

Pushed to the EXTREME BY MOTHER NATURE

Unpredictability is the only thing you can predict in the annual Wenger Patagonian Expedition Race in Chile's far south. Volunteer race journalist **Luisa Bustos** reports on the 2011 event...

With a history of demanding routes, unpredictable weather and unknown terrain, the Wenger Patagonian Expedition Race has become known as the 'Last Wild Race', and it never fails to disappoint. Held each year in February against a backdrop of majestic snow-capped peaks, aqua-blue rivers, lakes and fjords, dense forests, windy open plains, bogs and swampland, year after year competitors return home with stories of survival and adventure – and the dream to compete again.

2011's race – the ninth edition – yet again captured the hearts of everyone involved. Beginning on 8 February under

sunny blue skies in Torres Del Paine National Park, 14 international teams, each made up of three men and a single woman, lined up at the start to tackle an unmarked course comprising 105 kilometres of sea kayaking, 248 kilometres of mountain biking and 191 kilometres of trekking, aided by nothing more than a handful of basic maps, a compass and teamwork.

Despite a prediction from Chilean race director and founder Stjepan Pavicic that only three teams would cross the finish line in the volcanic crater at Pali Aike National Park, all were eager to begin. The experienced racers were undaunted

by what lay ahead; sleep depravity and physical exhaustion, more than 600 kilometres of unknown and undiscovered passages. Each was driven by their own spirit of adventure, their personal motivation to conquer one of the world's most unforgiving terrains as well as the anticipation of the beauty and solitude of the journey.

For many teams, the Wenger Patagonian Expedition Race isn't about crossing the finish line in first place. Most teams are simply aiming to finish within the ten days allowed. This year, against the odds, six teams crossed the finish line in a race that tested even the organisers.



WRITER PROFILE

Luisa Bustos, 34, is an Australian journalist and was a volunteer journalist in the 2011 Wenger Patagonian Expedition Race. She is currently on the road in Colombia and Chile.

AND SO IT BEGINS...

"Nos vemos in Pali Aike!" – "See you in Pali Aike!" – were the last words racers heard from the race director as they embarked on the first 60km mountain bike leg through Torres Del Paine, a spectacular setting for the start of the course.

Despite clear skies, racers soon faced their first challenge: Patagonia's famous fierce winds, with gusts of up to 150kmph blowing some riders and their bikes metres into the air in sections. From Checkpoint 2, teams moved to the kayaks, paddling in pairs past massive icebergs in Lago Grey and the Grey and Serrano rivers. At Stage 3, paddles were swapped for walking shoes as racers began a 73km trek through dense forest and wetlands, past the beautiful southern continental ice field, and through some of Patagonia's most stunning scenery.

Below: Trekking through the breathtaking scenery of Patagonia

Opposite top: Teams paddle the Rio Serrano on the opening day

Opposite middle: British team adidas TERREX-Prunesco on the road to victory

Opposite bottom: Mark Humphrey, Nick Gracie, Fi Spotswood and Bruce Duncan, of adidasTERREX-Prunesco, fly the union flag to celebrate victory

“Gusts of up to 150kmph blew some riders and their bikes metres into the air”

Here, the teams got their first taste of the difficult and slow-paced trekking terrain the race creator had chosen to characterise this year's race – dense forest, so thick in areas that racers could only proceed at a speed of 1-2kmph. "It's not trekking," many racers said as they passed through Checkpoint 8.

"We were just fighting the bushes all the way! My tights are all ripped to pieces and the thorns got through to my legs, so my skin is sore," said British racer Fi Spotswood. "You have to change your brain when you are bushwhacking like this."

With the race now in full swing, some teams chose to forgo sleep, pushing on through the night in order to gain a lead and reach checkpoints ahead of cut-off times. By Day Two, however, the race had its first casualties. Teams Dap Antarctica (Chile) and Xingu (Argentina and Brazil) withdrew, failing to reach Checkpoint 3 in the required time. Chile's Joshiken also decided not to continue despite reaching the checkpoint before the cut-off.

As dawn broke on Day Three and the favourable weather conditions turned on racers, the remaining 11 teams were spread across the course, trekking between Checkpoint 3 and Checkpoint 8.

Heavy cloud, rain and winds made conditions tough and unpleasant. By the end of Day Four, another four teams were forced out of the race, leaving just seven teams battling the deteriorating weather.

After completing the second kayaking leg, racers entered some of the most remote regions of Patagonia, areas rarely seen or accessed by humans. During the first section, teams trekked 67 kilometres through mountains, rivers and vast stretches of wetlands.

The 191km leg to Checkpoint 13 was to be the longest single trek ever navigated in the history of the Wenger Patagonian Expedition Race, designed to push racers to their limit physically and mentally. However, heavy rains and rising river levels forced race organisers to shorten the trek by 114km in the interests of safety, as sections of the planned route became impassable.

Three teams were airlifted by helicopter to Checkpoint 10, where Danish team Roadrunners Adventure was forced to withdraw, with members suffering from hypothermia. The six remaining teams were transported to Checkpoint 13 to restart the race at the final biking section, a 188km cycle to the finish line in the barren and windy Pali Aike National Park.



