

# The Patagonian Pursuit

THE MARK OF HUMANS IS STILL YET BUT  
A TRACE IN THIS WILD WONDERLAND  
BY CAROLYN MCCARTHY

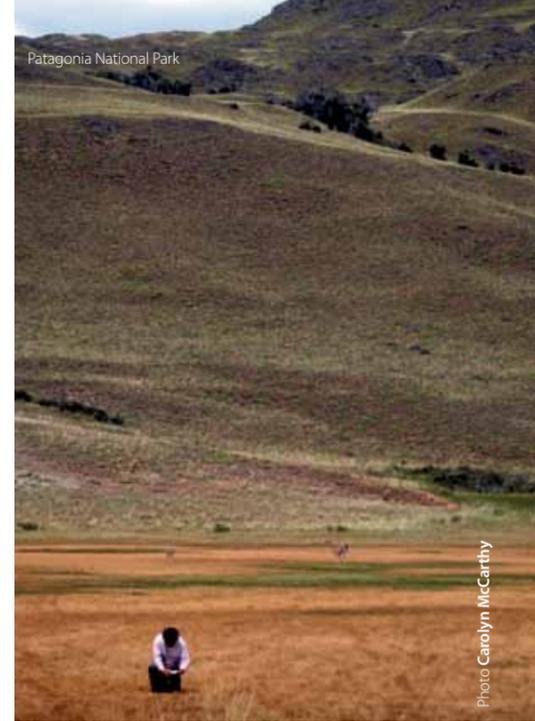
PHOTO: CHILE TOURISM & CAROLYN MCCARTHY



stunning threesome of sharp granite spires, rising 2800 metres skyward, but equally impressive are the trails. These signposted paths travel along turquoise lakes, skirt the enormous glaciers that unfurl from the southern ice field, and penetrate the cool, almost bewitched forests of dwarf lenga trees.

Once part of a large ranch known as an estancia, Torres del Paine only became a national park in 1959, though its first tourists had ridden through on horseback back in the 1880s. The Victorian party, which met Indian camps and the wild guanacos (native camelids) which still remain numerous today, included Lady Florence Dixie, who would later pen a memoir extolling the great adventure.

Adventure remains the draw here, although comforts have increased exponentially. An extensive park infrastructure includes hotels,



