

Big

Cat

Patagonia's glorious winter
sets the perfect scene for our
attempt to snatch a sighting
of South America's most
elusive big cat

Words: Sue Watt

Diary



The snow underfoot sparkled so brightly I felt like I was trampling on a carpet of diamonds. Rushing uphill, we spoke in whispers, but only when we had to. It wasn't just our hasty pace or hushed excitement that left me breathless: under crisp blue skies, the beauty of Patagonia's winter – its lakes, glaciers, mountains and rivers – revealed itself in every direction. But that would have to wait. We knew Sarmiento and her cubs were close: if we were quick, we might just catch our first sighting of South America's iconic and most elusive big cat.

Torres del Paine National Park, spanning nearly 900 square miles of southern Chile, is home to about 50 pumas. From October to May, they roam far across the mountains hunting guanacos, similar to llamas with camel-like faces and fur in caramel and cream. But in deep midwinter, guanacos congregate lower down the mountains to graze on grasses and shrubs not covered by snow, theoretically making pumas easier to spot as they follow their food supply. Most tours to Patagonia avoid the winter months, focusing on trekking and photography, and a very remote chance of seeing pumas en route.

This new winter puma-tracking trip with Natural World Safaris turns that formula on its head, concentrating solely on spotting pumas with expert trackers confined to areas where guanacos are common, around Sarmiento Lake and the Entre Porterias region. It just happens to be set amid some of the world's most dramatic mountain scenery.

It is undeniably colder from June to October: last July, I was "dressed like an onion", as advised by our guide John Walbaum, layered in thermals and fleeces in temperatures of -5°C . In Chile's most popular national park, visitor numbers dwindle from 105,000 in summer to just 7,000 in winter.

Opening pages: The elusive puma concolor. Below, from left: Grazing guanacos; and a glacial lake, both in Torres del Paine National Park

Most come to trek, but puma-tracking is gaining in popularity. However, CONAF, the Chilean forest service responsible for national parks, is concerned about unethical practices by some guides that include setting bait for pumas, interrupting their hunts, disturbing females with youngsters and shining night lights. Consequently, last year they imposed tighter regulations prohibiting walking off-trail.

"We want to keep our wildlife wild," said Alejandra Silva Garay, CONAF's regional director for Magallanes and Chilean Antarctica. "And we want to protect our natural heritage and maintain the safety and integrity of those who visit us."

Park ranger José Vargas, known as Wayaja, has worked in Torres del Paine for 25 years, and first brought his son here, also called José, at just 15 days old. Father and son have become puma-tracking experts.

Their job isn't easy. Pumas don't roar like lions, nor do they wear GPS collars signalling their whereabouts. So ethical trackers like ours rely on nature's telltale signs – the guanacos' alarm cry (like a horse frantically neighing), their panicked running, or standing rigid, staring towards the puma they've just sensed. Condors, eagles and vulture-like caracaras also help, circling over kills. Father and son rely on their experience, too, knowing the puma's usual ritual is to hunt at night then sleep, returning to devour their kill in the morning, then resting on full stomachs until the sun goes down – when the cycle starts again. If you find the kill, you'll usually find the pumas. We found neither on our first day, with low, heavy cloud obscuring the mountains and their wildlife.

At 3:30am, the moon woke me, shining like a giant yellow spotlight through our bedroom window. For the first time,



I saw the Paine massif in all its freezing, jagged glory, reflected in perfect symmetry on the glasslike Pehoe Lake. Six hours later, as the sun rose on a sparkling winter's day, we received a radio call in our jeep from Wayaja. He'd been following guanacos nearby and summoned us to join him. "In five years' guiding all around Torres del Paine, I've only seen one puma," John Walbaum confided, barely concealing his excitement. "That was at Puerto Natales airport well outside the park." Hence our dash up that seemingly diamond-encrusted path to find Sarmiento and her cubs.

A breathless hour later, we reached Wayaja. However, Sarmiento was already moving on to hunt, having failed to kill a guanaco during the night. With her three cubs hidden out of sight, for a split second we saw her striding purposefully into distant hills. About 3ft high and weighing 12 stone, her ginger coat and long streak of tail merged with the reddish hue of the rocks as she disappeared.

"I've known Sarmiento since she was a cub. I think she recognises me now, she knows my smell," Wayaja said, revealing she was his favourite. "They all have different characters: Sarmiento is calm and clever."

