

The Bergen Newsletter: The Lakeside Dental Edition

Patagonia Newsletter: 2016

The Bergen family has a history of travel. My grandmother loved telling the story about her father, my great-grandfather, Peter Klassen. In the early years of the last century he took his numerous kids, but not his wife, for a five-day trek through Crimea to the shores of the Black Sea and back. They slept under the open sky. A decade or so later there was further travel, this time trans-Atlantic, when both my parents' families left Russia following an internal governance squabble. That squabble is now known as the Russian Revolution.

My mother's favourite uncle, David Klassen, went to see Europe in the early days following the Second World War. What he encountered was so overwhelmingly traumatic and unsettling that it changed him from a carefree, adventurous guy to somebody who moved to a suburb of Vancouver and stayed there for the rest of his life, selling appliances until he retired.

My two brothers and I all had what is now known as a "gap-year". We took a year off following high school, worked for half of that year to earn money and hit the road living off our saving. I got as far as the middle of Iran, where I celebrated my 19th birthday. Karl and John both headed south, travelling through South America following the Andes, ending up at the bottom of Patagonia before slowly travelling home through the flatter lands to the east of the mountains.

Our collective children have similar inclinations and between them have covered much of the globe before they turned 25. The most accomplished traveller of all of these is brother John's son Gregory. He blended intermittent university education with tree planting in BC (for funding) with travel to pretty much everywhere. At some point in 2014 Gregory's mother Sharon developed a need to go off on an interesting road trip that included some serious hiking. She consulted with Gregory, saying "You've been pretty much everywhere, what do you recommend?" Without hesitation he answered: "Patagonia". More specifically, for driving he recommended a long gravel road winding through the southern Andes in Chile: the Carretara Austral. For hiking he recommended the trails in Torres del Paine National Park situated just above the Straights of Magellan at the bottom of Chile.

Sharon talked to John, John talked to Gregory, and once the magnitude of this journey sank in, John talked to the rest of us: the guys that he usually goes skiing with. As he saw it, one vehicle with John and Sharon heading off on their own down into the wilds of the bottom of South America, in addition to being a serious adventure, was more than a little problematic; two vehicles in

tandem with John and Sharon and a support team of 4 other guys¹ made a lot more sense. We were recruited. So last winter there was no ski trip. Instead we spent three weeks, starting in late February (the end of the southern summer) driving down the length of Patagonia. When we finished driving south Antarctica was 1,400km away.

The Beginning

We flew from Toronto into Santiago Chile and then down to Puerto Montt. There we took possession of our two Suzuki Grand Vitaras: these sound impressive but are in fact compact 4X4's. One was practically new, the other less so. It had 5 different brands of tires, one on each wheel and one on the spare. The four tires that we would be driving on had met their best before date a while back. The spare was the only one that wasn't seriously worn but it was restricted to use under 80 km per hour. Months before we had booked these two vehicles, but only with great difficulty. There was no other show in town, so we took what we got. There was no turning back. We drove into downtown Puerto Montt, found our hotel and wandered about to get a sense of the place and the people. It had a nicely run down feel to it. We set off early the next morning.

Some things we didn't know about Patagonia but do now.

Carretara Austral: The Carretara Austral follows the Andes through the bottom of Chile (translated it means "the Road South"). It runs about 1,240 kilometres from Puerto Montt to Villa O'Higgins through sparsely populated rural Patagonia. Aside from the inhabitants of one city, only 55,000 people occupy the entire bottom third of Chile. The Carretara Austral was started by Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1976 to provide access to this remote part of his country. Before



The open road: a scene from the Carretara Austral

¹ The four guys: cousin Peter Dick, a retired Ontario Hydro electrical engineer; more distant cousin David Mathies, a physician from Huntsville; and Max Frugier, Port Guy, retired teacher and our token non-skier. Max, while teaching, took two separate one year leaves and spent 14 months rounding the world with his wife and daughter: a seasoned traveller and good to have along. And finally, your author.



this much of Chilean Patagonia could be reached by road only by going through Argentina. This presented a big problem. Chile and Argentina had a long history of wars and skirmishes to determine their very long shared border. Pinochet wanted road access to the bottom of his country that didn't rely on Argentina, Chile's primary adversary. The Carretera Austral, started in 1976, was finally completed 24 years later, in late 2000. The road winds down through the fiords, mountains and pristine wilderness of the southern Andes.

