

Falling Into Cholila

Contributed by Sarah Tory [Photos] Dario Calfunao

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Or so I thought. In the fading light, I didn't see the deep sandy rut cutting across the road. My wheel lost traction and without warning I, along with my bicycle, were sprawled in a ditch, my arm screaming in pain and blood smeared in various places as it oozed through the coating of dusty roadside grime sticking to my skin. With my blistering pace of 3 miles per hour abruptly halted – along with all hope of making it to the campsite – I took stock of my suddenly dire situation. Right arm mobility: none

Availability of emergency services: none that I knew of

Distance to nearest hospital: unknown

After a few unsuccessful attempts to ride my bike, (braking and steering with one arm proved impossible) I sat down on the side of the road and surveyed my surroundings. Despite a throbbing pain in my elbow joint, some festering wounds, and the realization that I was in deep s**t, they were actually quite nice.

Here in the remote northwestern corner of Argentina's Chubut province, the rugged eastern slopes of the Andes meet the dry plains of Patagonia. I looked upwards, away from the road (and source of my current misery) to a line of peaks, now mostly obscured by evening shadows. The jagged outline momentarily lifted me away from my current predicament. Dark mountainous shapes transformed into white slopes cascading down from rocky summits, splintering into couloirs and converging in glades that gradually led to the valley floor.

But my fantasies of shredding corn in the wilds of Patagonia were, regrettably, short lived. It was the middle of the southern hemisphere's summer and I was supposed to be riding my bicycle. Given my current situation, however, I would not be pedaling anywhere for quite some time. Luckily, a pickup truck filled with fly fishermen rescued me from a long unpleasant night on the roadside and swiftly transported me to the only hospital for, literally, hundreds of miles.

Armed with a hefty dose of painkillers, I emerged from the rural medical clinic in dusty Cholila, a place where dogs and horses still roam the streets untethered, a place where on the outskirts of town sits a lonely, deserted cabin where an outlaw named Robert LeRoy Parker (better known as Butch Cassidy) hid out a century ago. But with no hope of bicycling anytime soon and towering Andean peaks rising in the distance, my mind - in its drug-addled state - naturally turned to skiing.

With my arm immobilized in a makeshift sling, I walked up to the only hostel in town, a tiny cabin at the end of a bumpy dirt road. "Hola amigos, welcome!" An extremely chipper man greeted me with a boyish grin and wildly gesticulating arms. He was holding a well-worn backpack and a bicycle – almost as beat-up looking as my own.

Dario Calfunao is the hostel owner and guide for Cholila Explorers, a small backcountry expedition outfit that runs mostly trekking and climbing trips around Cholila. He also happens to be an avid skier and recently began exploring the area's virgin slopes. This was enough to draw me out of my dazed stupor, while the patches of snow glittering on the distant peaks were a painful reminder of the ski season I was missing at home. (As it turns out, I didn't miss much, but news about "worst winter ever" took awhile to trickle down to my part of the world.)

Over countless cups of mate, the Argentinian tea-like beverage sipped from gourds through a metal straw, Dario told me about how he ended up as the unlikely purveyor of Cholila's backcountry skiing.

Along with his wife Laura, Dario founded Cholila Explorers in conjunction with the Piuke Mapu Hostel in 2007. The area has long been a world-class fly-fishing destination, but for Dario, Cholila holds untapped climbing, trekking, and skiing potential. Nonetheless, he stressed that they have no desire to make this place the next Bariloche, a touristy town in the Lakes District to the north with a number of well-known ski resorts, five-star hotels, fancy restaurants, and hordes of people.

At least for now though there's little chance too many people will overrun this place. That much became obvious as I navigated a fallen log crossing a river on the way to Dario and Laura's house for dinner one night. A rough overgrown path led to the top of a hill overlooking Cholila where I found Dario stoking the bonfire outside his house, which he and Laura built themselves using mud and local trees. He proudly told me the floor is made entirely from recycled materials and behind the building, I spied a garden of vegetables, medicinal herbs...and maybe some other types of herbs best left unspecified.

In the summer Dario and Laura cook most of their meals outdoors in a "disco." It looks like a giant wok, but is actually just the interior metal disk of a car wheel placed directly in a fire, filled with meat and vegetables and left to simmer for hours. More friends arrived and more wine was consumed while we waited for the food. I heard glowing reports of a recent ski expedition and some talk of "polvo perfecto." In Argentina, no one leaves a party until sunrise – at least. With light creeping into the valley I walked, somewhat unsteadily, back to the hostel, and dreamt of skiing bottomless Patagonian powder alongside Butch Cassidy.

The next morning, over yet more cups of mate, I plied Dario with questions about Cholila's skiing potential. Our conversation revealed some serious challenges, but also immense rewards of skiing in a place only a few have ventured.

"Around Cholila most of the nicest places for backcountry ski are far from town and roads and many of the approaches must be done by 4x4 trucks or horses to the base camp," said Dario. For this reason, he warned, "the skiers who come must be experienced and they must be prepared for a real winter expedition."

Cholila has no established network of huts, no avalanche reports, in fact, no backcountry infrastructure of any kind. I was intrigued. Dario talked about some of the surrounding mountain ranges that he had recently skied, all of which contained countless unnamed and unclimbed peaks.

