

## SOUTH AMERICA

**P**ATAGONIA, a land best known for bitter winds and vast empty spaces, sprawls across the southern halves of the South American continent, either side of the mighty Andean cordillera. Like our own Outback, Patagonia, which encompasses much of southern Argentina and Chile, is more a state of mind than a defined region.

Its national parks encompass awe-inspiring glaciers and sawtooth peaks, granite massifs and verdant forests. South America's trademark camels – the guanaco, vicuña, llama and alpaca – exemplify the wildlife of Patagonia, as do those fearsome predators, the condor and the puma.

Adventures await on both sides of the Andes ... here are several must-dos.

**Cruise down into the Straits of Magellan** to meet a pod of humpback whales cavorting without a care in the world. Operating out of Punta Arenas, Chile's southernmost mainland port, MV Forrest was once a sturdy workhorse in the Falkland Islands but has been refitted as a boutique expedition vessel. Short cruises penetrate some of the tangled channels off the Straits of Magellan to reach undisturbed sanctuaries for dolphins and humpback whales and glaciers still unnamed; longer itineraries cater to the avid wildlife photographer. See [expeditiontazzy.com](http://expeditiontazzy.com)

**Saddle up to become a gaucho** – or a Chilean baqueano – for a day and canter up to an alpine lake or on the hillsides around Laguna Sofia outside Puerto Natales. Expect to be guided by a beret-dad baqueano (of either gender). Within the Torres del Paine National Park and its own property, the Hotel Las Torres offers pony treks and hikes up to the Mirador Las Torres, an exposed lookout. See [lastorres.com](http://lastorres.com)

**Hike up** to the mighty glacial caves where early human hunters sheltered alongside the mylodon, a long-extinct giant prehistoric sloth. Strolling through open beech forest and scrub to the third and largest cave glimpsed a wild puma on the prowl – almost as unexpected as a mylodon. See [cuevadelmilodon.cl](http://cuevadelmilodon.cl)

**Explore fabled Tierra del Fuego**, Land of Fire, the southernmost extremity of the



## 'Outback' adventures

Norway isn't only the only country with fjords and cowboys aren't only in the US. Down in South America, Patagonia has grand waterways, gauchos and some other must-dos, writes **Philip Game**



Americas. A daily car ferry ([www.tabasa.cl](http://www.tabasa.cl)) connects Punta Arenas with Porvenir on the less-developed western end of Tierra del Fuego; cruise ships sail to the bustling Argentine port of Ushuaia. The windswept town of Porvenir is knocked together from corrugated iron, its buildings sometimes brightly painted, others displaying every shade of rust. Rent or borrow a mountain bike to venture out into the surrounding pampas to meet king penguins, cormorants, sea birds and black-necked swans.

**Enjoy a touch of luxury** in the most unlikely setting, a century-old meatworks transformed into a luxury hotel. Aptly named, The Singular Patagonia Hotel is a one-of-a-kind property that faces a sound flanked by towering snow-dusted ranges. Guests pick their way past silent steam-powered machinery in the former engine rooms and refrigeration chambers to reach the bar and restaurant. At The Singular, my first pre-dinner pisco sour was followed by a hotpot of king crab pie, with Chilean cabernet sauvignon. On the second evening a roast fillet

**WILD COUNTRY:** (from top) Hikers in Cuernos del Paine mountains; vicuña in the Torres del Paine National Park; and traditional houses in Porvenir, in Tierra del Fuego. **Pictures:** Getty Images

of guanaco, beautifully marinated, went down a treat. See [thesingular.com](http://thesingular.com)

**Cruise the fjords** of Chilean Patagonia to step ashore on glaciers large and small. A half-day boat trip enables a visit to otherwise inaccessible fjords and glaciers within the Bernardo O'Higgins National Park. On my visit the heavy, brooding clouds of dawn opened to reveal sheer cliffs, snow-capped peaks and above all, two great cascades of glacier ice, one being the Serrano Glacier, which feeds a lake dotted with bobbing ice floes. See [www.agunsapatagonia.cl](http://www.agunsapatagonia.cl) Some adventurous travellers reach Patagonia aboard the Navimag cargo and passenger ferries following a four-day voyage through the Chilean fjords from Puerto Montt to Puerto Natales. See [www.navimag.com](http://www.navimag.com)