The road was initially all gravel, although a few short sections are now paved. It is a go-to site for adventure seeking kids from around the world. To say that you bicycled the Carretera Austral gives you world-class bragging rights. At 1,240 kilometres you might think that two days of focused driving would take you from one end to the other. You would be wrong. This road travels

between some of the most spectacular mountains in the world. Some sections of the route are simply too steep for roads and so three ferries (one taking about five hours) are part of your journey. The road is a little more than a lane wide in many places. If it hasn't rained, a plume of dust trails every car by about a kilometre. However, once you start travelling, there aren't many cars at all. Sometimes we would drive for a half an hour before passing a car going the other way. This is on the main highway in the bottom third of Chile. And other times you go into a corner and find a huge transport loaded with logs charging at you with amazing speed—it's all interesting.



When the road can't get through the mountains, a ferry gets you there.

The road keeps going. It is relentless. Landscapes change from lush valleys to mountain vistas. And there are no people. Actually that's not true. There are people, just very, very few. You feel like you are driving through an endless national park with a small homestead thrown in every hour or so for human interest. And the road is formidable: gravel, potholes and dust, a winning combination. The best single day of driving that I have ever had was about 12 hours of the worst road and the most spectacular scenery that I have encountered. It seemed endless.

Where to stay: If you don't book in advance, bring a tent. Or plan to sleep in your car. December to February is Patagonia's summer and its high season, and although there aren't many of you travelling around, there are even fewer accommodations. Puyhuappi, a good example, is a three-hour drive from the last substantial town. It is a community of 200. It was first settled in 1935 by four young men from Germany. A boat brought them to the shore of this bay. They set about cutting back the dense forest/jungle that extended right to the water's edge in order to build a few dwellings. Slowly they cleared the land and with time an isolated village emerged. Casa Ludwig, run by the daughter of one of these four men, is a wonderfully Germanic lodge, one of three guest houses. Since John and Sharon booked months before, we had a place to stay. And a place to buy fuel. The next village was hours down the road.

Flat tires: Our fifth and final day in Chile was a long, long trek - as noted earlier, 12 hours of driving down untamed roads through fabulous vistas. There were two towns of any consequence (e.g.: they had a gas station) on the entire route. We passed the first one early on and hit the second one around 2:00 in the afternoon. It was on the edge of a glacial lake and we decided to stop for lunch. We drove out onto the beach and picnicked on the water's edge. We had just finished eating when we noticed that the right rear tire seemed to be losing air. We watched and waited. Ten minutes later it was even lower. We drove back to the only gas station: they didn't fix flats. However they directed us to a dirt road to the edge of town where there was a guy whose specialty was tire repair.



At the tire repair place.

We met him and he indicated (he spoke no English and we spoke limited Spanish) that we should remove the wheel. In a soapy water bath we saw where the air was coming out. He removed the tire from the rim. He pointed out that the tire had been patched previously in two places and was developing a serious bulge on one of the sidewalls. He suggested that this tire was a truly bad bet. We asked if our temporary, limited to 80km/h, spare was a better bet. He said yes and it was installed. Our spare actually stood up quite well, probably because we rarely exceeded 140 km/h (There are actually great paved roads in Argentina.)

So why did our tire actually fail in one of the two places where, in 12 hours of driving, it could actually be fixed? David Mathies has always described himself as lucky, and I've always thought the same about myself. Our explanation is that the cumulative force of our collective fortunes fused together which kept us from having a much more interesting adventure anywhere else on that long and desolate road. It's our theory, and we're sticking with it.

The Patagonian Ice Field: Patagonia holds the third largest ice field in the world (12,000 square kilometres). Who knew? The ice from this field flows out of the Andes forming dozens of glaciers that melt to form large, brilliantly blue lakes. We hiked off to see a number of these, our favourite being the Perito Moreno glacier in Los Glaciatos National Park, near El Calafate, Argentina. It was the height of Niagara Falls and stretched two and a half kilometres. As we watched, great sections broke off and floated away into the beginning of Lake Argentino, the largest lake in Argentina.

