

# **AGS Tour to Southern Patagonia November-December 2015**

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Guide – Ana Inés Bugiolocchi  
Driver – Sergio**

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Linda & Nico Verbeek and Andrew Ward.**



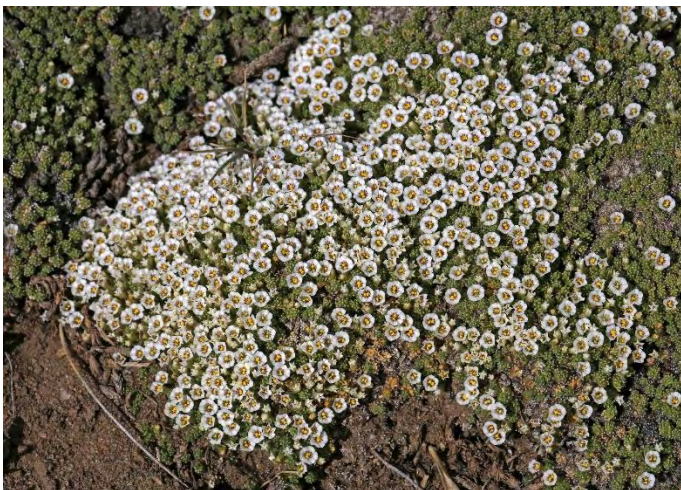


## The Tour ...

After flying to Buenos Aires, the group met up at Ezeiza International Airport for the flight south to El Calafate in Argentina's southern Santa Cruz province, where we were joined by our local guide Ana and our driver Sergio.

The rapidly growing town of El Calafate has become the centre of tourism in southern Patagonia. The advantage to travellers is that accommodation is plentiful and of a good standard. The disadvantage is that areas which, until recently were free to roam, now have restricted access. However, before sampling the delights of the El Calafate area, our first target location for the tour was Torres del Paine National Park in southern Chile.

On day 2 we travelled south towards the border, stopping to see the spectacular scarlet gorse *Anarthrophyllum desideratum*, a plant we were to see at various locations throughout the tour. On a trip last year, one of our party photographed a rare benthamiella *B. skottsbergii*, and so we made a short detour off the main road in search of this interesting plant. We were successful, but most plants had flowers that were beginning to fade. I can find no record of this species since its original description in 1948, at a location about 15km from our site.



After the border crossing we were joined by our local Chilean guide Carlos and continued to Torres del Paine National Park. The conspicuous feature of the park is a spectacular mountain massif, surrounded by a complex of lakes, rivers, glaciers, woodland, steppe and wetland. Our hotel was on an island in Lago Pehoe with views over the lake to the mountains.





On our first day we botanised around a series of waterfalls, La Cascada del Rio Paine, where we discovered a rich array of species, including the iconic porcelain orchid, *Chloraea magellanica*, and Darwin's Slipper Flower, *Calceolaria uniflora*.



Later that day we visited Lago Sarmiento and had lunch at Laguna Amarga. Both these lakes have high levels of carbonates and other minerals, supporting thrombolites, concretions formed by primitive algae.





Next day we spent botanising at Lago Grey, a glacier-fed lake. The nothofagus woodland en route to the lake was carpeted with dove orchid, *Codonorchis lessonii*. Icebergs calved from Glacier Grey were stranded in the shallow water close to the shore. We trekked around the headland in buffeting wind along a path giving spectacular views of the glacier and surrounding landscape.



The following day saw us heading back to the border by a different route, passing through a higher rainfall area with woodland supporting familiar shrubs such as escallonias, *Embothrium coccineum* and *Fuchsia magellanica*. In addition to the usual nothofagus, interesting trees including *Drimys winteri* and the world's southernmost conifer, *Pilgerodendron uviferum*, grew by the roadside.

Once over the border we stopped to botanise at various places en route to El Calafate. One particularly spectacular, Farrer Medal standard plant of *Oxalis enneaphylla* received much attention, and a beautiful roadside display of *Petunia patagonica* completed our return trip.



Next morning (day 6) we had an early start, using 4WD vehicles to climb Cerro Frias ("Cold Mountain"). This low mountain (about 1000m) stands on the southern shore of Lago Argentino and provides excellent views over the lake, with Perito Moreno Glacier in the distance. We found many interesting high mountain plants on the apparently bare and windswept top. In the afternoon we visited the spectacular Perito Moreno Glacier and added several orchids to our plant list.





Next day we botanised on the steppe to the west of El Calafate, where we found a surprising number of species, despite the bleak, desert-like landscape. The steppe was particularly dry this year, and although there were some highlights, most steppe areas were disappointing.

Leaving El Calafate we drove north to Lago Viedma, another large glacial lake, heading westward along its northern shore to the settlement of El Chalten, the administrative centre of Los Glaciares National Park and the trekking and climbing mecca of southern Patagonia. This is a delightful place, founded in 1985, surrounded by cliffs and overlooked by the spectacular Cerro Torre and Cerro Fitz Roy. The fast-flowing Rio de Las Vueltas (“river of curves”) flows through the town.

