

how great trips are made

Blazing a Trail

During a research and development trip with travel company Black Tomato, a new itinerary in remote Patagonia National Park comes together

TACK TACK TACK *tack tack!* I turn to my guide, Claudio, and ask if that drilling is coming from a jackhammer. He chuckles and tells our party of three that there's a tiny endemic woodpecker in a tree nearby. I'm not such a city slicker that I don't know a bird from a power tool, but the percussive pecking is just so aggressive. Apparently, when you're somewhere truly remote and all vestiges of human existence disappear, nature can be *loud*.

We're on an eight-mile hike around Lago Chico in southern Chile's Chacabuco Valley. It's part of Patagonia National Park, one of the country's newest national parks, part of a huge tract of land that American conservationists and rewilding philanthropists Kris and Doug Tompkins donated to the Chilean government to turn into protected parkland sustained by ecotourism. I've come to Chile with Tom Marchant, cofounder of the travel company Black Tomato, and five

members of his team on a research and development trip to see if this sweep of Patagonia—home to vast grasslands, snowcapped peaks, and a resurgent puma population—can be turned into a Black Tomato itinerary.

During a 13-mile hike past herds of grazing guanacos the next day, Marchant explains the process to me. "The research phase is crucial, especially if you're scouting a place that is still off-piste for most travelers," he says as we scan the horizon for puma. "A place may seem perfect from 3,000 miles away, but you have to go and experience it with an eye to your client. Maybe the infrastructure isn't there yet or it's absolutely brutal to get from point A to point B."

But Marchant felt confident that this trip would work for Black Tomato. For starters, his clients would be staying with Explora, a hospitality company that has three decades of experience in South America and has set the benchmark for adventure lodges and guiding on the continent. The fact that the park is shiny-new was also a hook. "There aren't tons of tour operators here yet—it's a blank canvas, and that's appealing," Marchant explains. While Explora, the only proper lodge in the park, already offers excellent programming, Black Tomato is looking for ways to layer in extras. "This could mean," he notes, gesturing toward a pretty valley, "that you get to

» dossier

BLACK TOMATO

ESTABLISHED IN:

2005 by friends Tom Marchant, James Merrett, and Matt Smith

AREAS OF OPERATION:

All seven continents

INSPIRATION:

The travel writing of Bruce Chatwin

CRAZIEST TRIP PLANNED:

A wedding proposal in an ice cave in remote Iceland

PHOTOGRAPHS: EXPLORA PATAGONIA NATIONAL PARK, BLACK TOMATO

From far left: Peaks meet grassland in Patagonia National Park; getting the shot in the Atacama



this point in the hike and you look down and there's a tent set up where you'll stay the night and have an amazing stargazing experience." With a laugh he adds, "I'm always looking for ways to surprise and delight."

This trip is also motivated by the less lofty but very important need to sell the itinerary to clients back home. Black Tomato's travel experts are along so that they can experience everything and authentically speak about the itinerary and understand how to tweak it for specific travelers. They're also there to give feedback on what is and isn't working—like the need for a few shorter hikes and more vegetarian options at meals.

Making original content is also often a part of Black Tomato's research trips, and the team's videographer is filming our daily activities. "I want to show clients what a place looks like and get them excited before they've boarded the plane," Marchant tells me. And there's no shortage of

content fodder. One morning we kayak down the Cochrane River. On another, we try to spot Patagonia's big five. We tick off puma, condor, guanaco, and the ostrich-like rhea; only the guemal, or South Andean deer, remains elusive.

After four days I say goodbye to the team, who is heading to the Atacama for part two of their Chilean research trip. On my flight home, I scroll through my photos on my phone, absorbing the images and trying to commit the accompanying feelings to memory. I keep coming back to the ones of that hike around Lago Chico that began with the aggressively loud woodpecker. Toward the very end, we'd headed up one last hill and arrived at a lookout point with a view of the lake framed by snowy peaks. There had been lunch waiting—hot soup and cold beers. Simple and perfect. I was surprised and yes, delighted by this unexpected picnic. We ate in easy silence, just taking it all in. REBECCA MISNER

SPECIALISTS CAN



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Kyrgyzstan

Making sure there is real cultural immersion when pulling together trips to far-flung destinations is key for Scott Abbott of **Wilderness Travel**, who plans yurt-to-yurt treks in the vast steppes of Central Asia. *From \$6,995, wildernesstravel.com*

Norway

Going to the middle of nowhere doesn't have to mean forgoing modern comforts. Amy Welfare of **AW Private Travel** can take clients to the Arctic Circle, where a local chef turns foraged ingredients into a Nordic feast under the midnight sun. *Price upon request, awprivatetravel.com*

Antarctica

As intrepid travelers increasingly seek out the truly remote, Leah Green of **Ubuntu Travel** is elevating the journey to reach the journey by beginning with a safari in Botswana or South Africa, followed by a leisurely pit stop in Cape Town, before flying to the southernmost continent. *Price upon request, ubuntutravelgroup.com*