he himself was born in Uruguay, but talks are still Swiss German. In addition to its hotel operations he provides in the garden a few places for campers, offering as an additional service, to park vehicles on its premises during a home leave. Before we left, we stocked up again with cheese, because the whole region is known for a number of cheese factories that produce mature and tasty cheeses. In the shop *Los Fundadores* even locally produced chocolate specialties were sold together with a good selection of cheeses.



## Colonia del Sacramento

From *Nueva Helvecia* it takes just under an hour to *Colonia del Sacramento*. The city, founded in 1680 is considered the oldest town in Uruguay and with its well-preserved buildings worth seeing.



Especially the old city gate, the bastion and the lighthouse from 1845, bore witness to the former importance of the town. From the platform, we could have a look over the city. *Colonia del Sacramento*

## On the Way to Uruguay

is a popular destination because the city is easily accessible with a ferry across the *Rio de la Plata*, above all, for the people of Buenos Aires. Now, because the southern winter not much was going on and many of the restaurants and shops were closed. The cold wind and freezing temperatures drove us to the warm car again after the long tour.



## A Small Roundtrip in Uruguay

The rain caught up with us again. Cold temperatures with sunshine would indeed be bearable but if rain is added, it is very uncomfortable. The *Camping La Chacra Holandesa*, a relatively new camp which is run by a Dutch couple, we sat out the worst days. Some of the time we could spend in the warm room of the owners, who invited all campers to watch with them the matches of the Football World Cup on television.

Since it took another good three weeks until we had to load the car in Montevideo, we used the time to get to know Uruguay closer. So we made our way towards the Brazilian border, but soon realized that there is not much to see in Uruguay during the cold season. The country is especially known for its big resorts and huge sandy beaches, and is therefore mainly a summer destination.

## On the Way to Uruguay

### Military Fortifications in the Border Region

At the border we visited the beautifully restored *Fort San Miguel*, which was built in 1737 by the Portuguese. The facility displayed in various exhibitions the history of the fortress, particularly based on uniforms and weapons of the time.

The crew consisted of up to 100 men, which would lead to rather cramped conditions for the soldiers, despite the size of the fort. After the fort was unused for a long time, it was restored to the original plans in 1933 and subsequently became a national monument.



The border town of *Chuy* was an absolute curiosity for us when it came to border regulations. We drove on the main road into the city and found, based on the labels, that the northern side of the road belongs to Brazil and the southern part to Uruguay. However, a real border was not marked. So we could on the left side, so in Brazil, refuel diesel, which was half the price than on the side of Uruguay. The gas station was correspondingly well attended and open to all payment types, they accepted real, pesos, dollars or credit cards. Also, while filling up the customers were served free coffee and sweets at the car. Only on the way out of town did we pass a customs post. Since we had not stayed outside of Uruguay, there was neither passport control nor formalities to be dealt with.

## On the Way to Uruguay

Half an hour further south, there was another fortress from the same era, *Fortaleza de Santa Teresa*. The construction of the buildings was very similar to that of *San Miguel*, just a lot bigger. Within the walls there was even room for the army horses and accommodations for 300 crew. Both the forge and the kitchen and other rooms were perfectly restored and equipped with contemporary objects. In the long wings of the former army quarter, several models of former Uruguayan military installations, were displayed. Certainly indications of the strategic importance of the country at the time of the conquest by the Spaniards and Portuguese.



## Cabo Polonio

The small town, which is connected neither to the public road network nor to the electricity and water network, is located at the tip of a crescent-shaped peninsula. The side facing the ocean outside offers ideal conditions for surfers, while in the opposite bay long, lonely beaches attract swimmers. The whole area around *Cabo Polonio* was declared a national park to protect the various landforms such as shifting sand dunes, shorelines or wetlands. For this reason, it was not allowed to drive by car to the village. We parked our car at the visitor centre, 7 km away. From there we had the option to get to the village either by an all-terrain truck or on foot. The weather was still overcast and cool in the morning, but cleared up around noon, so we decided to drive out with the truck and then hike back.