Borders: Along the way we crossed from Chile to Argentina and then back. In all we made four border crossings. These days, border crossings, outside of both sides requiring a pile of forms to be filled in correctly, are uneventful. Tensions between the two countries seem to be at an all time low.

The Patagonian Steppe: Also known as the Patagonian Desert, the steppe transitions from the Pampas, further north. Occupying 670,000 square kilometres, it is one of the largest deserts in the world. The Andes, always present on the horizon, and often shrouded in clouds, have wrung most of the moisture from the air driven over them by the prevailing westerly winds.

After winding down the ever-changing vistas of our awful, yet magnificent Chilean roads, the steppe was compelling in very different ways. First, it is a wide-open space with “big sky”. Vistas are crystal clear all the way to the horizon. Second, the roads are paved, smooth and travel in straight lines, with almost nobody on them. Suddenly, ignoring the warnings on our dodgy spare tire, we were able to make great time driving at some speed through a landscape that changed very slowly.

Asado: Asado is essentially South American barbecue, with meat cooked over an open fire. What we saw most commonly were whole lamb carcasses stretched on a frame and slowly cooked by the radiant heat from a nearby wood fire. Thereafter the cooked meat is sectioned and served: my inner carnivore found this deeply satisfying and my inner vegan disowned me.

Hiking: John and Sharon love hiking and since they were the organizers, hiking was a key component of our trip. Our first hike was along a muddy trail and then up a muddy hillside through thick forest. It was hot and muggy. I was less than impressed. Things got better. Just south of Aysen, Chile, we hiked two hours up a steep mountain trail to get close to the “Hanging Glacier” (Ventisquero Colgante) in Queulat National Park. Actually pretty spectacular. And In Argentina we took a boat to the Viedma glacier, and then as part of a larger group, attached crampons (steel spikes that dig into ice) onto our boots and hiked out onto the glaciers surface. Our guides took great care that we didn’t drop down the crevices that fell away from every walkable surface. But the highlight, and much of the reason for our trip was a four-day hike through Torres Del Paine National park in Chile.

Torres del Paine: Widely considered one of the world’s great hiking destinations, Torres del Paine combines “soaring mountains, electric-blue icebergs that cleave from glaciers and golden pampas (lowlands)...The three granite towers from which the park takes its name...are some of its most iconic sites.”

Hiking there is not for the faint of heart, but it’s also quite doable. There are no roads in here at all: you park your car, take a bus and then a boat and are let off at the far end of the trail. After

four days of hiking you get back to the beginning and your car. You sleep in hostels with six to eight bunks per room (or tents if younger, more adventurous, more frugal). Rain is normal: Gore-Tex gear is your friend. So were our stout waterproof boots and hiking poles. The wind can be ferocious, with gusts of up to 200km/h being reported. The trails wind up and down between the bases of the surrounding mountains.



Our iconic view of Torres del Paine

Stunning vistas are the norm.

Our second day involved pouring rain and really wild wind. We were feeling fairly chuffed with ourselves and our determination until a woman trekked by going the other way with a very recently born baby harnessed to her front. The father followed carrying the big pack and the tent. The baby was letting everybody know that it wasn't impressed with any of this. Now that family was made of stern stuff; we were just OK.

The third day was unusually sunny and calm. We had hiked for about eight hours with a lot of up and down and reached our last hostel in late afternoon pretty much exhausted. After a beer we heard that a new weather system was rolling in and that the highlight of our hike, the iconic three towers known as the Torres del Paine would be covered in cloud the next morning. It was now or never. Getting there involved an hour and a half scrambling up a mountainside and then an hour and a half getting back down. We went. It was difficult, but worth the effort. For me the best part was the next morning: After 11 hours of strenuous hiking, I woke up feeling fresh and ready to go. Not bad for a body in the middle of its seventh decade - it was still working pretty well.

