

## The Trail, The Road and the Space Between

### *The Trail*

THE STORY OF COCHAMÓ can start anywhere. But since the trail is where all climbers now begin their adventures, that is where this story will begin. The path was originally cut by the Mapuche, “People of the Land,” some of the first known human inhabitants of Northern Patagonia. For more than 2,000 years, they lived sustainably in these forests, leaving little signs of their civilization—beyond the paintings of hands and animals on cave walls—along the narrow trails they traveled. They gave Cochamó its name, which translates into English as *the place where waters meet or divide*. Today, Cochamó can mean many things. There is Cochamó the county, Cochamó the town, Cochamó the river, and Cochamó the tract of land that encompasses a vast array of granite cirques, forested valleys and clear tributaries. Within this latter designation is La Junta, the site of Refugio Cochamó, and the base camp for all climbing trips to the area. La Junta, Spanish for “the joint” or “the union,” probably refers to the confluence of two rivers. But La Junta is also a confluence of peaks and valleys; of rainforest and glacier-carved amphitheaters; and in many ways, of past and present.

From the mid-1500s to the 1800s, the Mapuche fought to keep the Spanish out of the territory that became known as Araucanía, of which Cochamó is a part. Eventually, the Mapuche were defeated in battle, and new settlers began taking possession of their land. Over time, Chilean and Argentinean gauchos transformed the modest path across the Cordillera Andino into a cattle trail leading from the Argentinean steppe to Chile’s southern port, Puerto Montt, where they could send cattle up the coast to be sold in the growing city centers. Today, a dirt road leads up to Paso Leon—a remote pass upon the long spine of the Andes, which stands like a border between two worlds. From here, following the setting sun,

the trail drops abruptly into a network of rifts and ridges, punctuated by lakes and alpine summits. Thick stands of bamboo-like *caña colihue* and *quila* rise amid a relentless sprawl of mosses, lichens and bromeliads that crawl up tightly packed trees. The Alerce grows tall and ponderous; some of these conifers predate the Spanish empire by thousands of years.

After more than a century of use, the trail is so eroded that the mud cliffs on either side can rise as high as twenty feet. The western half of the trail, which wanders through Chile’s Valdivian rainforest, is in many places composed of one-to-two-foot-deep trenches

ged banks, beaches of sun-bleached sand and round stones gleam. The jungle sprawls relentlessly up sheer walls of rock, covering them like a green woolen blanket. While the mountains and hills plummet more and more dramatically, outcroppings and escarpments of white granite begin to stand out against the endless canopy. Pale giants emerge, like ghosts of mountains, splitting and uniting the forest and the sky.

Upon crossing the Río Traidor, the Río Cochamó bends again around Cerro Trinidad and El Elefante, depositing you in the open meadow of La Junta. To the north and south,

gargantuan cliffs rise in four separate valleys. The forest pushes up long gullies between sheer buttresses like blades of grass in an overturned ribcage. To a seeker of granite big walls, it is clear that you have arrived at Valhalla, Heaven—whatever you want to call it. But for weary *gauchos* and their hooved charges, this place was little more than one more stop along the way—the last before the end of the journey. They grazed their horses and cattle in the fields, passed a rainy night or two in a small refugio, and then continued another twenty kilometers to the town of Cochamó, a quiet fishing village of dirt roads, brimming gardens, ramshackle houses and an old wooden church.

I first set eyes on Cochamó in 2010. My friend Grant Simmons had called me soon after reading Daniel Seeliger’s area profile in *Alpinist* 23. We scrapped money together and bought tickets without doing much research. About halfway up the trail, just as I was wondering if there would ever be rock anywhere, the dense trees opened up in a brief pasture, and I saw the walls. For much of the rest of the hike, we didn’t speak. I don’t think we could have. The reality of Cochamó felt overwhelmingly wild. On top of everything you see, there is also what you don’t see: cars, parking lots, cell-phone towers, power lines. There is just the laconic stillness of the forest’s midday slumber. The birds are



of mud, clay, rainwater, and horse and cow manure. The walls pinch claustrophobically close, and the slop sucks at your feet, eliciting a feeling I can only describe as being passed through a jungle’s intestinal tract. When it’s raining, and it often is, the mixture of sediments and feces can become deep enough to top a pair of hip waders. It takes deft walking and horse leading to navigate.

