

Chile – Pumas of Patagonia

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Tour participants Paul McDougall (photographic Guide) with 2 Touch the Wild clients

Summary

Torres del Paine National Park and Its Famous Pumas

Torres del Paine National Park is widely regarded as one of the most spectacular protected areas on Earth. Located in Chilean Patagonia, roughly 112 km (70 miles) north of Puerto Natales, the park is renowned for its dramatic granite towers, turquoise lakes, vast glaciers, windswept steppe, and extraordinary wildlife. It has also become arguably the world's premier destination for observing wild pumas (*Puma concolor*).

Overview of Torres del Paine

Established in 1959, Torres del Paine covers a vast wilderness landscape within the Magallanes Region of southern Chile. The area is recognized internationally and forms part of the UNESCO Torres del Paine Biosphere Reserve. The landscape sits between the Andes Mountains and the Patagonian steppe, creating an exceptional mix of ecosystems and scenery.

The Iconic Towers

The park's name comes from its most famous landmark:

Torres del Paine ("Towers of Blue"), three immense granite spires rising dramatically above glacial valleys.

The towers are:

- Torre Sur (South Tower)
- Torre Central (Central Tower)
- Torre Norte (North Tower)

Landscapes

Torres del Paine contains remarkable geographic diversity:

- Granite mountains and jagged ridges
- Glacial valleys
- Ancient southern beech forests
- Patagonian grasslands
- Rivers and waterfalls
- Lakes such as Pehoé, Nordenskjöld, and Sarmiento
- Grey Glacier, part of the Southern Patagonian Ice Field, one of the largest ice masses outside Antarctica and Greenland

The constantly changing weather, powerful winds, and dramatic light create some of the most photogenic scenery in South America.

Wildlife of Torres del Paine

The park is one of Patagonia's most important wildlife refuges.

Commonly observed species include:

Guanaco. The guanaco, a wild camelid related to llamas, is the dominant herbivore of the region and the primary prey species for pumas. Large herds roam the steppe and open plains.

Andean Condor. One of the largest flying birds in the world, with wingspans exceeding 3 meters (10 feet).

Other Mammals

- South American grey fox
- Culpeo fox
- Patagonian hog-nosed skunk
- Armadillos

More than 100 bird species have been recorded, including:

- Chilean flamingos
- Black-necked swans
- Caracaras
- Eagles
- Condors

The Pumas of Torres del Paine

Why Are the Pumas So Famous?

Torres del Paine has become legendary among wildlife photographers and naturalists because it offers some of the best puma-viewing opportunities anywhere in the Americas. Many conservationists and guides consider it the premier location globally to observe wild pumas. Unlike pumas in most regions, which remain extremely elusive, many Torres del Paine pumas can be observed in daylight and often tolerate the presence of distant humans and vehicles. This makes them unusually visible compared to populations elsewhere. It is the second-largest cat in the Americas after the jaguar and ranges from Canada to Patagonia.

Patagonian pumas are often slightly larger and more heavily built than many northern populations, adaptations that help them survive the harsh southern climate.

Why So Many Pumas Here?

Several factors contribute to their success:

- **Abundant Prey** - The region supports a robust guanaco population, providing a reliable food source. Guanacos comprise the majority of a puma's natural diet in the park.

- Protection - Historically, pumas were heavily persecuted by ranchers. In recent decades, improved conservation measures, reductions in hunting, and growing ecotourism have allowed numbers to recover.
- Expansive Habitat. The park's combination of: Open grasslands, Rocky hills, Forest patches, Low human density creates near-perfect hunting conditions.

Puma Behavior in Torres del Paine

Daily Activity

Unlike many puma populations that are mostly nocturnal, Torres del Paine pumas are frequently active during daylight hours.

Visitors often observe them:

- Hunting guanacos
- Resting on hillsides
- Caring for cubs
- Moving through open grasslands

This daylight activity is one reason wildlife photographers flock to the region.

Hunting Strategy.

Pumas are ambush predators.

Typical hunting sequence:

- Locate a herd of guanacos
- Use terrain for concealment
- Stalk within striking distance
- Launch a rapid sprint
- Secure the prey with a throat bite

The rocky terrain around Torres del Paine provides countless ambush opportunities.

Famous Puma Families

One unique aspect of Torres del Paine is that certain individual pumas have become well known among guides, researchers, and photographers.

