

TREKKING IN ARGENTINA



Ir. Chin Mee Poon

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

El Chalten is a village of less than 2,000 people in southern Argentina. Situated in a broad valley, this small place has only two main streets and a few side streets. The main streets are lined with hotels, guest houses, restaurants and tour operators. El Chalten is known as the Trekking Capital of Argentina and thousands of people come here every summer to explore the northern part of Parque Nacional Los Glaciares.

Established on 11 May, 1937, with an area of about 727,000 hectares in the Argentina side of Patagonia, Los Glaciares National Park is a region of exceptional natural beauty, with rugged, towering mountains in the north and a vast ice cap, numerous glaciers and glacial lakes in the south. The park was included in UNESCO's list of world heritage sites in 1981. The mountainous north and the icy south are not connected by trails and they appear to be two distinct national parks.

My wife and I, together with my two younger brothers and their wives, came to El Chalten in March this year by night bus and we put up 3 nights in this colourful village.

All of us were keen trekkers with many years of experience and we came to El Chalten with a strong desire to appreciate the natural beauty of Los Glaciares National Park by trekking into the mountains. El Chalten is right at the threshold of the northern part of the national park and 10 trekking trails are within easy reach from the village.

We were blessed with a sunny day and clear skies on day one in El Chalten. This was a good time to do the Laguna Torre trek as the tower-like peaks were usually shrouded by clouds. So, after our wives had prepared a packed lunch, we set out for the 9km long trail at 9.45 a.m.

It was a steep ascent initially, followed by alternating flats and gentle climbs. A view point at the 2.5km mark offered us

a spectacular view of the snow-capped peaks. From there on, it was generally level through a beautiful lenga (beech) forest. We reached Laguna Torre, a glacial lake in front of the saw-tooth peaks, after 3 hours and 50 minutes of pleasant walking, and we spent an hour there enjoying our picnic and feasting our eyes.

We decided to give our legs a rest on day two by joining a cruise in Lago del Desierto, a 14km long x 2km wide lake, 37km north of El Chalten, close to the Chilean border. It was in front of the cruise operator's office that I met my varsity mate, Hon, and his wife. They had come to El Chalten with a tour group. Hon is also an avid traveller and photographer.

We travelled in a large van to the southern tip of the lake.



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On the way we had a superb view of Fitz Roy, the majestic peak we would be trekking to on day three. The cruise turned out to be a pleasure, with Fitz Roy and Gran Glaciar Vespignani accompanying us all the while. We even had time to trek to a point close to the glacier.

On our last day in El Chalten, we trekked to Fitz Roy. Three of us started from the trail head at the north-western end of the village, and the other three began the trek from a point 13km along the road to Lago del

Desierto. I was in the first group. Initially, it was a long ascent along a river. Then we went through a lenga forest and had a rest beside a small lake. The gently undulating trail led us to a point where we met up with the other group.

After the 8km mark and a large campsite, my brothers and I pushed ahead for the gruelling climb up a steep rocky slope to Laguna de los Tres for a close view of Fitz Roy, while our wives started their descent. The climb was a severe test of my endurance and determination. I eventually made it to the glacial lake, but I was thoroughly exhausted.

Septuagenarians like I should be contented with trekking for pleasure rather than going all out as if trying to prove something, shouldn't we? ■