We wandered down to Sarmiento Lake, after which she was named. Over 15 miles long, it is fringed by Patagonian Steppe, flatlands of thorny calafate bushes that bear blueberry-like fruit in springtime and prickly, squashy shrubs known as mother-in-law's cushion. The calcified rocks hugging the cobalt-coloured lake are a popular resting place for pumas. We waited in silence, scanning the shore through binoculars in case a head popped up or a paw stretched out, willing orange rocks to morph into a puma's profile.

Guanacos and pumas aren't the only wildlife in Torres del Paine. We came across dainty grey foxes braving the cold

in thick winter coats and a skunk determinedly digging for food. The park is also home to more than 100 species of bird. Iconic black and white condors soared overhead, the second largest bird after the albatross. Southern caracaras and rare Austral pygmy owls perched on posts; vivid pink flamingos lapped the nutrients from Amarga Lagoon; and Darwin's rheas strutted across the hills.

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With vast ranches called estancias as neighbours, the area alongside the park is home to more mundane animals such as cows and sheep – and pumas don't discriminate between them and wild prey. Consequently, despite being protected, pumas have been hated and hunted by the local gauchos. "Gauchos thought badly of pumas because they kill livestock," Wayaja commented. "Now that they realise they have a tourist value, they are beginning to change their attitude."

At our hotel, Explora Patagonia, John explained how attitudes had changed towards Chile, too: "Explora put Chilean Patagonia on the map when it opened 22 years ago. It was the first five-star hotel here. Until then, people only thought of going to Argentinian Patagonia."

Below and next pages:
Roads cut through the
rugged landscape of Torres
del Paine. Closing pages:
Sarmiento Lake is a popular
spot for guanacos in winter











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The only hotel open in Torres del Paine during winter, Explora has lost none of its style or relaxing ambience during the intervening decades. The elegant spa and indoor swimming pool, most of the 49 rooms and the lounge and dining areas, in tones of blue, cream and pale wood, overlook spectacular lake and mountain views. And the restaurant's imaginative meals belie the hotel's remote location. Dinners included a delicate quinoa risotto with squid and tangy cochayuyo seaweed, delicious home-made pumpkin ravioli, and succulent Wagyu beef with chickpeas.

The full moon meant another foodless night for pumas, however. With the night light working to the guanacos' advantage, our trackers found no kills the following morning. In our Jeep, John was explaining the three Ps of puma tracking – "Positivity, Patience, Perseverance" – when we heard the distinctive screeching neigh of a guanaco's alarm call: perhaps providence plays a part, too. As we drove around the corner, a large puma, sleek and strong with a certain panache, sitting just 20 yards from the roadside, instantly became a blur of red as she rushed away, closely followed by two big cubs.

José had earlier seen guanacos around Sarmiento's home territory so, at a slower pace, we revisited the scene of our first sighting. Now we had time to appreciate the tranquillity of the Aonikenk Trail. Between Sarmiento and Amarga gates, in blissful winter solitude, lay a world of white peaks with streaks of black granite, frozen lagoons and clear azure skies. I lost myself in its beauty, almost forgetting I was here to track pumas. The chilly mountain air brushed my cheeks and our footsteps crunched rhythmically in the snow, the only sound until the low rumble of a distant avalanche broke the spell.

We were searching for Mocho, Sarmiento's daughter and another Wayaja favourite. "She's known for her stumpy tail. She makes us work hard because she wanders for miles – that's why I hate her," he grinned, knowing he meant the opposite. But Mocho was nowhere to be seen. "They're playing cat-and-mouse with us," Wayaja said. "They haven't had a kill for a couple of days, so they'll be hungry. Perhaps they'll get something tonight."

On our last morning, we left early to see the three famous granite towers which gave the park its name: at sunrise, they glow like giant red-hot poker. Suddenly, John hit the brakes. Minutes before daybreak, we could just make out a puma, large yet graceful with a stealthy gait darting up the hill near the road. Then a rock-like shape developed twitching ears and burst into puma form, and a third, silhouetted in the semi-darkness, joined them. As is their wont, all three seemingly vanished into icy thin air.

Mountain weather and wild animals live by their own unpredictable rules, and we had been incredibly lucky with both. We may not have seen pumas resting peacefully after a kill, fat-bellied, at one with their beautiful world. But we saw them hungry and hunting, on a mission to survive. And we saw Patagonia in all its winter wonder as the snow turned pink with the rising sun.

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