As you continue moving west along the historic journey, the furrows deepen. Beyond Lago Vidal Gormaz, the Río Cochamó spills out into its deep valley like a blue ribbon, pausing in crystalline azure pools where it bends and oxbows. Along the river’s rug-

hushed; the breeze doesn't penetrate the canopy. Beyond the trail there is only mystery and towering stone.

For most visitors, the hike into Cochamó takes from four to six hours. By the time you arrive, you feel more like an explorer than a tourist or a rock climber. A camaraderie emerges among mud-soaked wanderers. Climbers seem less individualistic and less competitive here. Over *mate*, beer and wine, you get to know the *arrieros*, the horse-packers who ferry loads up to the valleys; the people who run the hostels and restaurants in town; and the team that maintains Refugio Cochamó and Camping La Junta with the Seeliger-Verdun family.

Over the past four years, I've gone up and down the trail more times than I can recall. During (or after) long rain spells, the experience can be miserable, and even dangerous. I've swatted endless *tábanos* and carried unfathomable amounts of muck on my arms, legs, packs, shoes and clothes. I have certainly, from time to time, wished there were an easier way. But I love the smell of the strings of horses; I love crossing the clear rivers on rickety bridges and stepping stones; I love the first glimpse of white granite when the forest breaks; and I love getting back to my friend Claudio's house at the trailhead at the end of a long journey. The trail into Cochamó feels more like a portal back in time than a simple path from *A* to *B*. The path delivers you from cars, roads, airplanes, guidebooks, Internet beta and well-trodden classics to a vertical landscape that still pales into the unknown. The depth of the experience lies in the intangible—not in things themselves, but in the relationships that emerge between them. The light on the Río Cochamó in the morning; the mist rising among the pasture and the cow pies; rain drops falling from corrugated roofing in perfect monometer like koans from an old Zen poet's pen. None of these things alone is it. And none of them isn't it.

### The Road

THERE'S A POPULAR STORY that when the naturalist John Muir arrived in San Francisco by boat in 1868, he disembarked and promptly began begging passersby to show him the way to "any place that is wild." Whereupon he was pointed in the direction of Yosemite, which, at that time, still was. Muir, who'd just walked from Wisconsin to the Florida Everglades, sailed to Panama and then up to



California, now continued on foot through the Santa Clara Valley until he reached the top of Pacheco Pass. Ahead, beyond the fields of golden flowers, rose the Sierra Nevada: "so radiant," he wrote, "it seemed not clothed with light, but wholly composed of it, like the wall of some celestial city." Forests, deep violet in the distant haze, rose to an opalescent band of snow. It is no wonder that he stayed there, intent on exploring a shining landscape of reflected sun and moon, of giant waterfalls and ageless stone—with no scars of urban development in sight.

Cochamó, many climbing writers have said, is the Yosemite of South America. It's hard not to make this comparison. Both are enormous valleys with granite big walls. A thousand meters tall, Cerro Trinidad dominates La Junta just as El Capitan soars above Yosemite Valley. The cracks and flakes of Manos del Día and Al Centro y Adentro bring to mind thoughts of Astroman and the Rostrum. On a sunny rest day in Cochamó's "Camp Farm," scruffy hippies lounge about, pointing at unclimbed lines, just like the famous 1960s pioneers of Yosemite's Camp 4. It still feels like the Golden Age here, although the surrounding woods seem centuries older. But if you're really going to push the Yosemite analogy, you have to accept a certain flexibility of time and space. Cochamó is not Yosemite

now; it's Yosemite *then*.

