

An icy wind was howling down the lake, whipping the surface into gigantic waves... It felt like we were in the middle of a raging ocean, with waves crashing over the sides of our boat – not much more than a dinghy with an outboard motor. Sam Bié, Jon Cardwell and myself (Mayan Smith-Gobat) huddled down into our jackets, pulled the hoods tighter around our faces and put faith in skills of Francesco, our faithful host and boat driver, to get us safely back to the shore. Our life jackets felt far from adequate.

With each bitter moment the reality sunk in deeper – we were in Patagonia Andes, notorious for unsettled weather and high winds. It was late spring / early summer, and our mission was to go deep water soloing/bouldering! Jon and I had brought lightweight wetsuits in preparation for icy water, but had not expected the weather to be so bad... Our minds were set on beautiful sunny days and the clear still water shown in all the photos of the Marble Cathedral.

Thankfully, we made it back to the shore, frozen to the core and a little perturbed, but alive. Sulkily Sam, Jon and I returned to our cabin, thawed ourselves with hot tea and mulled over our options. The quick jaunt down to Chile from Argentina had quickly turned into an epic journey simply to get to our destination – the trip to the tiny village of Puerto Río Tranquilo, felt like it was a journey to “the end of earth”. Now that we had finally arrived, it did not even look like we would get to climb at all... We only had three days left, the weather was terrible and we kept hearing conflicting stories on where and whether we were even allowed to climb. Having finally laid eyes on the beautiful features of the fabled Marble Caves, did not make things any better – they were amazing! Unfathomably smooth stunning limestone caverns, sculpted by thousands of years of glacial water and adorned with drooping teeth and pillars. Creating the perfect climbers’ playground, with countless beautiful lines to climb... if only it was a little warmer and there were no officials and undefined laws to navigate.



The Marble Cathedrals of Earth



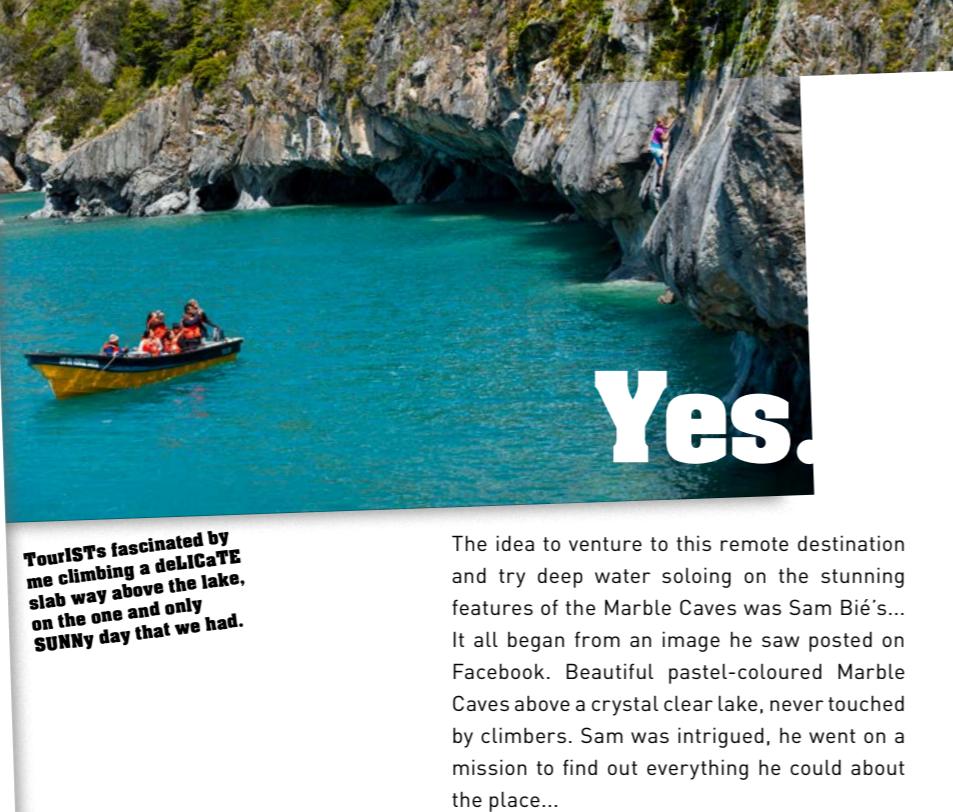
Waking to another day of rain and howling winds, the team's patience had all but run out. Sam and I were exasperated and ready to leave, but Jon managed to talk some sense into us. Reasoning that after spending so much time and energy getting to this remote corner of the world, we had to try every last thing to succeed in climbing on these incredible marble features. Grudgingly I agreed and we made arrangements with Francesco to take us out that afternoon. Hoping the weather would clear a little, but even if not, to climb in the caves along the coastline where we had eventually been told that we were allowed to climb, and which would not be sheltered from the rain. For once, luck was with us, the rain eased off and the sun even showed itself for a few minutes every now and then.