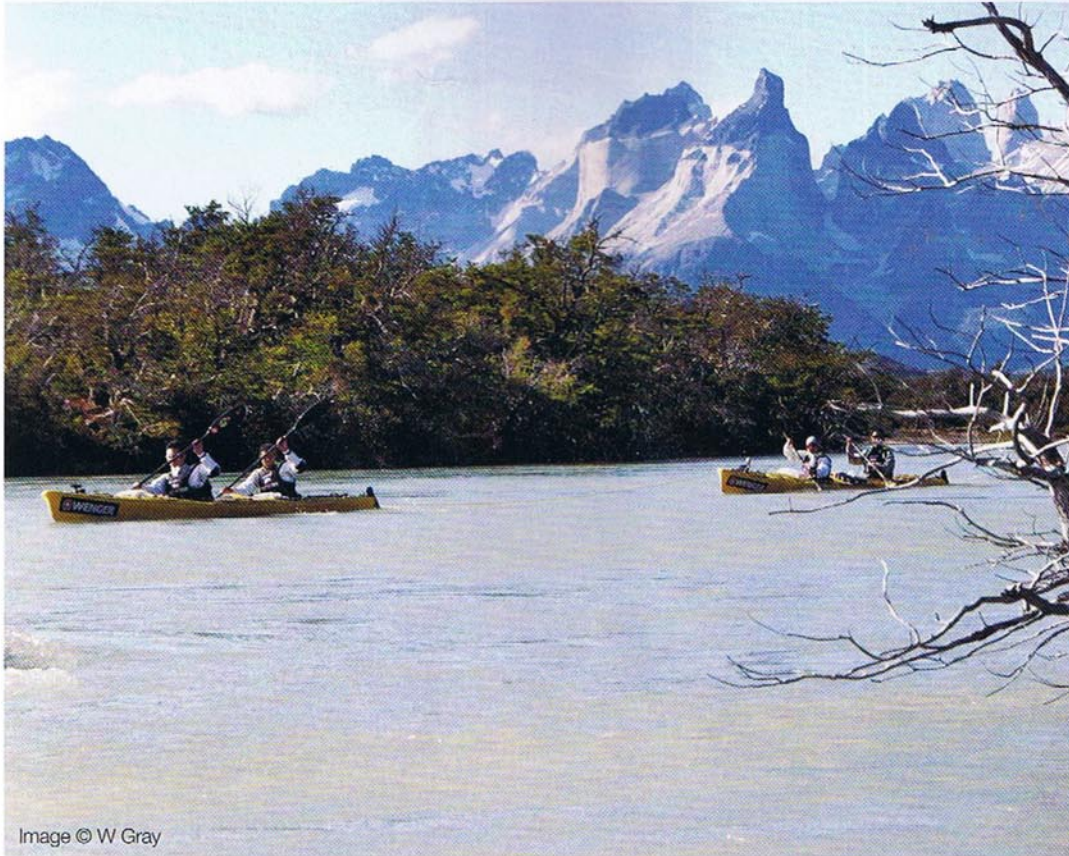


Image © W Gray

INFORMATION



The Wenger Patagonian Expedition Race exists to showcase the beauty, flora and fauna of Chile's Patagonia region and promote the importance of protecting and conserving remote and beautiful landscapes. For more information visit www.patagonianexpeditionrace.com

GET INVOLVED



Needless to say, you need to be physically and mentally fit to take part in the Wenger Patagonian Expedition Race. Teams interested in participating in next year's race can register their interest at www.patagonianexpeditionrace.com/registration. Nomadas Outdoor Services carefully selects participants based on previous adventure race experience and team spirit.

But even if you're not quite cut out to enter the race as a contestant, there are also plenty of other opportunities for interns and volunteers to be involved in some way – in the preparation, organisation and support crew for the race. Roles cover media, marketing, medical, support, logistics and much more.

To register your interest as an intern or volunteer, visit www.patagonianexpeditionrace.com/en/get_involved.php

ACROSS THE FINISH LINE

After leading the field for most of the race, reigning champions British Adidas TERREX/PrunESCO took first place for the third consecutive year. Experienced Patagonian racers Bruce Duncan and Mark Humphrey were joined by two new team members, and experience in Patagonia's wilderness proved to be the key to success.

US team GearJunkie.com chased the Brits hard, making radical strategic decisions, including choosing to swim sections of the fjords and coming close to hypothermia to come in second place, despite being awarded a ten-hour penalty for failing to check-in to Checkpoint 10.

France's Vaucluse Adventure Evasions took third place; Croatia's Ad Natura – Karibu came in fourth; East Wind from Japan took fifth place; and Perdido en el Turbal from the US and UK finished sixth.

On reaching the finish line and claiming his third victory, Adidas TERREX/PrunESCO team captain Bruce Duncan said: "To have won this race once is something special. To win it three times is simply amazing. It's the ultimate race and this one was a tough one. The weather really made a difference to the course, and I am both relieved and delighted to have reached the finish.

"In the last two years the trekking has been hard and spectacular, but even more so this year. We did a lot of fighting through forests, we have a few sores, some bad feet and I had a fight with a tree early on. But the scenery and the experiences we had were amazing, absolutely beautiful – the best ever." ◀



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