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Travel

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JAY GOODRICH

MY SHELTER IN THE WILD

In the mountains of Patagonia, the storm needn't pass for her to find peace

BY ERIN WILLIAMS *Special to The Washington Post*

The icy wind whipped and swirled, nearly knocking me off my feet. Snow lashed my face. My husband and I struggled to see the Torres del Paine summits through the fog. After a wet, cold, three-hour uphill hike, I hoped the slushy precipitation might clear, even for a moment, so I could glimpse the Torres — the trio of granite mountain peaks that are arguably Patagonia's most iconic sight. On a clear day, their jagged gray edges scrape the sky hundreds of feet above a snowfield and a meltwater lake, but at this particular moment they were hiding.

The Torres are often the highlight of the approximately 45-mile W Circuit trek in Chile's Torres del Paine National Park. On this day last December,

Dawn breaks near Lake Pehoé in Chile's Torres del Paine National Park, with the iconic Torres del Paine mountain peaks in the distance.

Andrew and I were alone at the lookout, the fierce weather probably deterring other hopeful souls. We huddled on a boulder to wait for the gray curtain to lift from the spires.

We had planned the five-day hike as part of a 20-day trekking excursion in Patagonia, the approximately 300,000-square-mile expanse of wilderness stretching across the bottom of Chile and Argentina. For months, we had looked forward to restoring our worn-out selves by backpacking and camping.

Wild areas are our escape from urban trappings: jobs, cellphones, gridlock, e-mails, deadlines, concrete. More important, they are a place of calm and provide solace as we endure life's biggest blows. They

HIKING CONTINUED ON **F4**



PHOTOS BY MARCO SECCHI/GETTY IMAGES

A gondolier sails along the Grand Canal and another readies gondolas in Venice. A travel clan spanning a wide age, and interest, range can be ripe for mishaps — or amazing fun.

Three generations, a lot of canals and a cat sanctuary

When I tell a friend that my wife, Gail, and I will soon spend a week in Venice, he sighs appreciatively.

Then I mention we'll be bringing our school-age son. My pal groans knowingly.

I add that my mother-in-law will also be coming. To which he says: "Are you insane?"

To be fair, my son, Ewan, is game for most any trip. And I'm famously lucky to have a mother-in-law as charming and adventurous as Jane.

Still, no matter how lovely your travel companions are, family trips — especially those of the multi-generational variety — are fraught with potential problems. Throw in a foreign country, even one as tourist-friendly as Italy, and you up the

Compromise was the key to success on one family's trip to Venice

BY PAUL ABERCROMBIE
Special to The Washington Post

ante for aggravations.

Which is why we settle on an itinerary that promises something for us all.

Museums, churches, a ghost tour, a visit to a cat sanctuary, a highfalutin scavenger hunt using GPS, and, of course, fantastic food and wine. We decide to go during our son's spring break, in March — which itself is a compromise, in that it's a little chillier in Venice this time of year

than Gail and I would like it to be for Jane. But it's the only time we could all go. Instead of a Grand Tour, ours is to be a Grand Compromise.

Foremost, Gail and I vow to slow down. This means, among other things, starting our days later, so our preteen son isn't grouchy from lack of sleep and Jane will have time for morning ablutions that

VENICE CONTINUED ON **F5**



JAY GOODRICH

When nature helps us weather our storms

HIKING FROM F1

are where we find peace.

Coming to terms with loss

Cheryl Strayed, who wrote the best-selling memoir "Wild," is helping to popularize nature's healing abilities. The outdoors played a tough-love role in her story, which appears on movie screens Friday. Her solo misadventures on the 2,650-mile-long Pacific Crest Trail through California, Oregon and Washington helped her come to terms with her mother's death.

Although my situation is different — I have an outdoorsy husband, and we were much more prepared than Strayed was when she hiked much of the PCT — I felt a kinship with Strayed when I read "Wild." After my 62-year-old mother died unexpectedly in 2009, I began planning to hike the entire trail. Long drawn to the mountains and lakes of the Sierras, I had day-hiked sections of the PCT near Lake Tahoe. I dreamed of a five-month trek spent in a daily rhythm of hiking, eating and sleeping. Frightened by what my mother's early death might portend for my own mortality, I didn't want to wait any longer.

