

Putting the wind up my husband

SUZANNE MORPHET
wins over a reluctant
hiker on this trek across
Chile's mountainside

My husband strides ahead of me, chin tucked to his chest, his back angled at 45 degrees into the punishing wind.

We're crossing a gravel beach at one end of Lago Grey, a glacial lake in Torres del Paine National Park in Chile.

At the other end of the lake is the glacier itself — a 6km-wide and 28-km-long river of blue ice, visible from space, and one of the most spectacular sights in a park that's filled with places of wonder.

Not just glaciers, but rocks, lakes and rushing rivers define Torres del Paine and make it a hiker's paradise.

It's also one of the windiest places on the planet. A place where katabatic winds flow off icefields and can pick you up and "turn you over like a turtle," according to a

glaciologist, who has studied how climate change is shrinking the glaciers of the Southern Patagonia Icefield.

Our taxi driver in the nearby town of Puerto Natales put it another way: "It bites and pulls and tears at your skin," he said, pinching his bare arms to demonstrate.

But wind is not my chief concern.

Kit, my 68-year-old husband, dislikes hiking and the only reason he agreed to join me is because this park is close to Punta Arenas, where we'll soon be departing for a cruise to Antarctica.

With fingers crossed, I signed us up for a three-day, two-night guided tour with Chile Nativo, a local company that offers day hikes as well as the seven-day, notoriously difficult O circuit and the challenging five-day W trek.

So, I'm surprised, and quietly delighted, that Kit seems to be enjoying himself. Of course, the scenery could seduce anyone.

On our first day we're hiking the French Valley and looming ahead of us are Los Cuernos — The Horns — three mountains



Hikers climb the trail through the French Valley towards Los Cuernos (The Horns) and Paine Grande, the highest mountain in the park.

composed mostly of grey granite and crowned with black sedimentary rock. The transition between colours is sharp and striking.

At our feet, flowering plants and shrubs provide dramatic bursts of colour, especially Chilean Firebush which, by February is into its second bloom. Even the

dead trees — from a massive forest fire in 2011 — have a ghostly beauty.

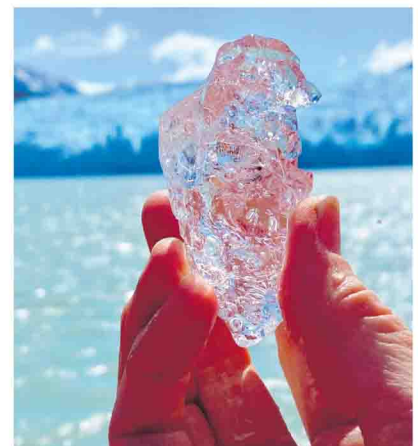
"We're looking at 10,000 feet right in front of us," says Cem, our guide, when we reach our lunch spot directly below Paine Grande, the highest mountain in the park. "No one has summited from this face because there's always a lot of avalanches," he adds, looking up at the behemoth mountain.

Later that day, we end our 18km hike at the intensely blue Lago Pehoe without complaint from Kit.

That evening, in our cozy yurt (insulated tent) at a campground just outside the park, I pick up the book I've been reading — *The Husband's Secret*, by Sydney author Liane Moriarty, and I wonder if my own husband is keeping something from me.

The following day is easy but breezy. After a short morning hike, we cross the beach at Lago Grey in that blistering wind and board a catamaran for an afternoon cruise to Grey Glacier.

At the face of the glacier, 20m-high spears of blue ice jut straight up, towering above the lake they'll eventually collapse into. The glacier looks as impenetrable as a fortress, yet it's about 2km shorter than it was 30 years ago due to the changing



Ice from Grey Glacier.