In modern Yosemite, the unknown is harder to come by. The masses descend on the Merced's glistening shores and gather in El Cap's crowded meadows to stare in awe at its unfathomable grandeur. Nature—or something like it—is delivered to passengers in an interminable procession of cars and tour buses from the comfort of their seats. For every squirrel, deer or black bear, there is a car and a parking place. For every campsite, there is a permit. To enforce each rule and regulation, there are rangers, cops, a court and even a jail. More than a hundred years after becoming a national park, the Valley is a land of tent cities, hotels and resorts; of smoke-choked campgrounds and bear-proof trashcans; of grocery stores, movie theaters, bars, restaurants and streetlights. The resultant experience is better described as Disneyland à la Swiss Family Robinson, than wild. Here, humans no longer co-exist with their natural surroundings as they once did. The Valley's last Native American village was destroyed in 1969, its remnants enclosed in interpretive displays and gift shops. Yosemite is a tourist destination, now, and its main veins are the roads that facilitate effortless access to the Valley's heart.

Although the numbers of visitors to Cochamó increase every year, La Junta will never have the crowds and infrastructure of Yosemite so long as there is no road into the valley. Our means of travel shapes the emotional and spiritual attachments we affix to the landscapes we see. In *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Rebecca Solnit notes, "The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it." The walk into Cochamó puts you in a state of mind that a drive could not. You feel the rainforest encompass and lay claim to you; you lower your mouth to the cool, clear streams; you wait and wait and wait for those walls to appear, and when they finally do, their presence resonates with every inch you have traveled to get here. I love Yosemite and Cochamó both, but I love them differently. If Cochamó *now* is Yosemite *then*—then surely the missing link between Cochamó *now* and Yosemite *now* is the road, the trail and the space between.



### *The Space Between*

AT FIRST GLANCE, MUCH of Cochamó remains relatively similar to the land the Mapuche occupied millennia ago. There are a few buildings in La Junta's open meadows where most people set up their base camps, and some primitive toilets in the high valleys. There are tents, fire rings, cattle, and some scraps of trash. From some of the summits, the signs of modernity are faintly visible, less as eyesores than as curious aberrations. In 1924 much of the terrain surrounding present-day La Junta was owned by an agricultural trust called Sociedad Agrícola Pucheguin, a corporation of six businessmen. The Fundo Puchegüin, as it was called, encompassed more than 200,000 hectares of arable pasture and forests—and many of the alpine cirques of granite walls that climbers frequent today. Throughout the twentieth century, settlers began occupying the low-lying lands, eventually gaining legal title to small parcels granted by the Chilean government until they occupied about half of the land. Until recently, investors largely overlooked the other half: the high valleys, which had little to no utility for farms and homesteads.

Then, in June 2008, Chilean power company Mediterráneo S.A. obtained water rights for the entire Río Manso, the next river south of the Río Cochamó, to be used for hydroelectric power, at a cost of \$45 million US dollars. The resultant project is expected to include more than sixty-three kilometers of high-tension power lines and 211 electrical towers. Two of these towers, 150 meters high, will raise the lines for about three kilometers across the Estuario de Reloncaví—the turquoise bay, enfolded by mountains and deep-green hills, where the small towns of the Comuna Cochamó sit and residents watch the sunset.

While this particular plan doesn't directly affect La Junta itself, similar ones have come close, including another major hydroelectric plant on Río Cochamó proposed by Spanish power company Endesa. The grassroots organization Conservación Cochamó protested the project, with support from many national and international nonprofit groups. So did Cochamó's Mapuche community, according to a report by a Mapuche organization, Mapuexpress, in June 2013, denouncing the Río Manso and Endesa projects as bad for the environment and in violation of their rights as indigenous people of the land. Although some of the wild areas of Cochamó are now designated as a "Site of Touristic Interest," that





status doesn't protect them permanently from logging or from industrial-scale tourism. And the owners of Mediterráneo S.A. now possess significant tracts of land around La Junta.