## On the Way to Uruguay

We were amazed that a good dozen other visitors travelled with us on the same truck, because neither weather nor season attracted many tourists otherwise to the area. However, the size of the parking lot let guess that there would be a lot more going on during the high season. The sandy tracks were snaking through beautiful natural forest, while the last 2 km were leading along the beach to the middle of the village. The settlement consisted of widely scattered, small cottages, often with fancy architecture and lovingly decorated. In the village centre, mainly restaurants, souvenir shops and simple accommodation had settled, but most were closed during our visit.



We walked to the beach and along the shore to the lighthouse, visible from far away. The sandy beaches at the eastern end of the peninsula were repeatedly interrupted by smoothly polished rocks. Soon, an unpleasant but well-known smell hit us in the nose and after a few steps we discovered the polluter, a large seal colony that had settled just below the lighthouse.

Commissioned in 1881, in operation and placed under protection in 1976 lighthouse was slightly elevated and was with its 27m height quite impressive. Its elegant, bottle-like shape and the generally good condition of the building offered a feast for the eyes and provided wonderful photo opportunities. It was striking



## On the Way to Uruguay

again and again, how good were the facilities were maintained and entertained under the direction of the army.

We drove on the coastal road, often directly along the sea, towards the capital. Outside towns and cities large stretches of beach were completely undeveloped and natural. Despite the coastal road, the water was not visible often because in many areas were high, vegetated sand dunes in front of the beach. Most of the traversed coastal towns were especially large accumulations of holiday homes, which were now, in the off-season, empty and shut. Apart from another beautiful lighthouse in *Jose Ignacio*, which by the architecture and its well-kept appearance was very similar to that of *Cabo Polonio*, there was not much to see in this section.

In *Punta del Este*, the largest and most popular holiday destination in Uruguay, facilities for mass tourism were dominant. Long before the centre we drove for kilometres along apartment houses and hotels, the closer we got to the city, the higher they were. Again, most of the apartments blinds were closed and the beaches virtually deserted. We put a photo stop at *Los Dedos*, the fingers. The concrete sculpture, which is a huge hand protruding from the sand, was designed by the same artist of the better known, practically identical-looking work of art in the Atacama Desert of Chile.



# The Last Stage



## The Last Stage

### Preparation for Shipment

Like many other Panamericana travellers we stayed a few days at the *Paraiso Suizo*, a popular campground managed by Swiss immigrants. In the still cold weather with little sun we were glad to have power connected to our camper, so that we could heat our little house at will. Two days later we met Nadine and Sergio, our containers partners. We appreciated their company and that of other travellers who stopped here and took advantage of the good infrastructure of *Paraiso Suizo*. Besides the daily aperitif in the camping restaurant we enjoyed a delicious cheese fondue one evening.

During our stay we organized a Airbnb accommodation, which was a bit closer to *Montevideo*, so we had a shorter journey for the forthcoming completion of the formalities for the return shipment. We found a house with two bedrooms and two bathrooms, which we could share with Sergio and Nadine. The pretty and well laid out cottage also had plenty of space to prepare the cars for the shipment. We appreciated the cosy warmth in the house and enjoyed to sit together with good food and wine and to let the past two years sink in.



## The Last Stage

On Thursday we had an appointment with the customs agent, who had to prepare the paperwork for us in Montevideo. We left the house in pouring rain, which was to last all day. The office stuff was done quickly and we had plenty of time to look around the nearby port market and have lunch. Most of the beautiful and elegant restaurants offered mostly grilled meat, but some also had fish dishes on the menu. We opted for fish and were not disappointed.

On the way back some of the roads were under water and when we got quickly out to go shopping, we got a generous shower. As a culinary highlight of our day in the cottage we had an *asado*, the typical Argentine barbecue orgy, planned. Sergio and Nadine had generously bought meat and sausages and we headed for the side dishes. Ueli cared about the fire and Sergio worked as *Asador*. The result was excellent, perfectly cooked meat and very tasty. Since even the best *Asado* is only half as tasty without corresponding red wine, we filled our glasses with a wonderful Malbec from Uruguay. We were even more surprised from the good quality of these wines, which can certainly compete with Chilean and Argentine products.

## The Cars are Sent on the Journey Home

Several months in advance we had received an offer for container shipping. As it turned out in the negotiations, we had a chance to share the container with a second vehicle, so that the costs could be significantly reduced. As we found out soon, our containers partners were the *Viva-Panamericana's*, respectively Sergio and Nadine. Their car had already been on the same vessel two years ago when our Toyota was sent to Canada. Their vehicle was shipped from Hamburg to Baltimore, while our camper was on board from Antwerp to Halifax. All four were delighted with this

## The Last Stage

amazing coincidence, also considering that we had met personally for only a few minutes in the no man's land between Mexico and Belize on the whole trip.