Action and some glimpses of sunshine lifted our spirits instantly... Excitedly, we cruised around in the boat, eyes peeled for the most striking climbable features. Once we had agreed on a line, we, in a jumbled mixture of Spanish and English, instructed Francesco where to take us. Skilfully he maneuvered the boat into our selected cave, then Jon and I took turns precariously climbing out of the boat onto the smooth and often razor-sharp marble features. We managed to climb for several hours on a variety of different features and found dozens of amazing lines to climb, yet did not even try to top anything out for fear of falling into the glacial melt, and facing the prospect of being stuck on a boat in the Baltic wind for several hours - hyperthermia would have been almost unavoidable!

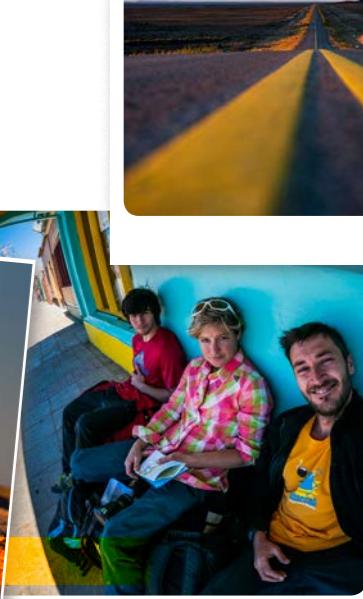
The idea to venture to this remote destination and try deep water soloing on the stunning features of the Marble Caves was Sam Bié's... It all began from an image he saw posted on Facebook. Beautiful pastel-coloured Marble Caves above a crystal clear lake, never touched by climbers. Sam was intrigued, he went on a mission to find out everything he could about the place...

These Marble Caves, Cathedral and Chapel are part of a huge area of extremely hard limestone (marble) band, located on the western side of Lake General Carrera (in Chile) or Lake Buenos Aires (in Argentina). This lake spans the border between Argentina and Chile, almost equally divided between the two countries - it is the largest lake in Chile and the second largest in South America. Because of the size of this lake and the Patagonian winds constantly blowing down its length, the icy water is often whipped up into sizable waves. In addition, Lake General Carrera is glacially fed, so there is an annual rise and fall of the water level of several metres. Where the marble drops directly into the lake, the combination of these two factors for over 6,000 years have eroded it into one of the world's most stunning formations - caves, columns, pillars and flying buttresses rising out of crystal clear glacial water.

Even though the distance to get to Puerto Río Tranquilo is not very far - a couple hundred kilometres from the Argentinean border, it is an extremely isolated and difficult place to travel to, getting there was much more time-intensive than any of us had anticipated. Immediately after crossing the Chilean border the roads turn to extremely small, winding dirt tracks - even the main road running down the length of Chile is no better, making any form of travel extremely slow. In addition, public transport is rare and even if scheduled, never seems to run or is very unreliable. A common way of getting around (for travellers) was to hitch, but this was no better - also very slow and unreliable, as there was not much traffic anywhere, even at the best of times!



Yes.



Eventually we arrived at the Los Antiguos and the Chilean border, only a couple hundred kilometres from our destination. Little did we know that this is where our problems would really begin. When hiring the car we heard that the laws had just changed and that it was no longer possible to take a hire car across into Chile. But, as we had no other options (public transport in this part of the world seemed to be nonexistent) we had decided to take the risk and try anyway. So with our fingers crossed and hearts beating fast we apprehensively approached the border crossing. Everything seemed to be going fine for a while, Sam received a bunch of stamps and feeling confident moved onto the next counter, while they began processing Jon and me. Only then did I realise what was happening - Sam had succeeded in leaving Argentina with the car, but now he had to enter Chile! Unfortunately, moments later we received the bad news - there was no way we could take the car. So, after a couple of hours, a bunch of paperwork and a lot of stamps we were back in Argentina, utterly frustrated and with no clue what to do...





try hitch hiking

Travelling IN style...
Our finAl ride, in
the cAb of OsCAR's
giant truck.