Over years of observation:

- Female pumas and their cubs are tracked and identified.
- Distinct facial features, scars, ear markings, and behavior help researchers recognize specific animals.
- Some famous females have produced multiple generations of cubs that photographers document over many years.
- This long-term familiarity has helped transform the area into a world-class puma research destination.

Scientific Research and Conservation

Recent genetic research has focused on understanding the health and connectivity of the Torres del Paine puma population. Scientists have investigated whether this southern population is isolated and how much genetic diversity it retains. Studies have examined DNA collected from puma scat and identified individual animals to evaluate population structure and conservation needs.

Conservation organizations are increasingly interested in maintaining connectivity between Torres del Paine pumas and other Patagonian populations to ensure long-term genetic health.

Ecotourism and Puma Tracking

Puma tracking has become one of Patagonia's fastest-growing wildlife tourism activities.

Professional trackers:

- Search for tracks
- Monitor known family territories
- Follow guanaco movements
- Interpret fresh signs in the landscape

The best viewing areas are often along the eastern edge of the park and neighboring private estancias where wildlife-focused tourism supports conservation.

This has created a powerful economic argument for protecting pumas rather than viewing them as threats to livestock.

Why Torres del Paine Matters

Torres del Paine represents one of the world's great conservation success stories. It protects an extraordinary Patagonian ecosystem where top predators still function naturally, guanaco herds roam freely, and visitors can witness behaviors rarely observed elsewhere in the wild. The pumas of Torres del Paine have become global ambassadors for wildlife conservation, showing how large carnivores can generate value through ecotourism while remaining a vital part of their ecosystem.

This was my first trip to Torres Del Paine and to Chile. It was a location that I had wanted to add to my tour offering for a while and also somewhere that I had always wanted to visit from a young age.

My 2 clients on this trip were regular clients who had visited the destination before but not in winter and it was a real pleasure to share the experience with them and also understand their thoughts on the trip.

Day 1 Monday 17th August

My clients arrived on Friday from the UK and I travelled from Argentina to Chile the day before. We all stayed in Punta Arenas. The first day was just a transfer day and I was picked up at 11am and then shortly after we picked up my guests from their hotel. The journey to Puerto Natales took around 3 hours and we checked in to our hotel which was to be home for the next 3 nights.

Puerto Natales is a charming Patagonian town in southern Chile and serves as the main gateway to Torres del Paine National Park. Situated on the shores of the Señoret Channel and surrounded by snow-capped mountains, fjords, and vast Patagonian steppe, it combines spectacular natural scenery with a relaxed, frontier-town atmosphere. Founded in 1911 during the region's sheep-farming boom, Puerto Natales has evolved into a vibrant tourism hub, offering cozy hotels, excellent seafood restaurants, and easy access to some of South America's most breathtaking wilderness areas. Visitors are drawn not only by its proximity to Torres del Paine but also by nearby glaciers, boat excursions through the Última Esperanza Sound, and the town's rich cultural heritage shaped by indigenous peoples, European settlers, and generations of Patagonian pioneers.

The rest of the day was a free day. I spent the time catching up on outstanding admin which is always a challenge when travelling due to time constraints and dodgy connection. My clients went for a walk around the town.

There was no dinner option at the hotel as it is low season, so we went to a nearby restaurant and had some lovely food. We then returned to the hotel for an early night as our Puma Search would start the next morning.



Day 2 Tuesday 18th August

We had breakfast at 6:15am and were ready to leave at 7am. We were picked up by our guide and driver and started on our way to Torres del Paine. It was still dark when we reached the main access road into the park. There was a car parked on the side of the road – it was one of the trackers. Our guide informed us that there was a Mother Puma called Escarcha and 2 cubs around 50 metres from us eating a Guanaco kill. We got out of the vehicle and got our cameras

ready. I made sure everyone was ok with their camera settings and then we waited. It was still dark and although we could make out the shapes of 3 cats it was still not clear that they were Pumas. As the sun started to rise, we could clearly make out 3 Pumas. WOW our first day and not even in the park and we have 3 Pumas. It was always my understanding that Pumas appear and disappear very quickly, so we all set about taking some images even though the light was poor and the ISO was high. The light took a while to come but over the next half hour it gradually improved. Over the next few hours a few other photographers turned up but the sighting was well managed by the guides to ensure nobody went past a certain point and that there was no disturbance to these cats. Over the next 4 hours we watched them eating, the cubs playing, mum stretching and occasionally joining in with play time and then them all just relaxing in front of a bush. It was bitterly cold with a very strong wind, but for 4 hours I barely noticed. As well as the Pumas there were Condors flying overhead, no doubt attracted by the Guanaco kill. A few of these huge birds perched on the hillside watching the kill before taking off again and sometimes circling right above our heads. I had always wanted to see a Condor and now I had them circling above my head with 3 pumas 50 metres away, It was quite surreal seeing so much on our first few hours.

