

Letter 8

The trip is long over, but by popular demand I will complete my tale. Please bear in mind that time has passed, beer has been drunk and that my mind no longer has the clarity of my youth. Some of this may be a little inaccurate, or indeed completely wrong. Fortunately Dave has sent me a list of places and dates and I think it's fairly safe to assume I would have been somewhere similar. (Rentboy – I'm rather hoping this was a rare 'free' service) So Christmas is a faint memory, the new years hangover has faded to a dull throbbing and the joys of Patagonia are upon us...

Rentboy: 3rd: Fut - Ventisquero. Hanging glacier and lots of rain.

Some truly remarkable scenery en-route. More lupins, but still Chippy seems reluctant to remove all her clothes and pose amongst them. Then Helen stops by a lovely stream where we can have a swim (I assume it was today as its not in any of my earlier letters- lets pretend it was). Perhaps we should have realised when Helen didn't actually swim herself. Perhaps the fact that the river flowed straight off an ice covered mountain should have warned us. But no – in we jumped. The word cold seems woefully inadequate. The current was so strong it was hard just to stand against it, let alone get out. All sensation in my lower body vanished. Finally Adam towed me up the bank. If you ever get the opportunity to swim in a glacial torrent – don't. It's a damned fool idea.

Then spent a happy few minutes looking for Brendon's truck keys. Finally they were discovered inside his underpants. (Fortunately it was not me who found them).

There is something strangely beautiful and compelling about glaciers. If only they were located slightly closer to tropical beaches I might see them more often. We arrived at the hanging glacier park late afternoon. The sky was clear, the air was crisp and sweet, the view was stunning. For just long enough to get a photo of the glacier. Then the mist came in. A thick icy drizzle rather reminiscent of childhood holidays in North Devon. Unfortunately Barnstaple leisure centre was not an option.

The next morning Phil and I set off on the walk to the viewing point. No one else was stirring. Honestly, the youth of today, missing out on a fine walk in the pissing rain. We crossed the bridge and due to a little confusion over left and right, went the wrong way. The path wound around huge boulders deposited by the retreating ice flows and ended at a lake. The lake stretched away into the mists, a solitary, empty boat

floated. It was eerie and beautiful. Any idiot capable of pressing a button couldn't fail to get a stunning picture. Mine is rubbish and I am relying on Phil for one.

Finally we convinced ourselves that we had gone the wrong way and since no mystic boatman appeared from the mists we returned to the bridge and started again. Despite the damp it was a really enjoyable hour or so's walk to the viewpoint. And there we stood, peering into the mists and feeling our sweat turn cold. It was one of those rare occasions where the fog totally failed to clear and reveal the stunning views beyond. So back we walked, still in fine spirits and planning to do the long walk in the afternoon. At the campsite only our tent was still up. Everyone else had packed up and was huddled on the truck. It seemed they had had enough and wanted to move on. Reluctantly we agreed and packed up. This at least meant I did not have time to use the zero degree showers and finally had a genuine excuse for smelling bad.

Rent Boy: 4th: Vent - Coyhaique. Camp site dogs.

Dogs. Our otherwise perfect and rather cute leader has this annoying habit of befriending the local mutts at every campsite we go to. These are invariably lice ridden, deformed vermin that proceed to empty the bins, steal food and piss on the tents. This campsite had more than the average quota. I'm not usually in favour of animal cruelty but I did resort to beating these with a stick whenever Helen wasn't looking. Then Big Andy trod on the camp cat. Fortunately the RSPCA are not big around these parts.

The town was only a couple of miles away so I went in search of a post office. In town the locals were very helpful and gave me extensive directions. I must have visited every street in town except for the one with the post office in.

The next day I set off for a four hour walk in the nearby park. Walking through the woods was lovely. Until about three and a half hours in the trail petered out. Are there bears in the woods of Patagonia? Or Wolves? Suddenly walking on my own wasn't such a good idea, who would I kill and eat if I didn't find my way out by nightfall? I tried back tracking but someone seemed to have stolen the path. Hmm. Then I come across a sign. It's in Spanish but I appear to be at lake Four. Unfortunately, there is no clue to where Lake Four is in relationship to the known world. The woods echo with Anglo Saxon expletives. Finally I come across a gravel road that leads me down to the entrance. As I am leaving I meet a group

of my companions just setting off. “Is it an easy walk ?” they ask. “Oh yes, it’s a lovely clear trail – you cant possibly get lost” I reply. Ho Ho. I suspect the Bears will be eating well tonight.

Bess (the truck) is undergoing surgery in town. All is not going well. Phil, Emily and I are supposed to be cooking. Unfortunately we lack a few important items, like food, pans, a stove and beer. However, Emily has an emergency wine handy. It’s a bit confused after that. There were Taxi’s. There was Beer. I fell over in the mud and winded myself and people were actually concerned. Mainly that I would be unable to cook. Dinner was late but it did happen. Well done Phil.