The plan was delayed in 2010 when my father-in-law was diagnosed with cancer and died a year later. Andrew and I dealt with our shock and grief by losing ourselves in the northern reaches of Rock Creek Park. Whether it was the Sierras or here in the domesticated woods of Washington, D.C., I understood the pull of the natural world when we need to heal. For me, the appeal was less escapism than rejuvenation, although at times it was some of both.

Prior to these deaths, I had headed into the wild whenever everyday stresses became overwhelming. When Andrew and I lived in Arizona, we camped among Sedona's red rocks and watched storms roll over the desert. When California was our home, we explored the craggy Northern California coastline, redwoods and Sierras. In Washington, we find sanctuary in the sylvan landscapes of the park, still, as well as Shenandoah National Park and West Virginia's Dolly Sods Wilderness.

These local areas had long been weekly — and often daily — pilgrimages, but after the deaths of our two parents, we began seeking out farther-flung, wilder places. We handled our grief by returning to the Sierras and hiking sections of the PCT near Lake Tahoe, climbing across granite ridges overlooking alpine lakes and scrambling over glacial moraines in the Desolation Wilderness. We pattered around on a ramshackle boat in the Galapagos and mountain biked in the Andes. We hiked Kauai's infamously challenging Kalalau Trail, teetering along the plunging cliffs of the Na Pali Coast.

Nature gave me few answers, but it reminded me that there is more to life than daily existence. It made me grateful to be alive and appreciative of the roots and rocks that kept me grounded.

Even when things didn't go our way, I was still happier inside a tent or on a trail. On an off-season camping trip in Iceland after Andrew's father died, gale-force winds and rain hammered our tent. We had made camp alongside Iceland's largest natural lake, Thingvallavatn, during a blustery storm that had kept us awake nearly all night. It had been raining for



ERIN WILLIAMS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



PATRICK BRANDENBURG

string so tightly around his face, only his eyes and nose were exposed.

"Are you cold?" I asked. It was barely above freezing.

"No, I'm actually fine," he answered, his voice muffled. "Are you?"

I was fine as well — in fact, I was utterly content, although I imagined that the winds might blow our little tent into the sky like a kite and drop us into the lake.

I wormed my way closer to him, and eventually we dozed off to the sound of tent fabric snapping in the wind. In the morning, puddles pooled under our sleeping pads and rain beaded on our sleeping bags, but we were still snug and warm, and grateful to have experienced the storm.

The W Circuit

By the time we left for Patagonia, grief was no longer a crushing presence, but contemporary D.C. life had left me feeling bedraggled. I ached to lace up my boots. Even when there wasn't a crisis, I had a growing need to get outside, and for longer periods of time.

We had planned the trip for six months before boarding our flight to Chile, poring over gear lists and replacing some of our threadbare 18-year-old backpacking equipment — "prepare to experience every season in one day!" warned the guidebooks. As training, we lugged our loaded packs along Rock Creek Park's Western Ridge Trail and during weekend trips in Shenandoah. Really, it was just another reason to get outside.

Andrew and I arrived in Torres del Paine National Park, the first leg of our trip, four days before our climb to Base de las Torres. I pressed my face against the bus window during the two-hour ride from the park's gateway town of Puerto Natales, mesmerized by the sprawling landscape and the surprising abundance of wildlife: guanacos that resembled petite llamas, massive Andean condors, incongruous flamingos and ostrichlike rheas with little chicks that ran frantically after their fathers. Once in the park, we took a choppy catamaran ride across Lake Pehóe to begin the W Circuit trek.

Our starting point was Paine Grande, one of the park's refuges that lie alongside the trail. Some hikers stay inside the lodge's comfortable rooms and others camp. However, nearly everyone warms up inside with showers and a limited menu. We cooked pasta over our tiny camp stove inside a backpacker hut, but we sipped hot tea inside the lodge before setting up our tent in the twilight.