At around 12pm we went for a toilet break at the main park entrance and then we returned to the Pumas. They were still sleeping in the same place, so we sat in the car and had our packed lunch. After around half hour it was play time again and the cubs started charging around and chasing and jumping on each other. They eventually all settled down together. Around 5pm the light was starting to fade a lot, and it was getting very cold so we decided to leave the Pumas and return to the hotel. It really was an amazing first day and such a privilege to spend so much time with this Puma Family. We returned to the hotel with a mountain of images to go through. We had dinner and again slept early ready for the next day.















Day 3 Wednesday 19th August

We again had breakfast at 6:15am and left for the park at 7am. Our plan was very simple today. To go back to the Escarcha and her family and see if they were still there. There was still a lot of the kill left the previous evening and our guide thought that there was a good chance that they would still be eating. We stopped on the way to take a few landscape images especially

focusing on the incredible sunrise. We arrived at the location of the Pumas a little later than the previous day but they were still there eating. They stayed with the kill for some time and then the cubs started to play. They were running around and jumping on each other and then they came closer to the road to drink. After a while mum was still eating and the cubs wandered off away from us. They then started to jump on each other and hide from each other by the road further away. We were not permitted to get closer to them as we would be between mum and cubs and also it is important to keep a decent distance from the Pumas. The cubs then got fed up of that game and crossed the road. They disappeared in to the bushes and were now quite away from mum. Mum was still busy eating her meal and didn't seem to notice that the cubs were not there. We knew that when she finished eating that she would either call for the cubs to come back to her or she would cross the road to look for them. The background of the road was the incredible Mountain scenery and this is the shot that I suggested we should all try to get. We waited and waited and eventually Escarcha finished her meal. She then started to call the cubs. We saw 2 little bundles of fur come out of the bushes and approach the road. We got in position for them to cross and I laid down in the middle of the road to try to get a low angle. There was an annoying signpost in the background which I hoped might be blocked by the cubs crossing. First one cub crossed and then the other. I shot the image quite wide to show the mountain scenery. I managed to get one frame of one of the cubs with the signpost completely hidden which was great. The cubs went to their mum and then all laid down in the grass. We then went for a toilet break. Whilst on route back from the toilets we got word that one of the trackers had found another Puma. We were told that it was very shy but decided we would go and have a look if nothing else to see a different Puma with a different background. As we got there it became clear that this would be more of a typical Puma sighting. It was a long way away near the top of one of the hills. It eventually made its way up and over the top of the hill so there was not really the chance to get anything much from this sighting. We went back to the Puma family and spent the rest of the afternoon there. When we got there they were still sleeping but after a while they woke up and mum joined in with playtime pretending to be the prey so that the cubs would chase her. It was fascinating to watch and despite one of the cubs getting in to trouble with Escarcha and being disciplined they all looked like they were having a lot of fun. We left them at 4:30pm as the light had dropped as well as the temperature. We didn't expect them to be there the next day, but they had given us 2 days packed full of incredible memories and opportunities for different images. We returned to the hotel and had dinner and slept early.

















Day 4 Thursday 20th August

We again had breakfast at 6:15am and left at 7am. The plan today was to focus more on landscapes, any other animals that we may see and also seeing a bit more of the park. We had spent 2 days here and had not even entered the park yet!!

We were due to transfer to a different hotel tonight closer to the park but also nearer to the Estancia Laguna Amarga where we would be concentrating our Puma search for the next 3 days.

We dropped all of our luggage off at the new hotel on the way in Cerro Castillo. Then we continued towards the park.

We did go and check to see if Escarcha and the cubs were there, but they had moved. We got to the main Laguna Amarga gate and entered the National Park. The weather today was amazing and although it was still very windy it was clear and we had fantastic views of the mountains and the famous towers. We took our time driving along stopping at various viewpoints and it felt like that every corner we went around or every viewpoint we stopped at the view just got better and better. It really was amazing.