The Straights of Magellan: I first encountered them in public school reading "Pirates and Pathfinders", our very Eurocentric history text. The ideas and the name have stayed with me. We returned from our Torres hike to Puerto Natales. From here it was back to Argentina and then north for several days and home. We did, however, after some discussion, decide to detour further south to the shores of the Straights of Magellan. You drive along a highway called the Ruta del Fin del Mundo, roughly translating to "The Highway of the End of the World". We were as far south as we were going to get.

Gas Stations and the Wind on the

Patagonian Steppe: This is a very lightly populated area - it's a desert. There are gas stations and they are about 200 km apart. They are marked on the road maps as places of some interest. After our Strait of Magellan detour we crossed back up into Argentina. After a couple of hours we passed a town that had a gas station. We were down to a bit over half a tank. The next station was 200 km north. We were running late



Did I mention the wind?

and decided to keep on going. We got to the next gas station, and it was there, as predicted. The problem was that it was closed, and as close as we could tell, had been closed for the last 3 years. Not good. The next station was about 200 km north. Our gas gauge was just over empty. We kept going. A fierce Patagonian wind was blowing from behind giving our fuel economy a real boost and we got to within 20 km of the next town before our first car ran out of fuel. Max, our resident Spanish speaker hopped into the car that was still running. They were on fumes but the next town our best shot.

Cousin Peter and I were sitting in the car on the level gravel shoulder waiting for our rescue. The fierce Patagonian wind blowing from behind was shaking the car from side to side. I asked Peter what he thought would happen if I put the car in neutral and took off the emergency brake. He thought that we should try it. We did. We started to move forward. We opened both doors, holding on tightly, and drove a half a kilometre down the road, on the level gravel shoulder. The shoulder narrowed. We decided to stop. Wind powered cars: who knew?

The rescue crew came two hours later with fuel. It was Sunday and things were closed but we eventually got it all sorted out and continued north. We arrived at our hotel in Comodoro Rivedavia at three the next morning. A short, meaningful sleep followed.

And Volcanoes: If you have an interest in volcanoes, let me recommend Patagonia. One objective on our agenda was an all day hike to the top of Villarica Volcano. It was described as 2,800 metres high, snow capped and at the top you could look down into the crater and see smoke and lava. We flew into Chile on February 23. A week later we heard that Villarica had erupted causing the evacuation of 3,400 nearby residents. Our plans changed. Chaiten, the second town we stayed in

once on the road was nearly abandoned following an eruption in 2008. The town was covered by a metre and a half of ash when a nearby volcano erupted. At first it looked hopeless, but with time things were cleaned up, buildings restored and it is again a functional place.

Along the way we passed a number of areas where we drove by miles of deep volcanic ash and skeletons of trees killed decades before.

Our final experience was with Puerto Montt, the city that we flew into and out of. A week after our departure the volcano framed by the main street blew up making headlines around the world, and closing the airport until the volcano subsided. Timing matters.

Final notes: After Comodoro, we continued on to Bariloche. It's on a lake nestled in the Argentinian side of the Andes and is described as Argentina's Banff. We checked into a very nice hotel for three days of just hanging out. There was a pool and the rooms had bathrobes. From there we continued into Chile and finally back to Puerto Montt for our return flights.

We had covered about 5,600 kilometres. Our spare tire, had no tread left, but didn't blow. Patagonia has had a lot of European (and especially German) settlement for the past hundred years. Even so, a large percentage of the population is indigenous. Much of the countryside that we travelled through felt curiously a lot like an earlier, simpler Canada. Unlike reports from friends who have travelled closer to the South American equator, there was no sense that crime, major or minor, would be a problem.

We're talking about a return visit in five years. By then the Carretara Austral should be mostly paved and this remarkably beautiful area will be much more accessible, with more people, facilities and accommodations, but we aren't clear that this will make things better than they are right now.

Our final feeling, as the trip was ending, was that we had experienced something much larger than we had set out to accomplish. We thought that this would be an interesting road trip.

It ended up being a lot more than that. It's rare in life to get to do something that starts to approach being epic, and for us this was one of those times.



The highway at the end of the world!