Of the more than 100,000 people who visit the park each year, most are from outside Chile. The breeze carried fragments of laughter and different languages through our tent walls. This was nowhere near a solitary wilderness experience, and we were surrounded by dozens of other people. Yet I still felt at peace as we drifted to sleep.

From Paine Grande, we hiked about 40 miles over five days to reach the Torres. The beginning of the trail wandered alongside Grey Lake, bedazzled with blue icebergs broken off a glacier that is part of the 220-mile-long Southern Patagonia Ice Field. Winds ripped across the water, nearly blowing us off the path.

Each morning, we packed up our camp and cooked oatmeal with dried fruit with

HIKING CONTINUED ON F5



GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST

In Chile's Torres del Paine National Park, the vista of Lake Pehóe, top; hiking paths, center; sunset over a bridge in Ascencio Valley. Wild areas can promise escapism, rejuvenation — or a little bit of both.

five days.

We hunkered deep inside our sleeping bags as the tent's walls pressed on us and rain misted in under the fly. Our shelter was nearing collapse.

I looked over at Andrew. His brown eyes regarded me through a hole he had created by pulling his mummy bag's draw-

If you go

WHAT TO DO
Torres del Paine National Park
 Magallanes y la Antártica Chilena region
www.parquetorresdelpaine.cl/en/
 011-566-1-229-1931

Entrance fee is about \$30.

The park is about two hours by bus from Puerto Natales. Companies such as Buses Fernández (www.busesfernandez.com), Buses Pacheco (www.busespacheco.com) and Bus-Sur (www.bussur.com/opensite) offer daily service. Rides are approximately \$25 round trip and depart from the bus terminal near downtown Puerto Natales.

Erratic Rock Hostel

Baquesano 719, Puerto Natales
www.erraticrock.com
 011-566-1-414-317

It's not necessary to hire a guide for the hike, but this Puerto Natales hostel offers a popular free information session on how to do it safely at 3 p.m. daily.

WHERE TO STAY

Fantastico Sur (www.fantasticosur.com) and Vértice Patagonia (www.verticepatagonia.com) operate the park's network of lodges, campsites and cabins. Tents, sleeping bags and mats are available to rent for \$3.50-\$16 per night. Online reservations are recommended during the high season of January-February, even for campsites and equipment.

WHERE TO EAT

Basic, American-style meals are available at the refugios and cost about \$12 for breakfast, \$16-18 for lunch and \$20-25 for dinner. Those wishing to cook their own food in separate camper accommodations can stock up at one of Puerto Natales's groceries such as Unimarc (www.unimarc.cl).

— E.W.

HIKING FROM F4

other trekkers. Each night, we snuggled deep into our sleeping bags, insulated from the biting Patagonian chill.

In between, we dawdled along the trail, admiring aquamarine lakes, forests, wildflowers and the black-capped, hornlike Cuernos del Paine mountains that stand sentry over the path. We hiked the French Valley, flanked by glaciers hanging off mountain slopes and granite walls, and ate lunch under Cerro Paine Grande, the highest summit of the park's mountain range. We drank unfiltered water from glacial meltwater streams.

Rudimentary bridges often cross these streams, requiring hikers to cross single-file. Yet many streams have no bridges, and hikers must cross by hopping gracefully across rocks. I was not graceful and fell into a stream.

"Are you okay?" asked Andrew, who was standing on the other side.

"Yes," I said, "just a little cold." The water was frigid enough to take my breath away.

I couldn't get any wetter, so I slogged through the water and plopped down on the stream bank. I bailed water out of my boots, then spent a blissful hour catnapping as my clothes dried in the sun.

Hidden towers

For the last day's hike to the Torres, sheeting precipitation and relentless wind slowed our pace, the weather changing from sunshine to drizzle to rain to sleet to snow — not uncommon weather for Patagonia's fickle summertime. Starting in a river valley, we crossed stream after stream, climbing through a beech forest that thinned into shrubs before hitting a boulder-strewn glacial moraine field. Andrew led as we picked our way along the slippery rocks, and I clung to his solid 6-foot-4 frame for support against the gusts.