Rent Boy: 6th: Coy - Puerto Guadal [CHILE]. Camped by the lake. 7th P. Guadal - Bush camp where we had the hut to cook in. [ARG] Stopped in a place famous for fruit and didn't see much fruit.

OK. I vaguely remember the fruit place. It was a cherry fair that wasn’t on. But a lake ? A hut ? I mean come on David. That could have been anywhere.

Rent Boy: 8th: Bush camp - El Chalten. Windiest place on earth. Fitz Roy. Lago Capri. Wine tasting.

Windy? Call that windy? There’s a boy who’s never eaten curried eggs. Found a bar. I had a few beers. The girls drank them out of wine. And Baily’s. And most of anything with alcohol in it. I left about midnight when the girls started singing different songs to the band louder than the band. They came back about 4am. It was not quiet. I then had a wicked nightmare. I think there were killer turtles and I had lost my turtle charm. The next morning I was grumpy even by my standards. Poor Debbie caught the worst of my ranting. She politely suggested I went away. (If I could do that I’d be a porn superstar Deb’s). I attempted to sulk but the sun was shining and the world was beautiful. Eventually I gave up, said sorry to Deb’s and had a restoring ale.

Then a few of us went on a four hour horse ride. My nag was called Balthazar. Fortunately he only had one speed. Slow. Despite the guides attempts to get us moving by repeatedly crying ‘Vamos, Rich, Vamos’ (like tell the horse) and occasionally smacking Balthazars rump we went at a very sensible plod. The sun shone, we traversed hills and streams and the Fitzroy mountains glistened in the distance as the skin gradually chaffed off my scrotum. That evening the others had a wine tasting party whilst I made friends with a tube of germaline.

The next day the swelling had subsided and I set off walking. First a visit to a nearby waterfall. Rather pretty & with a permanent rainbow. Then off up a big hill to a glacier. Met Brendan and walked with him. We did alright for the first few hours, then there was a wrong turn. The problem with trail walking with Brendan is that he doesn't realise that an essential part of trail walking is a trail. To be fair, I had the map and when Brendan suggested that we should turn right I ridiculed him. However, when the trail petered out I was prepared to turn back, but oh no. First there was a glacial torrent crossed by a rather dubious fallen tree. Then there was a cliff. I'm not good at cliffs. Then a boulder field across which I crawled and Brendan skipped – more than a little mountain goat in that boys family tree. Finally there was a rather stunning glacier. Then we had to go back through it all again. Nine hours after I set off I finally found a stool by a bar and made Brendan buy me a beer. I have to admit I really enjoyed the hike, although there were moments when that might not have been apparent from my language.

Rent Boy: 11th: El Chalten - El Calafate. Expensive resort. More steaks. Ice creams. Perito Moreno Glacier. Beef stew.

MMM Ice-cream. I may have consumed my entire body weight in ice-cream. I also queued at the post office to get stamps. There was a sign saying queue here, so queue I did. The little man ignored me for a long while, looking up only to serve the odd local. Eventually he indicated that he was closing. "But I need stamps" I wailed. "Oh, you should have said" he replied in perfect English. "I wondered what you were doing". I pointed to the sign and explained that I was queuing. The man laughed a lot and muttered something about loco Americano's. I chose not to correct him with regard to my nationality, let our American cousins get the reputation for stupidity.

So, on a bus to a glacier. Condors to the left, Condors to the right, Condors stacked five deep in holding patterns over rock escarpments that Sergio Leone would die for. Our guide tries to be enthusiastic about this surfeit of oversized vultures. Doesn't she realise we've done Condors – today is about Ice. And Ice there was. I was a bit worried that three glaciers in a week would be too much. How wrong I was. There aren't words. Look at the photos. Better still, go there. Incredible. I actually spent 40 minutes stationary in a squatting position, trying to get a photo of the glacier calving (technical term for lumps of ice the size of houses dropping off into the water). It did and I got an incredible photo. I only

hope that whoever found my camera in the toilets at the Valdez peninsula appreciates what a great photo it is.

Then there was a night. I was drunk. Not my usual, casual, attractive and debonair slightly drunk drunk. But a full blown carry me home and put me to bed drunk. To be fair, I was lead astray. We went out for a group meal and had I consumed an elegant sufficiency. But certainly not too much. I was ready to return home. (sad when a tent is home). Then I was told that everyone was going clubbing. Fine, try not to wake me. Then I was told it was more of a pub than a club and that every one was going and it would be rude not to join in. There was even a mention of dominoes. So off I went. It wasn't everyone, just the mad few (Danger, Chippy, Helen, Brendan and Em appear in the photo's – so that's who I'm suing) There were no dominoes. There was loud music and crap beer. There is a rumour that I attempted to dance, but I choose to dismiss this as malicious gossip. What can I say? It was 4am, The beer reacted with the ice cream, it was not pretty.

So, there I leave it. In love (spiritually) with all of the girls, hating (in a friendly way) most of the boys, and thinking Patagonia would be perfect if you could just get a pint of Hobsons.