Patagonia National Park

Photo Carolyn McCarthy



Puyuhuapi Lodge & Spa

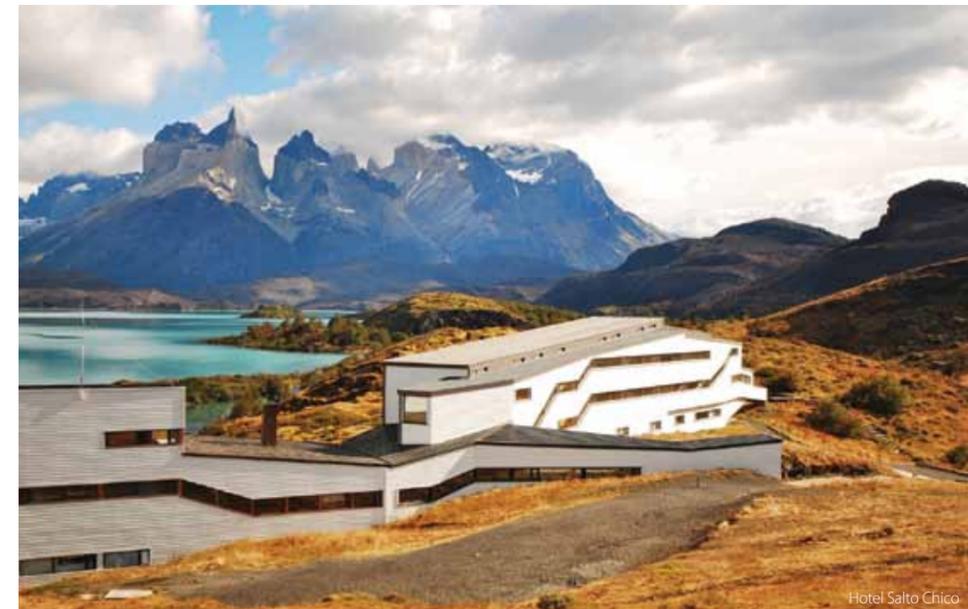


Lodge in Valle Chacabuco

**T**he wind greets you first. The southern sky is big and ringed with clouds, their hues ranging from chalk to slate, scattered over the tawny steppe. Welcome to Patagonia.

Flights from Argentina and Santiago, Chile land in Punta Arenas. Once a key port for ships rounding Cape Horn, the city retains hints of the elegance of the 19th century wool boom, with a grand plaza surrounded by classical architecture. It is a handy hub for visiting nearby penguin colonies and learning about the region's frontier history. Yet what may be most remarkable are its stark surroundings. Jump in a car and the Wild West landscape of Patagonia appears in a matter of minutes.

Visitors from all over the globe are lured to this end of the earth location to take in the sprawling 2,400 square-kilometre Torres del Paine National Park, one of the world's best spots for trekking. The park's namesake is a



Hotel Salto Chico

heated trekking huts, shuttle buses and ferries. Explora, a modern lodge with sweeping views of the Paine massif, puts the outdoors at the heart of your stay. In the evening, guides gather with guests to plan the next day's adventures, which focus on Paine's lesser-known footpaths and horse trails.

The park's massive popularity, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors per year, means more and more visitors opt to go outside the December through February peak season. Most trails are open from October through April, and some even remain accessible throughout winter, when snowshoes replace hiking boots as the mode of transport and the cover of snow offers the distinct pleasure of tracking animals. Wearing warm clothing in layers is key preparation to enjoying any season. Even in summer, there can be for four seasons in a day -- hail, wind and strong sunshine are all possibilities.



Yet visiting in the austral summer does bring one clear benefit: long hours of daylight which make an outing conducive to full immersion, not just hiking from point A to B, but also watching wildlife and soaking in the landscapes. When nightfall happens after 10pm, campers face the unusual challenge of bedding down before dark. But you can be assured that you've had a full day.

Those who want to experience Patagonia at its most remote should explore the region of Aisen. Though slightly north of Torres del Paine, there is no road connection because it is separated by the southern ice field. Access is gained via the north by ferries, small airports and mostly gravel roads.

Homesteaders settled Aisen only at the beginning of the 20th century, living in utter isolation until Chile's now iconic southern road, the Carretera Austral, was built in the 1980s. Wild landscapes, big rivers and rural hospitality characterise the region. Water is a permanent feature, taking the form of massive glaciers, fjords and seasonal rains that nurture the cool Valdivian rainforest. It also means outstanding natural hot springs.

The best known is Termas de Puyuhuapi, Chile's premiere hot springs resort. It's reached by a short boat ride to a remote peninsula surrounded by lush forest, which meets the Pacific in a spot where the occasional dolphin glides by. Its spa treatments and a glass-walled