After a brief stop at our hotel, we drove along the valley to Lago Desierto, a scenic forested lake, though not very rich in flowering plants. The following day we climbed above El Chalten to a nearby peak, Loma del Pliegue Tumbado, accompanied by two helpful park rangers. This was an arduous trek from 400m to 1250m, first climbing a grassy hillside, then through nothofagus woodland, emerging eventually above the treeline to bare, wet, exposed slopes and scree. Spring here was on the late side, but there were still interesting plants such as *Oxalis loricata*, *O. enneaphylla*, *Primula magellanica*, *Menonvillea nordenskjoeldii*, *Leucheria leontopodioides* coming into flower. *Primula magellanica* is the only representative of the genus in South America and is homostylous and self-fertile. Populations are generally all white, pink or lavender flowered, rarely with mixed colours.





The following day we headed north. Accommodation in central Santa Cruz province is somewhat limited and our destination was a remote estancia, Estancia La Angostura. En Route we visited Lago Cardiel. This is an isolated lake on the steppe with seasonal inflows but no outflow resulting in a high mineral content; the lake is a clear turquoise colour. We made a stop on the eastern side of the lake which supported a dry steppe community. Some years ago Kirsten Andersen had found a yellow flowered junellia (*J. aff. coralloides*) here which we have failed to find since. Our luck was in this year and several plants were found. This is a junellia that I am sure would do well in cultivation.



We continued around the northern shore of the lake, botanising around a volcanic plug, Cerro Puntudo, a monumental structure with vertical basalt columns surrounded by plant-rich scree slopes. Plants of note here were the pink-flowered *Austrocactus bertinii* and the pink-blue to blue flowered mallow *Neobaclea crispifolia*. Interestingly Mela (of which more later) found a white population of this species not far from here on her return to Monte León after we left for the UK.





Driving further along the northern shore of the lake the steppe was dry and few plants were in good flower. Ana found a stand of a small-flowered white junellia, which I initially was unable to identify. This was an unusual white-flowered form of *Junellia micrantha*, a species characteristic of temporarily wet soils and usually seen with pink or lavender flowers.





Driving through the steppe we eventually reached our overnight accommodation, Estancia La Angostura, located in the lush valley of the Rio Chico, a welcome oasis in the otherwise desert-like steppe. The estancia owners made us very welcome and served us a traditional asado.



The following day we continued our trip north along RN40, and then westward to Lago Posados, botanising en route. Notable plants were the cactus *Maihueniopsis darwinii*, *Benthamiella pycnophylloides* (found by Anna at Las Horquetas), *Alstroemeria patagonica*, *Tropaeolum porifolium*, *Nastanthus patagonicus* and *Adesmia aphanantha* (found by Michael).







The following day took us across the dry steppe to the Cueva de las Manos (cave of hands), an impressive UNESCO World Heritage Site, with wall paintings dating from 9,300 years ago onwards. The paintings are on cave walls and overhangs along the canyon of the Rio Pinturas and take the form of numerous hand prints, images of guanacos, hunters etc. In addition, the scenery in an around the canyon is spectacular.







Returning from Cuevas de las Manos we travelled north along RN40 before turning westward along the southern shore of Lago Buenos Aires to our hotel on the outskirts of Los Antiguos. This area has a particularly mild climate allowing the cultivation of cherries. The fruit trees are protected from the Patagonian winds by dense poplar hedges, and irrigated using water pumped from the lake. Here we were joined by two friends, Guido Vittone, an employee of the new Patagonia National Park, and Mela Iribarren, a park ranger based at Monte León Park. The town sits below the northwestern corner of a large rectangular meseta, Meseta del Lago Buenos Aires (the centre of the new Patagonia National Park). Our aim for the next two days was to travel along the Zeballos valley to the Zeballos-Ghio Pass, a high point on the road below the southwestern corner of the meseta. The road had been in excellent condition in 2014 and we expected it to be in a similar state this year. However, following a hard winter, parts of the road had deteriorated and, without the efforts of the A.G.S. Road Gang, our driver Sergio and Guido, it is unlikely our vehicle would have made it to the pass.

We drove through steppe grassland and sparse woodland before reaching the bleak, windswept upper slopes. The lower steppe areas supported plants such as the large euphorbiid *Colliguaja integerrima*, *Sisyrinchium arenarium*, *Junellia thymifolia* and *Nastanthus scapigerus*. In the sparse woodland areas we found the beautiful *Chloraea alpina*, *Oxalis adenophylla*, *Olsynium junceum*, *Leucheria hahnii*, *Calceolaria biflora* and *C. borsinii*. However, it was the high pass that provided us with the best high mountain plants of the trip, including 3 species of oxalis, 2 species of rosulate viola, 3 benthamiella species, 3 hamadryas species and many more floral gems.





*Viola auricolor*



*Viola sacculus*



*Nassauvia lagascae*



*Combera* sp. nov.





*Junellia congesta*



*Junellia congesta* – unusual white form



*Oxalis loricata*



*Oxalis laciniata* var. *pubescens*



*Moschopsis trilobata*



*Adesmia burkartii*

The following day we climbed to a volcanic plug on the eastern side of the meseta. The land was grazed and yielded few plants of interest, but views over the valley were impressive.



On the final day we drove across a very dry steppe to an oil town, Comodoro Rivadavia, on the Atlantic coast, flying to Buenos Aires the following day.

### Wildlife ...

The southern provinces of Patagonia are rich in wildlife and we saw numerous guanacos, lesser (or Darwin's) rheas, condors and eagles. We also saw foxes, an armadillo, a skunk and two rare deer (huemul). Also numerous birds, lizards and insects.

