

*This article first appeared in the September 2000 issue of On The Hill magazine*

## Patagonia

“Patagonia! She is a hard mistress. She casts her spell. An enchantress! She folds you in her arms and never lets go.” - Bruce Chatwin, *In Patagonia*.

“The country remained the same, and was extremely uninteresting... the curse of sterility is on the land.” - Charles Darwin, *The Voyage Of The Beagle*.

“And when, after a the long trip, I arrived in Patagonia I felt that I was nowhere. But the most surprising thing of all was that I was still in the world... I thought: [italics] Nowhere is a place. [close italics].” - Paul Theroux, *Patagonia Revisited*.

### Where Is It And Who Owns It?

Patagonia is not a political country but a geographic anomaly. Spanning two countries - Argentina and Chile - Patagonia occupies of up to one million square kilometres, yet just 5% of both nations' populations live there. In Argentina, Patagonia is generally understood to begin south of the Rio Colorado, but in Chile this definition encompasses areas like their Lake District. Chileans on the other hand recognise Patagonia as being the land south of Puerto Montt (a much smaller area). Even then some Chileans believe that Patagonia exists only in Argentina. As one local Chilean informed me in no uncertain terms, “This is not Patagonia - this is Magellanes!” (Magellan was the Spanish explorer who explored much of this region. Ironically, it is he who is credited with coming up with the name Patagonia!) The World Service's definition of what has become recognised as Patagonia in popular circles is the land south of Puerto Montt. Look in an atlas and you'll see that Argentine Patagonia is for the most part as flat as a pancake, whilst the Chilean side is littered with mountains that stretch like a spine all the way to Cape Horn.

## Vital Statistics

Time difference: Chile is GMT less four hours, Argentina less three.

Currency: Argentine & Chilean Peso

International telephone code: Chile: +56, Argentina +54

## Getting There And Around

Patagonia is well-served by airports. Most visitors fly into either Santiago in Chile or Buenos Aires in Argentina. Journey Latin America (020 8747 3108) are currently offering return fares with Varig starting at around £400+taxes. The so-called high season for flights is July, August and Christmas so avoid these times if you possibly can. From Santiago you can fly to Punta Arenas, from Buenos Aires flights go to Rio Gallegos. For around £630 you could fly into Buenos Aires and onto Rio Gallegos, returning via Punta Arenas and Santiago. It is also possible to fly from Santiago to Puerto Montt and then catch the boat to Puerto Natales, although this can be rough passage and is often full-booked in the summer months. Even when you arrive in Patagonia do not underestimate the vast distances involved between places. Nowadays thanks to cross-country bus routes linking places such as Calafate with Puerto Natales, tourists are spared multi-day detours via Rio Gallegos.

## When To Go

Most guidebooks to Patagonia encourage their readers to visit during the short southern summer which lasts from December to March. There is less chance of rain and snow at this time of year, although the weather is often unsettled and the infamous Patagonian wind blows more or less continuously. However, Eduardo Scott, one-time Park Ranger in the Paine National Park told me that the winter months, whilst colder, brought more stable weather. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of visitors travel in January and February.

## What To Take

The clothing and equipment that you use in the UK in the autumn should in the main be fine for trekking in Patagonia in the summer months. Waterproofs are essential. Since they will probably be worn to protect against wind rather than rain it is important that they are cut from a highly breathable material. Otherwise pack a separate windproof smock. As much as the clothing should be synthetic rather than cotton to speed drying times. If you are trekking then ensure that your footwear is stout with good grip on the soles. Tents should be able to stand up to high winds. Patagonia is often quite damp and so the place feels a lot colder at night than it really is. Synthetic sleeping bags will deal with the conditions better than a down bag. If you only have the latter, place it inside a Gore-Tex bivi bag or similar. Make sure that you have a thick closed-cell foam mat or self-inflating mattress. Gas cannisters are available but is best to bring what you need from Santiago or Buenos Aires if you are travelling overland to Patagonia. Otherwise bring a fuel filter, ensure that your multi-fuel stove is totally field-maintainable and take the time to clean it regularly.