We were exhausted by the time we arrived at the Torres. I wrung water out of my gloves, shaking my hands to warm them. No other hikers had been either intrepid or foolishly optimistic enough to attempt the hike, let alone sit down and wait for the storm to pass and reveal the soaring peaks.

"Is this where they're supposed to be?" I asked, squinting through the fog and snow. We were on the shore of the chalky gray lake directly under the Torres. The towers' snowfield was barely visible, and we could not see the Torres looming above.

"I think so," he said. He took my soggy hand in his. The storm showed no sign of clearing. "Are you disappointed?"

We sat there together, shivering and holding hands, and I thought about the infinity of the landscape and the intimacy of our tent. The two of us were alive together in this vast and beautiful wilderness, whether or not the weather cooperated. A view would have been nice, but it was not why I had come here.

"No," I said. "Let's stay for a while."
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Our smooth ride in the Floating City



PHOTOS BY MARCO SECCHI/GETTY IMAGES

With La Salute church in the background, a gondolier sails Venice's Grand Canal, which can get so bustling it feels like an aquatic version of a Richard Scarry book.

VENICE FROM F1

include rolling up her hair. What's more, we — especially fleet-footed Ewan — pledge to literally slow our walking pace for Jane, recovering from an inflamed heel. When not gallantly helping his grandmother over the city's umpteen bridges, Ewan's free to race ahead. With no car traffic, Venice is about as safe as a city can be for kids.

We also make accommodations over, well, accommodations. Occupying most of the top floor of the palazzo Ca' Mocenigo is the three-bedroom penthouse overlooking the Grand Canal that we've rented. From the altana — rooftop deck — we have a panorama of the city. An old-fashioned elevator makes trips to and from our fifth-floor perch a cinch for Jane. And it's added fun for Ewan: After helping his grandmother safely into the elevator, he delights in racing up or down the stairs to see if he can beat the lift before giving her a hand back out.

What's more, the palazzo's past guests include Giordano Bruno, the 16th-century philosopher-turned-martyred heretic with whom my mother-in-law is benignly obsessed (she has a picture of him on her kitchen wall). That the palazzo is rumored to be haunted by Bruno's ghost is enough to make Ewan a fan, too. He gleefully tells us one morning that he'd heard Bruno's ghost talking to him (in Italian, natch).

Gail and I would be happy with humbler digs. But here we each have our own room. And at half the cost of a couple rooms in an upscale hotel.

Stirring later every day also means other concessions. We forgo a favorite ritual of morning cappuccinos and people-watching at a local cafe in favor of so-so espressos brewed in our apartment kitchen's stovetop pot. But Gail and I admit that not having to get dressed first is a plus, and the view has its own charms. We all marvel at the workaday traffic on the Grand Canal. Boats for firefighting, police, mail delivery, garbage, even an armored one for hauling money. We decide it's like an aquatic version of a

Richard Scarry children's book.

Restaurants, with something for each of our tastes, are blessedly compromise-free, save for distance to and from. Fortunately, the several near our apartment are all excellent. And each serves my beloved saor, a Venetian specialty of sweet onions, vinegar and fish (in this case, sardines) that I make something of a mission to try every chance I get. Ewan's usually irksome habit of toting electronics everywhere is now welcomed when he volunteers to be our official food photographer, snapping photos of everything we eat with his iPod. Soon Ewan is documenting most aspects of our trip, freeing the rest of us from photographic duties.

Even one of Ewan and Gail's shared hobbies turns out to offer something for Jane and me. Strolling through the cool maze of Venice's canalside walkways, Ewan finds more than a dozen "geocaches" — small containers hidden by fellow players of this worldwide treasure-hunting game. Using her iPhone's GPS, Gail shares clues about where these small boxes are hidden. From each, we extract and sign a tiny notebook or scroll, sometimes even swap a prize. Though game for geocaching, Jane especially likes the little history lessons about the city woven into the clues. I'm happy to have an excuse to wander the city and, with the pretext of wanting my companions to rest their legs, stop at cafes for another fizzy Venetian Spritz cocktail.