Notes from Lakeside Dental

Lakeside Dental: A Short History

The idea of Lakeside Dental first came to life in the early 1990's when the city announced that it would change its regulations and allow home offices.

Stone Road Dental, our clinic in Virgil had been running for about 10 years at that point. The office had five chairs and 12 staff. In spite of the large number of people coming to us for care, our goal was to look after each person as an individual. We like to think that we were largely successful in that quest.

Running an office with five chairs and 12 staff requires a lot of choreography, getting everyone to work well and effectively together, and as the owner of the clinic I was the chief choreographer. In addition to providing dental care, I was charged with keeping everything running effectively and smoothly. This wasn't always easy: an excellent staff still has turnover and maternity leaves and the like. Consequently the chief choreographer was kept busier than he really wanted to be. So the idea of a one chair dental office, requiring minimal staff, in my home, looking out over our backyard and Lake Ontario seemed like a better and better idea.

Sixteen years later, in 2008, we opened Lakeside Dental and after the usual opening inefficiencies and learning curve issues we began to realize that for us, and for our patients, this was turning out to be an excellent decision. It's easy to focus fully on one patient when the office is designed to only care for one patient at a time.

A one-chair office creates some inefficiencies, but it also allows a contemplative, peaceful world, especially compared to the efficient but demanding world of our multi-chair practice in Virgil. As I see it, I am scheduled three days a week. Nice people come to see us with interesting problems and we get to solve them. This is a great existence.

When I am asked how long I plan to stay in business, the answer is: As long as is reasonably possible. I, and we here at Lakeside Dental, are having a great time, and we don't want it to end anytime soon. It won't be forever, but it could be for quite a while. Mom just turned 92, is sharp as a tack and she runs two miles a day. I think that I got some of those genes, so I'm quietly optimistic about things not changing for some time to come.

Thank You for all your referrals: People ask if we are still taking new patients. We are! Our experience is that once a new patient's dental situation is put in good order, and they are shown what to do to maintain excellent dental health, they really don't need us very much or very often. This is as it should be. Consequently, we continue to have room in at Lakeside Dental to see new people coming to us for care. And so we thank you for the steady stream of referrals of your friends and family.

Hygiene Care at Lakeside Dental

As a one-chair office offering hygiene services two days a week, the hygiene schedule is beginning to get full. As a result we have entered into relationships with a number of hygienists running independent hygiene offices. These offices focus on providing hygiene services, but not the rest of dental care.

This is a cooperative model that has been working very well for us, for our patients and for the hygienists involved. We remain the dental office of record, but hygiene care is provided in other, often more convenient, clinics with more flexible scheduling than our situation allows.

In the case of Amie Banting, who has her practice in Virgil, it results in significantly less travel time for our Virgil/Niagara-on-the-Lake patients. Her office is open six days a week and some evenings. Amie, and our office, work closely together and our records, including x-rays and treatment plans, are shared digitally. Essentially we both become extensions of each other's offices. We share responsibility for the larger picture with our dental team focusing on keeping teeth in a good state of repair, and Amie providing hygiene care, keeping gums and supporting bone healthy.

We have similar relationships with several other self-directed hygienists in St. Catharines and beyond. Generally their schedules are much more relaxed than ours. This works well for folks who have scheduling concerns, often the result of school or work.

We in fact have patients in Kitchener, Kincardine and Toronto who want to continue to see us for their dental care, but are getting their hygiene services from independent hygiene offices much closer to home.

Patients who are having their hygiene care in other locations are always welcome to see us for this service, but so far, everyone seems very happy this arrangement. We have had essentially no one ask to return, which tells us that all of this is going very well.

Emergencies

One of the good things about a one chair dental practice in your home is that emergencies are much easier to deal with. As a dentist on a day off, you put on a pair of moccasins, head upstairs and turn on the power. This is much easier than getting into your car and driving to your office some distance off.

So, if you develop an unexpected tooth issue, and it is outside of normal business hours, give me a call on my home phone. If it's at all serious, I'm happy to see you right away. Our home number is 905-934-8598. If I'm away, call the office number and you will be directed to a dentist who is on call providing emergency service.

In Conclusion

As always, we here at Lakeside Dental wish all of you the very best.