So now all was ready, the formalities were completed and the vehicles were ready to be loaded. We left our temporary home and drove once more to *Montevideo*, where we first checked in the reserved hotel. As there remained still plenty of time, we parked the car near the customs agent and took a walk through the old town. In bright sunshine, we strolled along the huge harbour to the western tip of the city. A strong wind blew in from the sea, causing the waves to splash high on the shore. The houses in the pedestrian zone offered protection from the wind and we enjoyed sitting in the warm sun at the *Plaza Zabala* and watching the bustle of the city. Past the *Plaza Constitución* with the cathedral built in 1790, we strolled to the *Plaza de Independencia*. This large square was lined with buildings of varying architecture, with well-preserved old confectionery-style office blocks on one side and an ugly prefab-style skyscraper on the other.



Then it was time to go back to the customs agent and start the loading process. In the office of the agency, we made another payment before we could all drive together to the port. Here it was now necessary to hand in our temporary import permit for the vehicles to the customs authorities and to pay the fees for the company that would load the container and transport it to the ship. Arriving at the container provided for us, the team who

## The Last Stage

secured and lashed down the loaded cars showed up immediately.

Everything was done within an hour and the doors could be locked and sealed. A final payment to the customs agent for his services and for fees he had advanced for us completed the transaction.



Back in the city centre, we toasted with Nadine and Sergio to the successful completion and the imminent end of our trip with a good bottle of red wine.

For dinner, the lady at the reception had recommended the restaurant *La Pasiva*, because we really wanted to enjoy the national dish *Chivito* before we said goodbye to Uruguay. The meal consisted of a gigantic amount of fries, garnished with Russian and green salad and topped with a load of beef cutlets, ham and fried eggs. Although we had been forewarned that the dish would be served in large portions, what we finally had on the table was a tasty and beautifully prepared meal, which, however, could not be eaten even with the greatest hunger.

## Buenos Aires

We had decided early on to spend a few days in Argentina's capital at the end of our trip. With the *Buquebus*, a modern high-speed ferry, we drove two hours across the mouth of the *Rio de la Plata* to *Buenos Aires*. Since the route was exactly 200 km, it meant that the powerful catamaran, loaded with nearly 1,000 passengers and 100 cars thundered across the water with more than 100 km/h.

## The Last Stage



Once in *Buenos Aires*, we were met by Gabriel, who took us to their apartment. We had met him and Monica about half a year earlier in the National Park *El Rey* and had been invited to visit them when we passed through their town. We were very happy to meet them again and spend a few days with this new friends.

Cloudy and rainy weather was forcasted for the following day, but this did not stop us from driving with the *Subte*, the metro, to the centre of the city. In front of the *Teatro Colon* we joined a Free Walking Tour. We had already explored several cities in Chile in this way and had very good experiences with it. Despite winter season and bad weather, even for the English-speaking tour almost thirty people had assembled. The motivated guide led us past the *Plaza San Martin* and many other attractions to the *Recoleta Cemetery*. *Evita Peron's* is buried there, in addition to a large number of other celebrities. The controversial wife of former President Juan Peron had to endure some adventure even after her death in the year 1952. The body of *Evita* was embalmed and laid in a coffin with a glass lid in the Congress building. After the fall of *Juan Peron's*, the body disappeared for 17 years, since the current government fought the memory of her and her husband. Only in 1976 the remains of *Eva Peron* were definitely buried in the family grave in the cemetery of *La Recoleta*.



## The Last Stage

Another tour of the city brought us to the government district, located around the *Plaza de Mayo*. Here, in front of the pink seat of government, the weekly demonstrations of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* still take place with a silent march, to commemorate the sons and daughters who disappeared without a trace during the military dictatorship. During our visit, however, the square was quiet without large crowds. We walked to *San Telmo*, one of the older quarters of the city, which has numerous buildings from the 19th century and many museums. We were particularly impressed by the old market hall, an elegant steel construction in which you could shop or eat something in the dry even when it was raining.



