It took four years and one month to cycle from California to the tip of South America, thanks to the long travel pause of the pandemic. As I neared the tip of South America in March of this year, rivers, waterfalls, and soaring condors surrounded me and my bike. The Patagonia mountains with their massive lakes and narrow, creeping inlets of the Pacific required frequent ferries, usually surrounded by more peaks and glowing blue glaciers. Hints of purple nestled between the ice masses and dark rock, and as I stared at this space, it occurred to me that traveling solo made everything feel more intense, more tangible, more close-up and zoomed in.

Despite enjoying my solo time, I teamed up with another cyclist, Felix, south of El Chaltén to battle the headwinds for a few days. The Patagonia winds have their own day-to-day dramas, coming from any and all directions, and no bike tour is complete without at least a few tears shed to the wind gods. My new cycling buddy and I watched the blue hue of Patagonia’s rivers and mountains transition to tan, ochre, khaki, and amber of the dry Argentinian grasslands as the roads climbed and descended inland. The bunchgrass seemed to grip the soil with clenched fists against the battering wind. Mint-green lichen colored the hills, and brown guanacos galloped parallel to the bikes. Farther south, the land of both Argentina and Chile narrows into a funnel shape across Selk’nam, Tehuelche, and Kaweskar ancestral lands, and is increasingly broken by water as hundreds of islands diverge as if forced apart by the wind and sea.

Felix and I amicably parted in Punta Arenas and I was glad to be alone again. My mind feels like a jar of water and fine sediment that is shaken up by company; it needs a chance to settle in order to feel calm. When alone, I think more clearly, feel more grounded, focused, and myself. I often feel more connected to the natural world around me.

On March 10, I cycled through the now-familiar beech trees, Nothofagus genus, through Tierra del Fuego National Park, to the very end of the road in South America. The trees felt like friends cheering me on, but the final kilometers felt like the longest of my life. My anticipation was high, my emotions teetering on a cliff, ready to soar above the valley like the condors. I pedaled south until I could pedal no more, then parked my bike on the boardwalk over the water. The memories of the months of travel, years at home, and tears of joy and sorrow in both places merged in my mind. There had been rough gravel, rough times, illness, mud, rain, sunshine, and crosswinds. I camped in abandoned buildings that felt like five-star hotels and stared at moss, trees, and the cold, silver moon for hours at a time.

I met up with Felix and other cyclists in Ushuaia, and we celebrated with beers and the usual easy friendship and camaraderie among touring cyclists. Just before my...
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plane to Buenos Aires took off, it started to snow. I landed in 90°F heat, the type of heat where you never stop sweating, and after 10 days in that massive, sometimes magical, sometimes frustrating, and tango-infused city, I boarded my much-anticipated flight to Cape Town, South Africa.

Again thanks to the pause of the pandemic, my husband Tom was now in a position to leave his job and join me. Just before seeing him, I was nervous like before a first date. I was bouncing up and down on my feet, combing my unruly hair, hoping I looked okay. I leaped up to hug him. We hugged and kissed and talked and talked and talked, rainbows in our eyes.

We had two weeks in Cape Town to relax, sort gear, see the sights, eat amazing food, and get our route through Africa more dialed. I wish I could say it was nothing but rainbows and kittens, but that mirage is for the movies. We had just come from completely different continents and perspectives. I was simply ready for Africa and giraffes, but he had just closed up our house, retired from his job of 25 years, and said goodbye to his daughter and all our friends just that week. He was also finally recovering from a series of injuries.

We have been cycling together for two weeks in South Africa now, and we’ve had hard conversations as I bristled at the lack of the mental and emotional space I had grown accustomed to. But relationships are real, and beautiful, and sometimes hard. Rainbows, though lovely, are not something you can hold in your hand. I must say, we are finding our groove and having a ball. Tom is slowly getting into travel mode and has a cheetah figurine taped to his handlebars. I do more of the planning, but that’s okay. I’m more of a natural planner, and Tom is a better mechanic, cook, and problem solver. We’ve cycled hundreds of miles through the Western Cape and the fynbos, a unique vegetation area. Of its 8,000 species, many of them are endemic!

Cycling through the bright sun, vineyards, and farmlands of the coast, we have made countless friends among the uber-friendly and welcoming South Africans. Tom is great at meeting people, and I am getting used to the “we” part of travel. I never expected to be part of a two-person team called marriage, but despite the difficult moments, I am exceedingly happy to have my teammate with me. I can’t wait to share the road ahead, the potholes and the rainbows, from Cape Town to Kenya, and beyond.

Hollie Ernest is a botanist, forester, cyclist, and swimmer, currently traveling around the world by bicycle. To get in touch about anything at all, you can find her on Instagram @hollie_holly.