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Emerging Explorer

EXPERTISE
Adventurer

LOCATION
Chile

Cold Crossing My partner and I were walking from the Equator to the southern tip of South America, trying to learn the secrets of sustainability from people who had lived on the land for generations. Just south of Santiago, Chile, there were giant snowfields. We had to cross them if we were going to continue.

We walked for a week across the snow's crust, often falling through because it was melting. When we came out on the other side, the snow gave way to fine ash. When a sudden wind kicked up, we had to wrap our shirts around our faces to avoid breathing it.

Finally we made it to Laguna de la Invernada. According to the map and some locals we'd met, there should've been walking trails circling the lake. But the water level had risen, covering them, so the lake was surrounded by cliffs. Rock climbing was too difficult. We went back to flat ground, waterproofed our gear, and jumped in.

We pulled ourselves along the cliff face in 34°F water. Within minutes numbness set in. After a blind corner we got lucky—on the other side was a rockslide that gave us some relief from the water. The wind was blowing 20 miles an hour, and the air was about 50°F. I started shivering uncontrollably—probably hypothermic. To warm up, we stayed in our sleeping bags for two hours and made tea from the lake water. All we'd had to eat was a can of tuna between us. We turned our walkie-talkies on and asked for help on every channel. No one answered.

We had to keep going. It became a pattern: in the water for five to ten minutes at a time, then out for a couple of hours to get warm on the rocks. Thirty-six hours later, we made it to the other side—a distance of less than a mile.