I kept thinking to myself and sometimes saying out loud "It would be so amazing to get an image of a Puma in front of the towers" The landscape here is truly breathtaking and in winter with the snow on the mountains it looks absolutely amazing.

After a few hours in the park we exited through the Sarmiento Gate and then took the main roads to Laguna Azul. We stopped here for our lunch and had a visit from a young Red Fox. Known as the "Red Fox" because of the colour of its reddish fur on its head and legs, this fox lives anywhere it can burrow. This means near bushes, steppe, banks of streams and low, dense shrub vegetation. It stayed with us for a while in the picnic spot and then disappeared to try and get some food elsewhere. After lunch we found a herd of Guanaco and stayed with them for a while. It was nice to spend some time watching them and taking a few images. We then spent some time photographing Caracara and also saw some distant Condors. By now it was late afternoon and because of the strong winds we decided to go back to the hotel. No Pumas had been sighted today, but we had spent a lovely day in this stunning location. We said goodbye to our guide and driver and checked in to the hotel. We had dinner at 7pm and then slept early.





Day 5 Friday 21st August

We had breakfast at 7am and were picked up by our new guide and driver at 8am. Today was our first day in the Estancia.

Located on the eastern edge of Torres del Paine, Laguna Amarga Ranch (Estancia Laguna Amarga) has earned international recognition as one of the best places in the world to observe wild pumas. The ranch lies amid Patagonia's open steppe and mountain scenery, where abundant guanaco populations provide a natural prey base for these elusive predators. In recent years, the area has become a model for wildlife conservation and ecotourism, demonstrating that livestock farming and puma conservation can coexist. Visitors and researchers are drawn to Laguna Amarga because of the unusually high density of pumas and the opportunity to witness remarkable behaviors, from mothers caring for cubs to hunting and territorial interactions, all set against the dramatic backdrop of Torres del Paine's iconic peaks.

This was the part of the trip I had been waiting for. My clients had been here 4 years ago and had several Puma Sightings. We had already been very fortunate with our sightings, but we all hoped to see a few more Pumas and also to try and get some different images with hopefully the landscape being a feature.

On the way to the estancia, we stopped to take a few images of another breathtaking sunrise. We then entered the Estancia. Our tracker in another vehicle had already been out early looking

for Pumas, so we hadn't missed anything by stopping on the way. I didn't really know what to expect from the estancia, but it soon became clear that the views of the park were even better here and what looked like mountain tops from the main roads were in fact a whole new world of flat open grassland dotted by small lakes and rocky escarpments. It was amazing. We stopped a few times to photograph the many Guanaco that were around and were just enjoying the peace of this incredible location. At around 12:30pm we started to head towards a place where we could have lunch. We were on the top of one of the hills with an amazing view of the towers. As we rounded a corner our guide said "Puma" he pointed to the Puma. This one was darker and almost an orange, brown compared to the grey colour of Escarcha. But this Puma was with a male. It was Petaka who is an older Puma and the mother of Escarcha and the male was Cuevas. Petaka is very relaxed around people and the vehicles and so there was no problems in getting out of the vehicle and watching and photographing her. They were both by a rock approximately 80 metres away so we were able to get a few distant images of them both although mostly only the head of Cuevas. We couldn't get any closer to Petaka due to the male, he was very nervous and we did not want to disturb them. After a while Petaka decided to come towards us and laid under a nearby bush for a while. Cuevas decided to leave her to it and silently slipped away the other side of the ridge. Petaka then got up and walked around a bit before laying in some bushes on the top of the escarpment. This was now the chance to get a Puma in front of the towers. We moved position to allow for this shot if Petaka decided to get up and walk along the ridge with the mountains in the background.

We waited for quite a while but finally she stood up and walked right in front of the towers. Our tracker had also arrived by now so all of us followed Petaka as she walked around. She really was showing off. We all got some lovely images of this incredible sighting. Technically the sun could have been in a different position, and she could have been a little closer, but I know that is me being very picky. We had all achieved what we wanted with a Puma in front of the famous towers. Petaka eventually decided it was time to rest, and she laid down in some bushes. We decided this was a good time for lunch and a coffee and so we sat by the car and watched the bushes where she was resting. We must have waited for around an hour before she sat up and then she started to call the male. It was an incredibly loud call and when there was no response she moved to the top of the ridge line and called again and again. It gave us another great sighting and another brilliant photo opportunity. We decided that as Cuevas was so nervous of us it would be unlikely that he would come to Petaka with us there, so we left her calling to him and left the estancia. We got back to the hotel at around 5:30pm and had dinner at 7pm and then slept early.

