



The Perito Moreno Glacier rises above turquoise glacial waters in Los Glaciares National Park, Argentina.

# A Walk in the Ice Age

*Rahul Jagtiani* travels to the end of the world to hike the icy terrain of the commanding **Perito Moreno Glacier** in Argentine Patagonia.

**A LONG FLIGHT TO ARGENTINA** meant that I could catch up on a couple of new flicks and a good novel without any interruption. But my patience was tested with over 36 hours of travel time, thanks to London's Heathrow Airport being snowed under. I lugged my suitcase off the belt at the Ministro Pistarini International Airport in Buenos Aires and languidly walked out of the terminal to hail a cab to the Aeroparque Jorge Newbery Airport, where I was to catch a 3.5-hour flight to El Calafate in Patagonia. The weather conditions at my stopover and ultimate destination were vastly different—while Buenos Aires was as warm as a summer day can get (summer in the Southern Hemisphere is typically

STEFANO NICASTRO/BETTYIMAGES





between November and March), El Calafate in the far south was much cooler, with the classic Patagonia chill hanging in the evening air.

On landing in El Calafate, however, my travel woes quickly dissipated. My flight touched down right next to Lago Argentino, the country's largest lake, with a hue that can be best described as milky turquoise. This unusual shade of blue picked me up instantly and reminded me of the adventure that had lured me there.

The town of El Calafate is small and sparsely populated, and its streets not too busy. Lined by quaint stores and restaurants, with the odd pickup truck whizzing by and kids playing football in the alleys, the streets have

a quintessential Latin flavour that one might associate with a Roberto Rodriguez movie.

I was dropped off at the cosy South B&B El Calafate. Its location, atop a hill, offered sweeping views of the lake as well as the majestic Andes. The warm owners, Andrea and Javier, generously suggested local restaurants (the steaks at Mi Rancho are the biggest I've seen) and were quick to make reservations for my trip to the Perito Moreno Glacier, the main draw for tourists visiting El Calafate and the Patagonian region in general.

Reported to be formed around 18,000 years ago during the last Ice Age and named after renowned Argentinian explorer and academic

The glacier offers hikes for both, beginners and seasoned hikers.





## A boat ride can bring you within kissing distance of the glacier. But that wasn't enough; I couldn't miss out on hiking this iconic mountain of ice.

*Clockwise, from top:* The Patagonian desert set against a clear blue sky; Mt Fitz Roy bathed in the first rays of the day; Mi Rancho serves sumptuous local cuisine in El Calafate.

Francisco Moreno, the glacier is a mere 78-kilometre drive from El Calafate. A boat ride can bring you within kissing distance of the glacier. But that wasn't enough; I couldn't miss out on hiking this iconic mountain of ice.

Still a bit jetlagged and weary from my travels, I chose the Mini Ice Trek package of Hielo & Aventura (1.5 hours on the ice, ₹11,030 per person; [hieloyaventura.com](http://hieloyaventura.com)), over the longer Big Ice Trek. A shuttle drove us through the picturesque countryside to the UNESCO World



Heritage Site of Parque Nacional Los Glaciares. Further, a boat ride of 20 minutes across the Brazo Rico brought us to the towering glacier.

Perito Moreno is 30 kilometres long and covers an area of 250 square kilometres. It is one of the 48 glaciers that are fed by the South Patagonia Ice Field, which accounts for the third-largest reserve of fresh water in the world. Climate change may be altering our planet at an alarming rate, but this glacier is largely unaffected (so far) by rising global temperature and is one of only three glaciers in the ice field that are advancing out into Lago Argentino, a phenomenon that is giving scientists much to think about.

Once we alighted from the boat, we fixed crampons under our shoes to get a grip on the icy surface and began our journey on the stunningly blue mass of ice. The next hour and a half was pure thrill, as our expert instructors guided us in navigating the extreme terrain and helped us get a closer view of the turquoise cracks and caverns. Every time we chanced upon a small blue lagoon, we made a beeline to sip on the incredibly pure, but ice-cold, water.

As we neared the end of the hike, a well-laid-out table with a bottle of single malt and a dozen glasses filled with gleaming glacial ice was our reward. 'On the rocks' took a whole new meaning here, and we paired the fine choice of beverage with rich dark chocolate—a combination I must admit that I've been addicted to ever since.

Although the whole experience was surreal, I didn't fully appreciate the sheer expanse of the glacier until I made my way to the observation deck. Strolling on a network of metal walkways, I took in views of the natural wonder from various vantage points. As I stood mesmerised by its grandeur (I was told, it's as high as a 21-storey building), my stupor was broken by a sudden rumbling and crackling. Within seconds, a gigantic chunk of ice calved off and splashed into the lake. The glacier was truly alive. ✕



CLOCKWISE: ADRIAN WOJCIK/EYEEM/GETTYIMAGES; DON SMITH/GETTYIMAGES; COURTESY OF MI RANCHO