## A Word About Food

On my first journey to Patagonia I made the terrible mistake of being talked into buying the cheapest food in the supermarket. It wasn't unpleasant so much as inedible. None of my party could swallow more than a mouthful before we started to gag. Later we found out that the cheapest pasta in the shops is so disgusting that the locals won't even feed it to their pets. By contrast, paying a reasonable price for better quality food is well worth the extra cash. There is a much wider choice of lightweight, dehydrated and freeze-dried food and drinks to be found in Chile and Argentina than in the UK so don't bother bringing food from Britain. Note that prices in Chile are noticeably less than Argentina. It is illegal to bring certain produce from Argentina into Chile.

## Email

Email is possible from both countries. Again, it is cheaper to send and receive email in Chile than Argentina. Opening a free email account such as those operated by yahoo.com and ekit.com will allow you to send and receive email from any computer with access to the internet.

## Money

Like most South American countries, the US dollar is king in Patagonia. Chilean and Argentinean peso are readily exchangeable in each country. Avoid travellers cheques and instead take new US dollar bills and a couple of credit cards - ideally one VISA, the other Mastercard. Hole-in-the-walls normally give the option of dollars or pesos. Some establishments levy a surcharge for credit cards and/or a discount for cash. Ensure that you have sufficient cash in both dollars and the local currency before venturing away from the major towns.

## Language

Both countries speak Spanish; Chileans in particular speak very quickly indeed. English is not widely spoken, so bear in mind that without a working knowledge of the language getting anything arranged (especially when you are in a hurry) may take a longer-than-expected time.

## Getting Started

Yes	Sí
No	No
Please	Por Favor
Hello	Hola (pronounced 'Ola')
Thank You	Gracias
Good morning	Buenos días
Goodbye	Adiós

Check This Out: Lonely Planet Latin American Spanish Phrasebook. ISBN 0864425589.

## Medical Matters

Drink bottled water in cities and treat water taken from streams with iodine. Diphtheria, Hepatitis A and B, and Tetanus vaccines are all recommended. There is no risk of malaria in Patagonia, but be aware that other South American destinations may require additional injections and malarial courses. Whilst here might not be any malaria in Patagonia, the mosquitoes here have a fearsome bite especially in the evening. Wear long-sleeved shirts and trousers and pack a head net and repellent. People sensitive to insect bites would do well to include antihistamine tablets in their medical kit.

Check This Out: Altitude Illness, Prevention & Treatment. Bezruchka. ISBN 1871890578.

## Where To Stay

Many types of accommodation await you in Patagonia from camping on organised and wild sites to full-blown hotels with modern amenities both inside the national parks and in the towns. Also available in the towns are pensiones which are rooms let out in people's houses. If you are on a budget look out for these. A number of refuges have also been established in some of the parks but as you cannot guarantee to find room inside them, most people trek with a tent.

## The Mountains

The mountains of Patagonia offer climbers the prospect of some of the most challenging super-alpine climbing in the world. Granite spires rise inexorably into the sky and attract world-class mountaineers in both summer and winter. Witness this account of climbing on the Central Tower of Paine as told by Chris Bonington in his book, 'Mountaineer': "...Eventually Don [Whillans] and I made a bid for the

summit. We had some narrow escapes. One of the fixed ropes, frayed by the wind, parted in Don's hands whilst he was leading. Somehow he maintained his balance, kept hold of both ends of the rope, retied them and continued!"

By contrast the trekking around these mountains is sublime.

## Torres del Paine National Park

There are two separate mountain blocks within this Chilean National Park, the most famous of which are the three towers from which the park takes its name. A full week is required to complete the circuit of the Torres del Paine, which is sometimes closed even in summer because of deep snow on its highest pass. If you're feeling less energetic then there are straightforward hikes to the bases of the Torres, and also to the foot of the second set of mountains, the beautiful Cuernos. One of the striking features of this park are the beautiful lakes including Lago Grey which is fed by Glacier Grey. As a result the lake is often full of icebergs. By contrast Lago Pehoe is only a couple of hours walk away but emerald-green in colour.