We soon discovered that even though only 8km from Chile Chico (the next town just across the border) no one had any information about anything on the other side of the border. Our only option was to leave the car, take a taxi across to Chile Chico, then work out the next stage of our journey once in Chile. After a crammed taxi ride with a ridiculous amount of luggage, a lot more paperwork and stamps, we finally made it into Chile. Our initial excitement soon dissolved as we found ourselves stranded, sitting in front of a corner store waiting for a bus which never arrived – the owner of the store eventually informed us that it was not coming today, the next one would be there (maybe) in three days. Having run out of options, we found a hotel to stay in, drank wine and, once again, tried to work out how to proceed. The hotel owners eventually arranged a friend of theirs to drive us the next morning. This sounded like it would work, but the next morning the arranged time came and went, yet no one arrived. We waited till noon, and then 2 pm... Still nothing and my patience

was in shreds! I needed action and only two options remained: #1 – bail back to Argentina where our car was waiting and try for a different objective. Or #2 – try hitchhiking. Eventually we all agreed that, even though this was unlikely, it was at least worth a try. So, the three of us ended up sitting on a corner with our thumbs out. However, the faint shimmer of hope we had on arriving quickly dissipated – there was barely any traffic leaving town, the afternoon was almost done and the three of us with a huge amount of luggage, would have been lucky to get a ride at the best of times.

Almost an hour passed and we were about to give up on this crazy mission, when a truck pulled over. Hastily throwing our gear in the trunk, we piled in and were pleasantly surprised that one of the guys was actually from England. He was working at a self-sufficient farm near a tiny village an hour around the lake. An hour later, this is where we ended up – again, sitting on the side of the road, yet this time, truly in the middle of nowhere. There happened to be a hitchhiker opposite us, who

proceeded to tell us that he had been sitting there all day and how epic hitching was in this remote place. To our surprise, luck seemed to be with us for once and another truck stopped for us after a relatively short time. After two more rides we ended up at the last intersection, with only 40km to our destination. It was getting dark, but we were beyond caring – we were as good as there and here we even had a small bus shelter (somewhere to sleep) and a boulder to play on!

We instantly gave up on hitching and played on the boulder... However, luck was still on our side and we did not have to spend the night here. In the last faint glimmer of light we got the most unlikely ride of all – a truck transporting a digger happened to stop at the intersection to talk to a friend. Without hesitation, Oscar, the driver, welcomed us on board and for the next several hours we travelled at about 10km per hour. I have never been so happy to drive at this pace – after far too many days of travel, we finally knew that we would make it to Puerto Río Tranquilo!

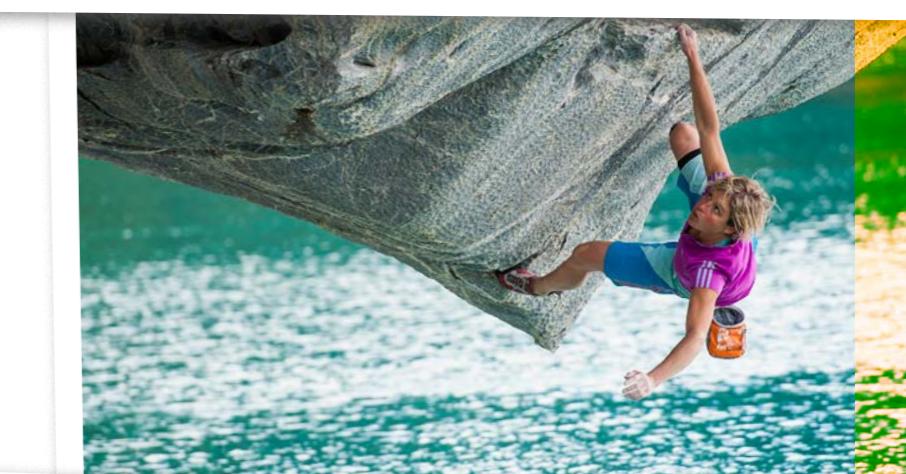
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On arriving, we let loose days of frustration and partied until the early hours of morning... Celebrating being there and Oscar's birthday, all our worries forgotten! Yet, they all returned in a hurry when we woke to the disappointment of battling rain and officials for the next few days. Finally, on our last day there, the sun showed itself. Our faithful driver Francesco dropped us on the shore and I rappelled into one of the lines which had struck me on our first trip in the driving rain. It turned out to be a beautiful climb – a fun roof section with big holds, which then turned into a delicate and airy slab. It felt amazing simply to be climbing again, after the epic journey to what felt like the "end of the world".