"In Huemules, Esquel, Leleque, and Nahuel Panyou can ski long distances and they have couloirs, nice rocks to jump, forest, and steep slopes. Cerro La Torta has lots of couloirs and El Blanco is a new area we are exploring, far from Cholila, with virgin slopes and beautiful atmosphere with many lines of different difficulties."

There were, however, certain other "minor" challenges.

Jacob Slot is an Arc'teryx sponsored skier from Austria who has skied throughout the Patagonian Andes for 10 seasons. He recently returned from a ski expedition to Cholila and offered some cautionary words. "This is not skiing as people are used to," he warned. If you don't bring a lot of motivation to get beaten up by wind, bushes

and low trees you might as well not go.”

But Patagonia has never pretended to be easy, a fact of which I was all too aware.

Nonexistent trails and thick bushes on the mountains often make it difficult to get to the slopes, but, Slot claims “if you find the way, there is fantastic skiing - big, open bowls and steeps on the front faces.” Powder, however, can be hard to find as the snow is often windblown and crusty in the exposed terrain at higher elevations. According to Slot, however, the biggest challenge facing skiers is negotiating the private property through which most of Cholila’s backcountry must be accessed.

“It is not a place you can go on your own as you enter private land all the time and might get shot at by some landlord,” he says. Both Dario and Slot recommend hiring a guide who can arrange permission with landowners to pass through their property.

None of these challenges, however, seemed to dampen Dario’s enthusiasm for the skiing. As our conversation turned to his upbringing and Mapuche heritage, it became clear that for Dario, remoteness, dense underbrush, and rogue landowners were only a small part of his uphill journey to becoming a skier.

As a child he lived far away from any ski resort, but when the family moved to Esquel, his father built him a pair of skis out of wood from the local lenga trees.

“I went sometimes to La Hoya (the local ski center) to learn but it was very expensive for me to pay the ticket to ski, so I take the decision to go to the backcountry and explore other places and I discover many amazing activities.”

He learned what technical skills safety rules he could from friends and eventually found a way to enroll in the AAGM (Ass. Argentina de Guías de Montaña) Guide course where he learned more about backcountry skiing.

The sport is not exactly booming in Argentina – at least not by North American or European standards. The reason for this, says Dario, “is that skiing here is a very expensive activity (gear, equipment, etc.) and most of the people cannot pay for it.”

So, skiers, he claims “must make many sacrifices to learn and it is very difficult if we compare with other places where the sport is more popular and easy to access.” To encourage more people to explore the mountains in this part of Patagonia, Dario and his wife founded the Club Andino Cholila, with the goal of developing a bigger community of local trekkers, climbers, and skiers.

They are, he told me, “working to expose the younger generation to the mountains.” But, he said, “we need more technical instruction and gear. It would be easier if government institutions and sponsors would give more importance to these activities.”

At the moment, the government is more interested in developing the region’s vast mineral resources, many of which lie directly beneath our feet. According to Dario, mining projects threaten the endangered huemul habitat, a species of deer once found throughout the Andes. He hopes, however, that introducing more people to backcountry skiing around Cholila might offer more incentives to protect the environment and promote a sustainable model of development. For Dario, it is also about changing the culture of skiing in Argentina, which, in his opinion is an elite “showy” activity mainly for the rich. Dario is a Mapuche, a descendent of the only South American tribe never conquered by the Incas or the Spaniards. Guiding the backcountry, he claims, reflects the way of life and

characteristics of his ancient culture. Sadly, mining companies have pushed many of the native communities in this area off their lands. Dario sees backcountry skiing as a way to promote both economic development and indigenous land rights.

Talk of politics fades as the sun rounds the western edge of the sky. We watch as it creeps behind the distant peaks and for a few incandescent moments, they are sheathed in fire. Dario leaves and I'm left alone in a place that feels as empty and uncompromising as ever. The prospect of skiing in the Chubut Valley is simultaneously daunting and alluring, but no more insane than riding a bicycle across Patagonia. So I know I'll be back – this time with my skis - even if it means slogging for miles through dense bushes and pleading with ranchers to let me pass. And even if, when I finally get to the top of the mountain, howling wind and terrible snow mean I can't make a single turn I'll still smile, because the wine is cheap, and there's always Butch's cabin to visit.

Getting there:

Flying to Buenos Aires (nonstop daily flights from many North American cities available) is the best starting point for a trip to Cholila. From there, take one of multiple daily flights to Bariloche, about 2 ½ hours. Rent a car and drive the 2 ½ hours south to Cholila.

Logistics:

In town you'll find accommodations, restaurants, ATM, grocery stores, and Internet is available. There are weather reports, but no avalanche reports, so skiers must carry all the necessary avalanche safety gear (transceiver, shovel, probe) and know how to use them. Given the remote location, lack of road access and rescue services, the area is best suited for experienced backcountry skiers. Hiring a guide is highly recommended. Slot recommends UIAGM certified guide, Jorge Kozulj, owner of Andes Cross, a company specializing in guided expeditions to Patagonia. For more information visit andescross.com/english/company.htm

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