Unlike many tourists, I'm content never to set foot in a museum. Gail is only slightly less of a philistine than I am. High culture to Ewan is like kryptonite to Superman. For Jane, it's catnip.

Which is why a visit to the art galleries of Ca' Pesaro is leavened with gelato. And why, one drizzly night, we take a ghost tour that offers a survey of some of the city's more ghoulish history. A visit to the iconic Doge's Palace wins us all over when we spring for a behind-the-scenes tour of the palace's secret passages, hidden torture chambers and prison cells.

There's no debate about visiting Gattile di Malamocco, a sanctuary for more than

a hundred abandoned and abused cats on the nearby island of Lido. We all are unabashed cat lovers. Getting to Malamocco on our morning of choice, though, has its challenges. A vaporetto — or water bus — brings us to Lido, where we grab a bus that takes us to one end of the island, followed by a half-mile walk to the fishing village of Malamocco. Ewan again does his parents proud by helping his grandmother navigate muddy potholes. The sanctuary is a series of small buildings where cats of all ages and degrees of health live. A volunteer named Ricardo gives us a tour, introducing us to each cat by name, and explaining when and why it's been taken in. Gail and I share a smile as Ewan pets every cat that will let him and whispers soothing words. When he happens upon a particularly friendly cat, he insists we all offer a pet or chin-scratch. Only hunger for lunch tears us away.

A visit late that same afternoon to Caffè Florian on Piazza San Marco is a perfect compromise, in that it allows Jane to revel in the famed cafe's live music, Gail and me to enjoy the stage-play of Venice street life, and Ewan to run semi-wild in the city's only true piazza, leaping to chase a glowing spinner toy bought from a street vendor.

Gail and I had all but sworn off having any chance of going out alone, much less indulging in the city's night life. But when Jane and Ewan volunteer to stay home one evening, we're almost out the door before they're done talking.

Westroll — more briskly now that we're on our own — and linger over dinner at a restaurant a little farther afield. Late as it is when we leave the restaurant, we realize we don't have to cut short our date. So we pop into a cozy bar for ombrette, traditional Venetian glasses of wine. By the time we return home, it's late, though neither of us knows — or cares — what time it is. Who knew a multi-generational trip could be so easy — and romantic?

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GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST

If you go

WHERE TO STAY

Web sites offer a wide variety short-term apartment rentals, including cozy studios (about \$150 a day), one-bedroom lofts (\$210), multi-room apartments that sleep 10 (\$685) and luxury penthouses (topping \$1,000).

The Red House

011-39-041-309-1289
www.veniceredhouse.com

Views on Venice

011-39-041-241-1149
www.viewsonvenice.com

WHERE TO EAT**Caffè Florian**

Piazza San Marco
 011-39-041-520-5641
www.caffeflorian.com

Regarded as Italy's oldest cafe, Caffè Florian offers light Italian snacks, desserts and a dizzyingly extensive (and expensive) list of coffees, wines and cocktails. Splurge on the \$7.50-per-person charge to sit outside to hear the orchestra — and sip a pricey espresso (\$8) or Venetian Spritz (\$24) — and you've bought yourself a front-row seat for some of the city's best people-watching.

WHAT TO DO**Gattile di Malamocco**

Via Teodato Ipato
 Malamocco, Lido di Venezia
 011-39-041-526-5002
www.dingovenetia.it

In the town of Malamocco, on the nearby island of Lido, this cat sanctuary is home to more than 100 abused and abandoned felines. Free, but by appointment only.

Venice Ghost Walking Tour

www.viator.com

By reservation only; about \$32 per person. Tours start atop the Rialto Bridge.

Doge's Palace Secret Itineraries Tour

www.viator.com

By reservation only; about \$79 per person. Tours start at the main entrance to the Doge's Palace.

INFORMATION

en.turismovenetia.it



A gondolier waits for customers. Venice's maze of canalside walkways even hide geocaches, prizes in a scavenger hunt game.

— P.A.