We finally took the bus to the most colourful of all parts of the city, *La Boca*. The original headquarters of the Italian immigrants is primarily a tourist attraction today. Many buildings were constructed from sheets of scrapped ships and colourfully painted. Many artists have set up their studios here and pull the visitors, together with the souvenir shops, cafes and restaurants. In many of the pubs we could watch couples dancing the tango. A few blocks away one was quickly reminded that *La Boca* is not an area of the rich and famous, but the working class. Surrounded by



## The Last Stage

poor-looking houses we ended up in front of *La Bombonera*, the football stadium of the famous *Boca Juniors*. The stadium, with approximately 57,000-capacity, is wedged between the houses and we wondered how it would be, when the teams were playing and all the fans flooded the neighbourhood. Travel to and from the games is only possible by bus, as for parking no space is available.



Our friends had planned to go out with us to *El Tigre* and take a boat trip into the delta of the *Rio Parana* from there. Unfortunately, we had to abandon the plan due to the still poor weather. We limited

ourselves to explore the north of *Buenos Aires* in the car and then take a wonderful, dignified lunch in the elegant restaurant *Vila Julia*. Located in a beautiful park villa, the restaurant offers an excellent cuisine and a few, elegant rooms to stay in.

On the very last day of our trip we visited together with Monica and Gabriel, a grill restaurant in the neighbourhood and once again enjoyed a typical Argentinian *asado*. Various cuts and sausages, as well as innards were on the table, everything as always excellently roasted on the embers of the wood fire. Again, the advertising slogan of the Swiss butcher would best fit, it reads: "Swiss meat, everything else is a side dish," you would have to change in "What supplement is needed, if there is enough meat."

In the evening we had to definitely say goodbye to our friends and take the taxi to the airport. That Latin America is strongly influenced by the Spanish mentality, we also noticed at the booked airline *Iberia*. The check-in and boarding ran quite chaotic and

## The Last Stage

disorganized and the service on board was very basic. However, the exertion of the long flight home via Madrid in no way diminished the anticipation of coming home. After a flight of more than 18 hours and without having slept, but overjoyed, we arrived in Basel, where Myrta's three children were eagerly awaiting us. To celebrate the reunion properly, we drove to the city together and enjoyed a real Swiss cheese and sausage salad and a fresh, cold beer.

The fact that, as we found out later, a few hours after our departure, the weather in Buenos Aires had cleared up and the people there were delighted with blue skies for the following days, did not make us envious, given the wonderful summer weather in Switzerland..

## Welcome Home "Tortuga"

A good month after we had delivered our vehicle in *Montevideo*, we were informed by the shipping company that we can pick up the car at the container terminal in Frenkendorf.

But wait, in the meantime a lot had happened that caused us a lot of headaches. During the transport, we were kept up to date by the forwarding agent on what was happening. Even before loading, it became apparent that, due to the low water level of the Rhine, the inland transport from Rotterdam to Basel could possibly be subject to a surcharge on the transport costs. Then we received the message that our container, along with many others, could not travel on the booked ship due to reduced loading capacity.

Alternatives were soon suggested to us. However, all of them had the disadvantage that there would be delays and additional costs. Finally, we decided to accept the offer to switch to the train. At

## The Last Stage

least this transport could be scheduled to some extent and the container would even arrive in Basel a week earlier than planned. We had to grudgingly accept the additional costs of 1200 CHF for the container. All other variants would not only have meant indefinitely long standing costs, but also a surcharge due to low water level on the Rhine.

But then came the next piece of bad news: we were informed that our container had been selected for a scan by Dutch customs: additional costs of 550 euros! Yes, it is actually the case in freight traffic, when customs orders a detailed inspection of the goods, the customer pays once again. Imagine the police doing a speed check and all measured cars are asked to pay for the measurement!!

But finally the time had come. Together with Nadine and Sergio we met in *Frenkendorf* at the container terminal. We were escorted to a storage area and the container, hanging from the crane, floated in and landed gently in front of our feet. Sergio and Ueli broke the container seal together. The tension rose as the gates opened. But everything was fine, both vehicles had survived the journey unscathed.

Now all we had to do was attach the new license plates and off we went. Apart from signing a declaration that the goods had been received undamaged, there were no formalities or customs controls. We hadn't imagined it all that easy...