## Los Glacieres National Park

The three big attractions on this park are Cerro Fitzroy and Cerro Torre, and the Perito Moreno Glacier. Cerro Fitzroy is without a doubt one of the greatest mountains in the world. It rises two vertical miles in a single bound. Just sitting at its base is frightening. Contemplating climbing it takes the mind into a new dimension. Cerro Torre and its slightly shorter neighbours, Torre Egger and Aguja Standhart are a beautiful triplet of peaks. What is surprising about trekking in the Los Glacieres park is just how straightforward some of the routes are. Unlike the Himalaya where trekkers must battle with the altitude, here in Patagonia there is no additional exertion required beyond putting one foot in front of the other. Just for once the rewards outweigh the effort!

## Valdes Peninsula

On the opposite side of Patagonia to the mountains lies the Vales Peninsula, known as the Zoo of the South Atlantic. People come here for the abundant wildlife which includes sea lions, fur seals, guanacos, lesser rheas, roadrunner-like tinamous, the Patagonian hare, whales, dolphins and penguins. (Penguins can also be found at a colony close to Punta Arenas). Enjoy the wildlife from a distance so that they do not feel threatened.

## Patagonia Under Threat

Patagonia, like so many of the world's most beautiful places, is under threat from developers. According to the World Land Trust, "...huge acres of land are coming on to the market in Patagonia because of the collapse of the world market for wool. Ranches are being snapped up by speculators for quick profits...". The World Land Trust, which counts Sir David Attenborough as one of its supporters, is inviting individuals to purchase acres of land surrounding the Valdes Peninsula to save it from development. £25 allows the trust to purchase an acre of Patagonia on your behalf. For more details call 01986 874422 or visit [www.worldlandtrust.org](http://www.worldlandtrust.org).



I Did It! Dave Bradbrook caught the boat from Puerto Montt to Puerto Natales and spent five weeks trekking and touring around Patagonia.

"I'd read and heard a great deal about Patagonia and decided to go and experience the place for myself. I didn't over-plan the trip - it was all about getting off the aircraft in Santiago and heading south.

"I had a huge amount of good fortune throughout my whole journey. In Puerto Montt everyone told me that the boat was fully-booked but I happened upon a

friendly travel agent who faxed the ship and I secured a berth! The boat journey took four days and gave plenty of time to meet other like-minded travellers. The views from the bridge were fantastic. Beginning in the north the landscape was very green but as we continued it became more barren and isolated and reminded me of the coast of Scotland.

"I'd been to the Himalaya before but the Torres del Paine were nevertheless very impressive. Even from a distance of 25km the fortress of granite rock and emerald green lakes were exactly as I imagined they would be. I hooked up with a Swiss chap to trek the seven-day circuit around Paine and that worked very well. Fitzroy and Cerro Torre were incredible and must be seen to be believed, especially at sunrise. I was really lucky with the weather. Of course from time to time it was very wet and very cold - like a summer in North Wales - but this only added to the charm of the place."

Nick Lewis spent four weeks in the Los Glaciers National Park in the middle of a Patagonian winter, from mid-June to mid-July.

"Out of 28 days we had 21 good weather days. It wasn't as cold as we thought it was going to be. When we arrived we experienced about eight and a half hours of daylight with twilight either side of that. By 6pm it was dark enough to need headtorches. Dawn would begin round about 8.30pm but it was too cold to do anything until 9am. In the valley it was about -10 to -15°C at night. Towards the end of the trip it had warmed up a bit and during the day I would just walk around in a thermal.

"In Chalten there were patches of snow on the ground. Overall you don't need skis to trek around but they were needed on the final approach to Jim Bridwell's Base Camp beneath Cerro Torre. But going around to Fitzroy Base Camp there was hardly any snow at all and I kept thinking, "This is mega trekking." There are



many interesting valleys to explore away from the traditional base camps, and loads of wildlife. In one forest we even spotted green parrots.