Moving around the coastline, Jon prepared to climb a stunning prow we had also found the previous day. Out of the boat we had played on this line and Jon had succeeded to decipher an awesome three-dimensional sequence of moves, involving a toe hook above his head, to navigate past a blank section on the horizontal roof. However, unfortunately just before Jon was able to attempt to climb this prow, a very official looking boat rounded the corner and headed straight for us. As it drew closer our fears grew, they carried guns, had a camera pointed at us and once close enough proceeded to order us (in Spanish) to come down to the shore. In my imagination I saw us being handcuffed and landing in a Chilean prison, but also could not imagine what we had done wrong... Fortunately, the three officials were actually very friendly and in our broken Spanish we made out that they believed we were not allowed to climb there after all and they told us not to do it again.

This was the end of our last day anyway, so after they departed, we packed our bags and, with some trepidation, began our long journey back to Argentina. However, we were still determined to get to the bottom of what was actually allowed. So, once we made it back to Chile Chico, Sam, Jon and I went into the District Council. With the help of a local, who had become a friend of ours, we managed to explain the situation. The end result: it was simply private property and all we would have needed to do was get permission from the local landowner – very good to know, yet also a little frustrating that we did not know this earlier...

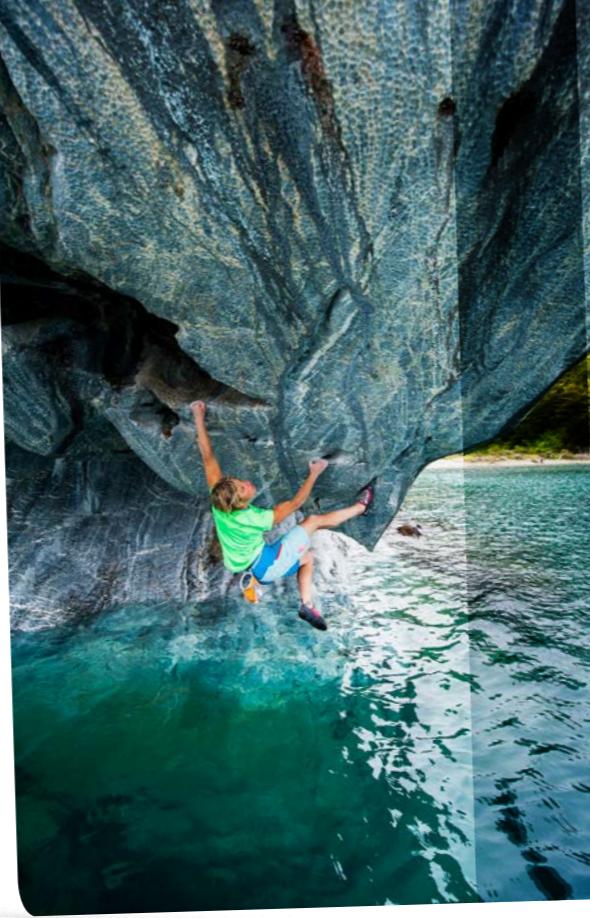


I'm plAyInG on the
stunNing features in
the Marble CavEs.



This trip

was a new experience for the entire team, even in our wildest dreams none of us imagined that it would end up like this. However, even though it was not exactly what we wanted, the trip was an amazing experience and a total success – despite all the odds being stacked against us, we made it to the destination, Puerto Río Tranquilo, and discovered the phenomenal beauty of the Marble Cathedral and Caves. Jon and I braved the harsh Patagonian weather and, as far as we know, were the first people to climb in these fantastic Marble Caves. Exploring these unique features on these untouched and incredible formations, with absolutely no information and in one of the most remote locations ever, was totally worth all the frustration.



Jon and I trying to figure out the sequence on this perfect prow - dubbed "The Rhino"



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