**Witness the fleeting magic** of an Andean sunrise or sunset bathing the mountains of the Torres del Paine. Popular trekking routes in Chile's Torres del Paine National Park include the four-to-five-day W Trek or

the seven-day Paine Circuit, equipped with campsites and refuges (refugios). These granite spires lure climbers and walkers from all over the world and refugio reservations are strongly recommended. Puerto Natales tour operators offer guided hikes. [fantasticosur.com](http://fantasticosur.com), more options detailed in guidebooks

**Marvel at the vast wall of ice** that is the face of Argentina's Perito Moreno Glacier, perhaps the world's only advancing glacier. Facilities are well-developed here at Los Glaciares National Park and regular coach excursions operate from El Calafate.

**Admire the mountain vistas** from the Argentine side. The township of El Chalten, north again from El Calafate, lies within a valley enclosed by dramatic peaks. An easy hike up through the hillside forests reveals a 120-degree array of serrated, snowy peaks, gleaming brilliantly if the weather is kind. A three-day trek follows two remote lakes westwards back over the mountains to Chile.

**Discover the lost way of life** and the tragic history of the aboriginal tribes of Patagonia, including the Aonikenk, the Selk'nam, the Kaweskar and the Yaghan. The indigenous people are acknowledged today in the Salesian Museum in Punta Arenas and the town museum in El Calafate.

• Museo Salesiano, [museomaggiorinoborgatello.cl](http://museomaggiorinoborgatello.cl)  
• Centro de Interpretación Histórica, [museocalafate.com.ar](http://museocalafate.com.ar)

**Experience daily life on a sprawling estancia or sheep station.** Enclosed within Torres del Paine National Park, the Hotel Las Torres remains faithful to its roots as a guesthouse attached to a remote cattle ranch in the mountains. Hop out of bed in time to watch the baqueanos corral the horses as each day begins. [lastorres.com](http://lastorres.com)

Other estancia experiences include Estancia Rio Verde on Skyring Sound, just north of Punta Arenas. [estanciarioverde.cl](http://estanciarioverde.cl)

Philip Game was a guest of the properties mentioned.



### G02 PATAGONIA

#### GETTING THERE

LAN now operates Sydney-Auckland-Santiago de Chile, codesharing with Qantas, complementing a network of domestic and regional services.

Within Chile, Sky Airline services offer more competitive fares.

Long-distance bus transport is quite

comfortable and reliable, but few rail services remain. See [lan.com](http://lan.com), [www.skyairline.cl](http://www.skyairline.cl)

Australian visitors do not require a visa to enter Chile, but hand over about \$US100 (cash or credit card) on arrival. Argentina's equivalent must be paid online (get started at <http://csidn.mrecic.gov.ar/en/node/32256>).

#### TOURING

Operators of adventure tours into the Patagonian Andes include Intrepid Travel

([intrepidtravel.com](http://intrepidtravel.com)), KE Adventure Travel ([keadventure.com](http://keadventure.com)) and Say Hueque ([sayhueque.com](http://sayhueque.com)).

#### SEE WHALES

These companies also operate whale-watching sightseeing cruises in the Straits of Magellan.

Whale Sound, whale watching ex-Punta Arenas ([whalesound.com](http://whalesound.com)).  
Cruceros Australes, Tierra del Fuego channels and whale watching ([australis.com](http://australis.com)).

Cruceros Skorpis, departing Puerto Natales ([skorpis.cl](http://skorpis.cl)).  
Book through Comapa in Puerto Natales, Punta Arenas or Ushuaia (See [comapa.com/es](http://comapa.com/es))

#### MORE

Chilean Tourism ([chile.travel/en/](http://chile.travel/en/))  
Argentine Tourism ([turismo.gov.ar](http://turismo.gov.ar))  
Lonely Planet's *Chile & Easter Island* includes a chapter on Argentine Patagonia.  
Footprint Travel Guides' *South American Handbook* covers the entire continent.