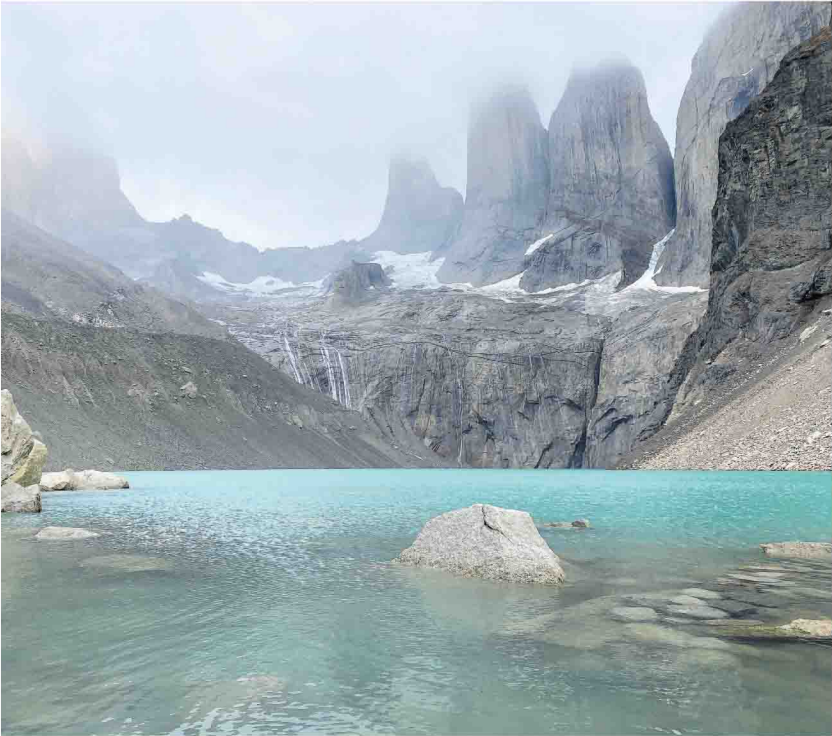


View of Lake Pehoe from the French Valley. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



Fences help break the wind for campers at the Paine Grande campground in Torres del Paine National Park. This is at the trailhead for the French Valley.

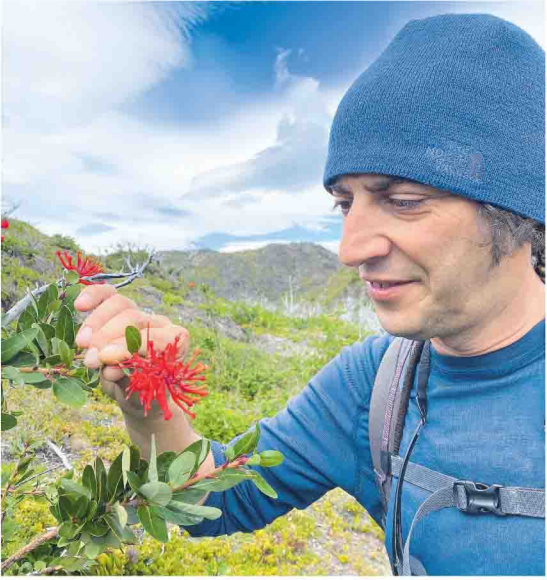
Hikers climb the trail through the French Valley towards Los Cuernos (The Horns) and Paine Grande, the highest mountain in the park. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



The towers that give Torres del Paine park its name and the glacial lake at their base. Most of this glacier has melted with climate change.



A boardwalk crosses a wetland in the French Valley.



Chile Native guide Cem Inal admires Chilean Firebush, also called Notro, on the trail in the French Valley.



Melting icebergs that calved from Grey Glacier in the background.

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climate.

Pieces of ice that have recently broken off float around us as we motor ever closer to their source. They dazzle like precious jewels and melt before our eyes. While we stand on deck photographing, a crew member fetches a chunk of ice and hammers it into cubes for pisco sours. Sipping ours on the upper deck in the warm sunshine, I know what Kit is thinking: “this is the best hiking trip ever!”

On our third and final day, Kit says he’s not going to attempt the entire hike.

We’re doing Los Torres, the trail leading to the three imposing granite towers for which the park is named. It’s a 22km return hike, partly through a steep boulder field. “My knees won’t take it,” he tells Cem.

When he turns back halfway to the top, the remaining six of us — Cem, me, a couple of middle-aged Brits and a young American couple — carry on. Reaching the

WYNTK
what you need to know

- Chile Native’s W Fast Track begins and ends in Puerto Natales and starts at US\$1695 (\$2511) per person. Price includes transportation, meals and accommodation in yurts at its Riverside Camp.
- chilenativo.travel

top after a couple more hours, we find the towers partially cloaked in clouds, but serenely beautiful.

Returning to the parking lot, we reunite with Kit and enjoy a cold beer to celebrate our three-day adventure.

That evening, on the bus back to Punta Arenas, I tease Kit about how he seems to have found a new love – hiking. “No,” he laughs, “I love golf.”

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Chile Native. They have not seen or approved this story.