It's fair to say that any major development requires constructing a road. The idea of that road, and its purported boons or burdens, divides local citizens as an island divides a river. Some are in favor because it would raise the value of their property and facilitate access to their land. Some are opposed because it would inexorably change the sense of place and the way of life they have known for so long. Eliana Sandoval Alvarado was born in the town of Cochamó more than seventy years ago and has spent most of her life there; she feels strongly that "progress destroys not only the environment, but also culture." Her husband, Pedro, described La Junta to me as "just a bunch of rocks...good only for tourism," which "does nothing to protect culture." By bringing more visitors, a road would undoubtedly support the development occurring in small towns throughout rural Chile. But the slow pace of life, local agriculture and aquaculture, and traditional values might not withstand the influx of thousands of visitors each season all looking to buy souvenirs, pump gasoline, and eat and sleep in town.

In some ways, establishing a road to La Junta to create a popular national park could help protect Cochamó. Tame though Yosemite may be, the ease with which one can come face to face with the Valley's incredible humbling glory helps bring a profound notion of nature—if not wildness—to each and every visitor who travels there. These vistas can help to create lifelong conservationists. Surely the views from La Junta could be just as beneficial to the long-term well-being of the environment, even if they do come from a rolled-down window. Cochamó would never be the same—not for the arrieros who make money packing loads for climbers to La Junta, not for Pedro and Eliana. But wouldn't a national park still be better than a hydroelectric dam?

The difficulties in answering this question lie in the diversity of the feelings it's likely to elicit. A businessman, a congressman, an environmentalist, a gaucho and a climber may all feel differently. But if conservation, worldwide, is to move in a positive direction, we must also listen to some of the people who have lived in wild places the longest, and who know them best. In Cochamó, that would be the Mapuche—People of the Land, who



today make up around 10 percent of Chile's population. In the famous essay "The Trouble with Wilderness," the American historian William Cronon describes how the Western idea of "wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not."

Since the nineteenth century, in several countries, this dichotomy has sometimes contributed to the expulsion of indigenous people from their lands—in order to create a fantasy of "untouched" nature for visitors, an artificial vision of the wild that often appears glassed-off and commodified. Within this context, tourism can all too easily develop into another form of exploitation of the land. In *The Practice of the Wild*, the Sierra mountaineer and

poet Gary Snyder argues that to "live fully and creatively together with wildness," people must learn to see it as part of themselves: "To resolve the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild, we must first resolve to be whole."

Leonel Lienaf, a modern Mapuche poet, explains that the Western concept of separation between people and nature has no meaning to traditional Mapuche: "When people speak of *az mogén*, which is 'way of life,' they generally mean the reality, the way you live as a person, but this immediately involves your relationship with the territory you inhabit, how you fit into the territory in order to live, not how you adapt the territory to your way of life." Each feature of the earth—a tree, a giant rock, a river, a mountain—has its own protecting spirit, a *ngen*, that must be respected. While some of their ancestral lands have been restored to them under the 1972 and 1993 Indigenous Laws, others remained



threatened by hydroelectric dams and industrial logging.

Since the 1990s, conflicts between Mapuche people and Chilean authorities over mega-development projects have resulted in both peaceful protests and violent confrontations. To many Mapuche, a centuries-old sense of place—the natural resources, the unique character and sacred beauty of the land that sustains their culture—is at stake. At a 2003 environmental conference at the University of Victoria, Maria Theresa Panchillo explained, “The Mapuche people believe that we are the guardians of our magical forests.”

Cristian “Mono” Gallardo is the only person of Mapuche heritage I know who lives in Cochamó. He works as a campground host, carpenter, architect, construction worker, guide and horse packer for Refugio Cochamó. He is a good climber, and a good friend. In the winters, when everyone else who works and lives in La Junta leaves, Mono stays on as the Refugio caretaker. It rains incessantly at the lower elevations and snows in the high valleys and on the peaks. I imagine La Junta, on a rare sunny winter morning looking like the French Alps poking up out of French Guiana. The short days and harsh weather keep away most visitors, and Mono goes long weeks without seeing another soul. It is a testament to his love of Cochamó that Mono not only stays there in winter, but that he says he enjoys that time of year. When I asked him how he would feel if someone built a road into Cochamó, his eyes seemed to turn inward, deeper and deeper.