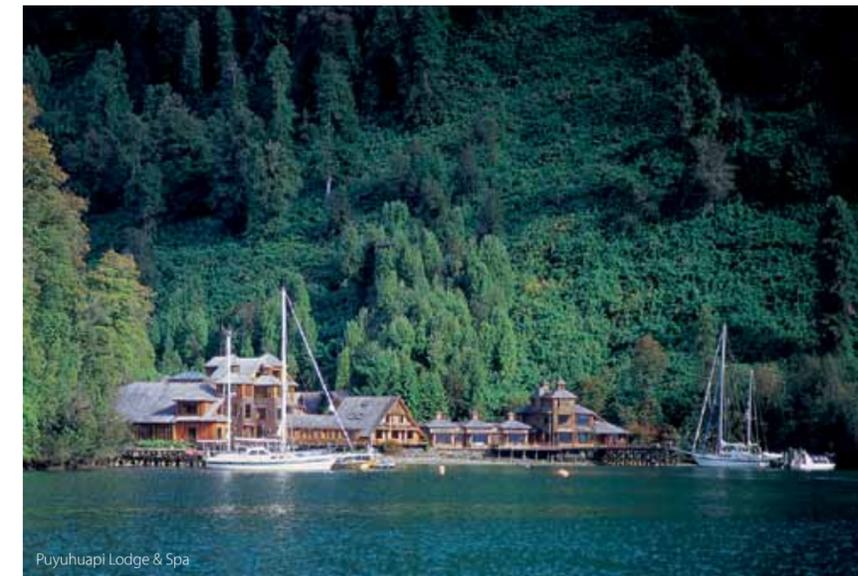


34°C thermal pool are main attractions. For a full nature immersion, follow the wooden boardwalks through vibrant greenery to an assortment of natural stone pools that watch over Dorita Bay. On a day of light rain, this is the place to feel reborn.

Travelling the Carretera Austral is a journey through scenic landscapes and surprises, with rolling farmland dotted with shingled homes, the occasional roadblocks of crossing sheep and waterfalls that burst the seams of steep cliffs. Heading south, visitors reach the regional capital of Coyhaique and Puerto Chacabuco, where cruises depart for the San Rafael Glacier.

The Carretera Austral continues south to Lake General Carrera. Chile's largest lake, its sky blue expanse reflects distant snowy peaks on a (rare) still day. Boat rides take visitors to sculpted marble caves and out to fishing spots. From here, it is a short distance to the future Patagonia National Park.

Creating a buzz throughout Patagonia, this new 690 square-kilometre private park is the best place to view uninterrupted wildlife. Flamingo, flop-eared viscacha (a chinchilla



Puyuhuapi Lodge & Spa

relative), herds of guanaco and the Andean condor are all easily spotted. Also present but elusive are puma and huemul, a rare native deer.

The future Patagonia National Park is the latest project of Kris Tompkins, half of the American philanthropist couple responsible for creating more parkland in South America than any private donor in history. Modelled on Yosemite and Yellowstone, the infrastructure features handsome stone lodges built to last with stunning details. With only six rooms, The Lodge at Valle Chacabuco is an understated gem, with hardwood trim, huge fireplaces and stunning nature photography throughout. As the park is developed and completed, it will

eventually be donated to the Chilean state.

Recently opened to the public, the park's meticulous restoration from overgrazed ranch land was years in the making. Volunteers and staff dismantled hundreds of kilometres of fences, so Patagonia's native species would return.

Now a series of hiking trails weave through its shimmering grasslands and steppe to gemstone-colored lagoons and rocky ridge tops. Wander the ridge tops and the silence leaves a searing impression. Yet resilience may be its most stunning feature, the idea that in places like Patagonia, the mark of humans is still yet but a trace. ▲



**GETTING THERE**

Santiago's international airport Arturo Benitez has connections with Singapore via Air Canada, KLM Royal Dutch, Delta Airlines and British Airways. Regional flights to Coyhaique and Punta Arenas are operated by Lan and Sky Airlines, with several flights daily.



**USEFUL INFO**

**CRUCEROS AUSTRALIS**  
Luxurious four-day and five-day sightseeing cruises between Punta Arenas and Ushuaia between September and May.  
[www.australis.com](http://www.australis.com)

**CATAMARANES DEL SUR**  
Cruises to see San Rafael Glacier on a 12-hour day trip from Puerto Chacabuco.  
[www.catamaranesdelsur.cl](http://www.catamaranesdelsur.cl)



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[www.explora.com](http://www.explora.com)

**TERMAS DE PUYUHUAPI HOTEL & SPA**  
[www.puyuhuapilodgespa.com](http://www.puyuhuapilodgespa.com)

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