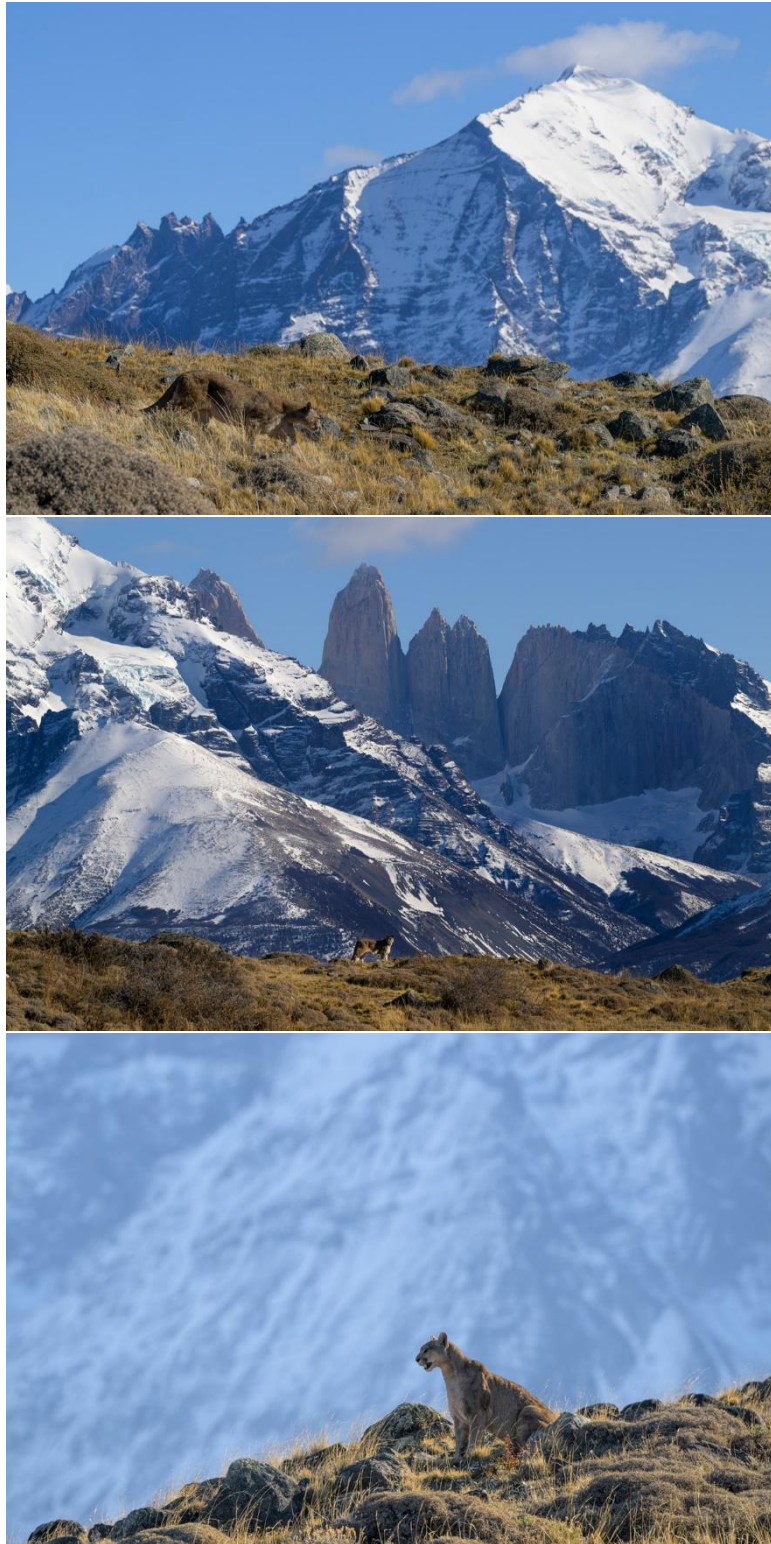












Day 6 Saturday 22nd August

We had breakfast at 7am and were picked up by our guide at 8am. It was a lot colder this morning but only in temperature, there was no wind, so it actually felt a lot warmer. We set off for the estancia and again stopped a few times on the way to photograph the amazing landscape and the sunrise. Our tracker went straight to where we had left Petaka and we went off to explore other areas of the Estancia. We had a lovely drive around in some spectacular places but no Pumas only Guanaco. We photographed the Guanaco for a bit and then stopped

