



03 MAY FEROCIOUS BEAUTY

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Writer Alison Konecki ascends steep slopes in Torres del Paine National Park, Chile. Photo: Peter Raleigh.

There they were — fever-red and burning white-hot, smack on the bottom of my pinky toe. I switched off my headlamp and scrunched back down into my sleeping bag, trying to ignore the throbbing as furious gusts of wind throttled the shelter's tarpaulin walls and smashed rain against the porthole above my bunk.

Blisters had sprouted each day of my multi-day trek through Torres del Paine in Chilean Patagonia. The previous day had supposedly been the “easy” day of the trek: a short dip forming half the base of the park’s “W” trail (so named because of the shape the path traces, like a wobbly “W” quickly scrawled). While the other legs represented long, burly strokes of the “W” — beefy trails that charged toward sharp peaks, towering granite spires, and massive glacial fields — the “easy” day was a low-mileage stroll along a lake from one hikers’ shelter to another: a relative day of rest.

But it wasn’t a stroll. My overstuffed pack was heavy with far too many layers of contingency clothing, and the straps chafed my hips. When I stopped for lunch I found a flattened, inedible sandwich oozing mayo and some sort of smoked fish. I did my best to shrug it all off, pulling from my stash of peanut butter M&M’s and ignoring the minor discomforts. As irritating as they could be, I’d always held a secret delight for blisters, bruises, and sore muscles. I viewed them as evidence that I’d pushed my body into new territory, beyond the comfortable sphere of my personal limits. The problem was that I hadn’t anticipated them appearing on my “easy” day. I’d faced longer and more demanding hikes before, but in Patagonia it was as if my body had forgotten what it was capable of. Throughout the hike my lungs and legs grew steadily heavier. And rather than feel like entry stamps to new and exciting physical possibilities, they just felt like signals telling me that I wasn’t up to the challenge. I stumbled through the final couple kilometers on knees wobbly and sore.

I’d been trying to ignore the blisters — they were on the most inconsequential of toes, after all — but each evening, rather than begin to heal and sink quietly back into my skin, they seemed to relish the freedom from my boots, throbbing gleefully throughout the night. They’d even begun to stratify: The blisters had blisters. I didn’t know that was even possible.

Several hours later I awoke again with a start, convinced that the batting of the shelter was about to be ripped off its caging and blown out across the lake below. The rest of my bunkmates were soundly asleep, their rumbling snores filling the gaps between gusts. As the storm bellowed outside, I felt an anxious knot forming in my stomach. Patagonia is notorious for its fierce weather. I’d read about winds so strong and unrelenting that hikers — even those tethered by the weight of hefty packs — could be knocked clean off their feet.

Like boxers too long in the ring, the Patagonian mountains bore the scars of thousands and thousands of years of pummeling. Glacial erosion had shaped the land; the elements had defined its brutal character. And when morning arrived I'd be out in one of its storms, carrying a far too heavy pack and hiking the longest, most difficult leg of the entire trek.

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Purple light filled the porthole. I checked my watch — 6:30 a.m. The storm was still raging; the shelter's batting heaved great sighs from the wind's force. In the bunk below, my hiking partner rummaged through his pack for his toothbrush. The faint beam of a headlamp traced a path along the floor as someone quietly made their way to the bathroom. Storm or no storm, it was time to get up.



Following a rainbow into Valle del Francés in Torres del Paine National Park, Chile. Photo: Alison Konecki.

After shuffling and re-shuffling the contents of my pack, debating the merits of leggings vs. hiking pants for the day ahead, and anything else I could think of to wait out the storm just a little longer, I finally gave in. Cinching the hood of my rain jacket, I poked my head outside. Instantly, a gust of wind snatched the door from me and hurtled it back against the shelter. But surprisingly, the air felt mild. The rain, which had sounded sharp and menacing as it beat down above my bunk, was actually more of a drizzle. Lago Nordenskjöld, the aqua lake I'd hiked along the previous day, had hushed to a soft silvery-blue in the pre-dawn light. Phantoms of mist whirled across its surface, propelled by the wind. Thin streaks of fuchsia illuminated the underside of clouds in the distance.

I laughed. A gust tore off my hood and knocked me against the banister, and I laughed harder.

Twenty minutes later, I left breakfast to grab my pack and start the hike, but immediately stopped. Others were rendered similarly immobile, transfixed, their heads tilted up. The sky — *the entire sky* — was a husky pink. As we watched, fleecy clouds burnished bright with gold began to gather at the edges. I turned my head and right behind me, stretching a bright arc across the pink expanse of sky, was the longest rainbow I'd ever seen, striding with swagger across the Cordillera del Paine mountains. My heart swelled so fast I thought it would pop right out of my chest. I ran over to the shelter and up the steps, waving my arms and babbling to my friend:

"Grab your pack! ... Forget the pack! ... No, yes, grab the pack!"

Before he had a chance to do either, I ran back out, my pack half-zipped and my poles still retracted and smacking against my thighs as they dangled from the strap around my wrist.

Bundled in rain gear, our faces peeking from scrunches of nylon, we followed the rainbow as it unspooled first into a rushing river, then into the rocky folds of a valley. At last, after being pursued for nearly a half hour, it settled into the icy pocket of a mountain glacier and melted away. My feet, my legs, my whole body felt light. And it stayed that way — through the unrelenting batter of the wind, through the steep and rocky trail, and all the way through to the heart of the "W," where I stood, muscles sore but strong, encircled by the majesty of peaks bursting from a land of ferocious beauty.

**ALISON KONECKI**

Alison Konecki is a writer whose curiosity for the world has sent her kayaking with orcas in the San Juan Islands, trekking in Patagonia, herding goats in France, and planting papaya saplings in Costa Rica. She has a graduate degree in Art and Museum Studies from Georgetown University and has held several arts fellowships. Her travel writing has appeared in Transitions Abroad, AFAR, and Hidden Compass. Since becoming a San Francisco transplant she's made it her mission to explore every trail, park, and campground in the West.

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