As the sun sets on Cochamó, the walls remain bathed in radiant splendor. Trinidad, Capicúa, Arco Iris, Atardecer. All of Cochamó’s granite giants hold onto the dying embers of daylight, reflecting the sky’s fiery hues. The sun dips down behind the trail, past the trailhead, beyond Cochamó and the Estuario de Reloncaví, and into the Pacific Ocean. At last, the walls glow ghostly white, as the moon rises and the stars poke through the darkness. Cochamó, and perhaps everything, appears most beautiful during the last golden hour of each day.

The otherworldly pink glow comes at a time of vulnerability.



[The quotation from Leonel Lienlaf comes from an essay by the anthropologist Fabien Le Bonniec, “What is a Landscape for the Mapuche?: Controversies around the representations of the landscapes of Southern Chile.” For more on the Mapuche and the environmental history of Chile, see also *Becoming Mapuche: Person and Ritual in Indigenous Chile*, Magnus Course, 2011; and *The Mapuche in Modern Chile*, Joanna Crow, 2013.—Author]

—Chris Kalman, Index, Washington

## In Deep

JAMAL’S SENSES SNAPPED INTO FOCUS with a sudden burst of light. The darkness that enveloped him had lasted only an instant as his mind recovered from the shock of having fallen. In those first few moments, he wasn’t entirely sure where he was. The bright flashes of blue and white seemed to reflect the intricate patterns of chipped and cracked tiles on the countertop of his mother’s warm kitchen. *But why I am so cold?* He wondered. And then, all at once, he knew exactly what had happened.

Grey clouds drifted overhead. Through the gaps, the perpetual sun of an Alaskan summer lit the walls of ice around him in bright flashes

of blue and white. Snow drifted down and onto his face. Only the glacier glasses he wore kept the flakes from falling into his eyes. Just moments earlier, he’d been walking behind his two partners, across a vast field of ice and snow on the Matanuska Glacier in the Chugach Range of Alaska. A snow bridge broke beneath his feet, and he fell into the crevasse. Now he hung suspended above an abyss, the rope still tied securely to his harness. The bulk of his heavy pack wedged him between the walls like a cork in a bottle. He couldn’t see the depths beneath him, but his legs dangled free. He felt as though he’d been buried alive.

Jamal Franklin was only seventeen years old. Days earlier, when the small bush plane first touched down on the glacier, he realized immediately that he was farther from his home in Washington, DC, than he’d ever had been in his life. Despite the company of his friends, Michael Pope and Carmela Espinoza, he felt isolated and horribly vulnerable. He imagined himself a tiny speck in the middle of an infinite universe without color, distinguished only by varying shades of grey. When the plane whined off into the distance, a great silence fell over the landscape like a heavy curtain. Doubt rippled down his spine. *Am I supposed to be here?*

No answer came from the enormous mountains all around him. His presence or absence on the landscape had no more significance than a single flake of snow. All he heard was the pounding of his heart and the noise of his own breathing. At first the surrounding quiet unnerved him. He’d been on many winter climbing trips in the White Mountains. Cold was nothing new to him, but he hadn’t realized, until this moment, submerged in the vast Alaskan wild, just how much the city still echoed in his mind: the growl of car engines; the blare of truck horns; a constant thrum of noise that enveloped him in waves, washing over him as he walked from his apartment to school and back again; rhythmic currents of constant motion, pulsing at a frequency so familiar they passed unnoticed in his wake.

Here, the silence appeared, strangely, to amplify his perceptions: the loud crunch of snow that seemed to reverberate off the mountains when Carmela slung her pack onto the crusty glacier; the small orange flags tied to