for lunch at around 1pm. As of yet our tracker also hadn't seen any Pumas, so we continued to explore and look in other areas of the estancia. We put in an amazing effort today but unfortunately were not rewarded with any Pumas. This just goes to show how lucky you are when you do see them. It is hard to be disappointed in such an incredible location though and none of us were overly disappointed when we left the estancia to return to the hotel. On the way back I spotted some Rhea quite close to the road and this was one species that we had hoped to see so we stopped and photographed them for a bit and then continued to the hotel. We had dinner at 7 and then slept early





Day 7 Sunday 23rd August

Our last day to look for Pumas. We were picked up again at 8am and as we got closer to the park and the estancia, we could see a mist forming on Lake Sarmiento. It was again cold this morning but also there was no wind. Although we had taken many images of the towers we stopped as it looked so different and then as the sun started to rise lighting the towers and the mist it was an incredible scene. We got back in the car and soon heard from our tracker that he had found a Puma. It was actually Petaka and Cuevas. They had walked down towards the lake and were hidden in some rocks. We soon got to where the tracker was and were able to see them, but they were quite distant. Due to how nervous Cuevas was and that they were a mating couple I was more than happy to agree with our guide and tracker that approaching them was not a good idea as we did not want to disrupt their natural behaviour. We watched them from a distance sat by this large rock and the videos that our guide took through his scope were amazing and much better than any of us could get with our cameras, after around half hour both of the Pumas left the rock and walked away. Our tracker went off in his vehicle to see if there would be an opportunity to get a better view of them. We stayed where we were. We then heard on the radio that they were both laying down in some rocks and seemed to be quite relaxed. Our tracker was able to get within 100m of them so it was decided that we would walk towards where they were. We set off on our walk through the frosty grassland. It took us an hour walking slowly and staying hidden behind the hills until we got nearer to the Pumas. But as we got a little closer both Pumas got up and walked off. We didn't see them this time but with this information