“Travelling around was a doddle. There were only eight climbers in the entire range and no trekkers. We flew to Rio Gallegos and bought all our food there. Two or three buses go from Rio Gallegos to Calafate all the time. From Calafate buses run to Chalten two or three times a week. there is also a bus that runs directly from Rio Gallegos to Chalten on a Sunday. In Chalten we stayed in the Albergue Patagonia, which is run by Rueben and Esther. It costs \$10 a night and you can cook your own food there or ask Esther to cook for you. It’s the best Base Camp I’ve ever been to!”



### ‘Been There, Done That’

So you’ve trekked around Paine, camped beneath Fitzroy and visited the Valdes Peninsula. But if you think that you’ve done it all, think again. We asked Steve Jones, who has been leading Raleigh International expeditions in Chile for the past two years, to share some of his knowledge on the hidden gems of Chilean Patagonia.

“The vast majority of people doing big trips in South America travel south through Chile because there are good road links to Puerto Montt in Region X. From here the country falls into the sea and you can’t continue the road all the way south. So people jump over Region XI to region XII and go to Puerto Natales and the Torres del Paine. The downside of Paine is that it is on the world map of places to go.

“There are places in Region XI as beautiful and rewarding as Paine that are not very well known. The capital of Region XI is Coyhaique. Its airport is at Balmaceda which is served by several daily flights from Santiago. It can also be reached by

ferries which arrive at the nearby port of Chacabuco. The principal highway in the region is the Carreterra Austral (or 'southern road'). The Northern Patagonian icecap borders the Carreterra, so the road can be used as the jumping off-point for any number of adventures.

"There are some stunning places to trek. The nearest place to Coyhaique is the National Reserve of Cerro Castillo (or 'Castle Mountains'). There's good alpine climbing in the spring and wonderful trekking through the southern summer. The scenery is as stunning as anything in Paine yet it's an unsung gem. The region also boasts the second largest lake in South America. It straddles the border with Argentina and both countries have a different name for it! In Chile it is called Lago General Carrera whilst in Argentina it is known as Lago Buenos Aires. It has fantastic azure and turquoise colours and is amazing to drive around. The lake is sandwiched between the mountains, the icecap and the Jeinimeni (pronounced 'Henny-Menny') National Reserve. There's very easy walking in the valleys but there aren't any bridges so be prepared to get when wet crossing rivers.

"Adventurous hillwalkers who can look after themselves in the Welsh hills in summer and who can organise the transport and deal with the remoteness will be able to trek in Region XI. There also some very serious journeys possible that knock adventure trekking in the Karakoram for six..."

Raleigh recruits about 100 volunteers between the ages of 17 and 25 years to take part as 'Venturers' on each expedition. Raleigh also needs 35 people over 25 years to accompany each expedition as volunteer staff. To get involved call 020 7371 8585 or email [info@raleigh.org.uk](mailto:info@raleigh.org.uk) [close box-out]

Not Quite The End Of The World...

You may think that Patagonia is so far south that there is nowhere left to go! Yet incredibly Patagonia is a launch pad for an even more unlikely set of destinations...

#### Tierra del Fuego

An island separated from Patagonia by the Magellan Straits. Like Patagonia, it is divided into Chilean and Argentine sectors.

#### The Falkland Islands

Flights from mainland Argentina to the Falklands have now resumed, and it is also possible to sail from Patagonia to this British dependency. To the Argentinians, the Falklands are the 'Islas Malvinas' - always have been and always will be. Any tense moments about the sovereignty of the islands can normally be defused by changing the subject to football and in particular Manchester United.

#### Antarctica

The ports in Southern Patagonia are the most popular departure points for cruises to Antarctica, most of which need to be booked in advance through UK operators.

#### Check These Out

Trekking In The Patagonian Andes, Lonely Planet, ISBN 0864424779

South America's National Parks, the Mountaineers, ISBN 0861904478

Backpacking In Chile & Argentina, Bradt, ISBN

In Patagonia, Bruce Chatwin, 0330256440

Patagonia Revisited, Bruce Chatwin & Paul Theroux, ISBN 0224036076

Trekking Great Walks Of The World, John Cleare, ISBN 0044401353

Mountaineer, Chris Bonington, ISBN 090637197X

© Paul Deegan 2000. [www.pauldeegan.com](http://www.pauldeegan.com)