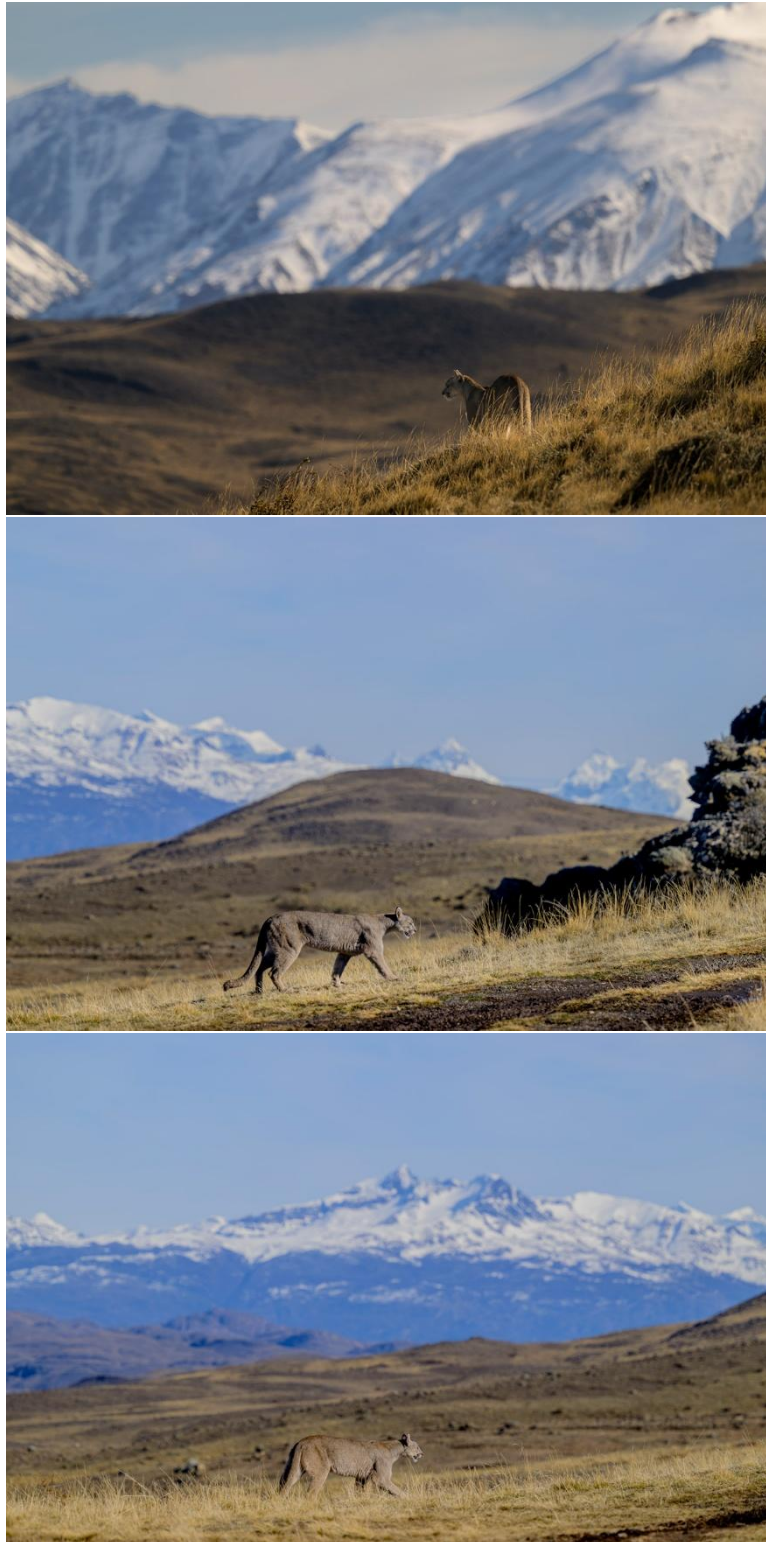
e decided to leave them to it and walk back to the car. As we walked back, we saw both Pumas on the shore of the lake and Petaka was drinking. It was too distant for any images, but it was lovely to watch them both. We got back to the car and then decided we would go and look for another Puma. After a toilet stop, we entered another area of the Estancia, we got to the top of one of the viewpoints near a herd of Guanaco and decided that it was a good place to stop for lunch and coffee as it was gone 1pm. As we were eating lunch we heard on the radio that a tracker had found another Puma. She wasn't too far away from us so we quickly finished eating and drinking our coffee and set off to look for this Puma. It was Escarcha. She didn't have the cubs with her, so it was generally thought that she was probably hunting. We soon came across her on top of a hill. We parked the car and got out. We thought she would come down the hill cross the road and then head into the grassland. I laid down in the road to try and get a low angle shot of her crossing it, but what happened next was unbelievable. Instead of crossing the road she walked towards us. I was photographing her as she walked towards me, she was no more than 5 metres away, so I had to swap cameras and use a smaller lens and as I did she crossed the road and walked past me no more than 2 metres away. It really was quite amazing to be that close to a wild puma. We then gave her some space to move away and then followed her in the vehicle. We kept a good distance away so that we wouldn't disturb her and were able to get some lovely images of her with the mountains in the background. Eventually she went up high on to the top of one of the hills. We knew that there were Guanaco there as we had seen them before we had lunch. We went and positioned ourselves a distance from the Guanaco and then we saw her laying up on the horizon. We decided that as she was hunting, we would not attempt to get closer to her and we would watch from a distance. After about half hour she disappeared and we think she was possibly circling to get closer to the Guanaco. But as we couldn't see her and we had such an amazing experience with her we left her to it. We then went for a toilet stop and as it was now 4pm we decided to head back to the hotel. It was another fantastic day and a great way to end our Puma Trip. We returned to the hotel and had a final delicious meal and talked about the highlights of the trip of which there were plenty.











Day 8 Monday 24th August

We had a later breakfast at 8am and were picked up at 10am to transfer back to Punta Arenas. We arrived early afternoon and checked in to our hotels. We would both be leaving separately on the 25th so that was the end of the tour.

In summary, I loved my time in Torres Del Paine. I don't think that there is a more spectacular location for wildlife photography, not one with such a sought-after species like the Puma

anyway. I will be returning here in the future and will run more trips to Chile as It really is an incredible destination for wildlife photography. We were so fortunate with our Puma sightings and to be here for 6 days and to come away with the images and sightings that we did was amazing. If you are interested in joining me on a future tour then please get in touch.















