

[HOME](#) » [TRAVEL](#) » [ACTIVITY AND ADVENTURE](#)

## Patagonia: Trip of a lifetime

In our latest instalment of the world's greatest journeys, Chris Moss offers an inspiring, practical guide to visiting the life-changing wilderness of Patagonia.



A guanaco stands on a hillside in Torres del Paine National Park in Chile Photo: Alamy

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 9 Comments

'Bienvenido a la Patagonia', says the sign at Balmaceda airport in **Chile**. There's something stirring about being welcomed not to a nation or a city but to a landscape of the imagination, a site of myth-laden memoirs and storied exploration, a region where Darwin and FitzRoy, WH Hudson and the Welsh settlers, St Exupéry and Bruce Chatwin all experienced life-changing journeys.

No one agrees exactly where the fertile pampas end and arid Patagonia begins, but for most people the northern border is the Río Colorado. That's on the Argentine side. In Chile, it's much lower, probably around the island of Chiloé, where the lake district peters out and the jagged coast of Palena begins.

This triangle at the southern end of South America is immense – about 400,000 square miles – with three quarters of that in **Argentina**, and then there's the island of Tierra del Fuego at the very bottom. The name of Patagonia comes down to us from "patagones", the name given to the tall native Tehuelche people by Ferdinand Magellan in the early 16th century. It might mean "big feet", but is probably an allusion to a "dog-headed monster" in the Spanish romance Primaleón. Either way, it was a magical-sounding name for a faraway land.

It was fitting. For Patagonia lends itself to flights of fancy. It is home – surprisingly, perhaps – to the world's seventh-largest desert, a mainly flat swathe of steppe and tableland that occupies most of Argentine Patagonia and juts into Chile's Aisén and Magallanes provinces. Also in the latter are two great icefields, remnants of the last ice age, which spill out of the Andes as impressive glaciers. The wildest winds in South America blow across eastern Patagonia, while the west has some of the most beautiful temperate rainforests on the planet.



The peaks of in Torres del Paine

Patagonia is a wonder of the world. Its headlining acts – the Torres del Paine national park, the southern right whales off Península Valdés, the Perito Moreno glacier – are spectacular, but can detract from the sublime and varied topography of the region as a whole. For some travellers, the most memorable moments will not be at the photogenic highlights but on the road trips in between: the huge dome of the sky, tufts of coirón grass bursting through the desert, a solitary guanaco keeping watch from a hilltop.

These are the scenes that define South America's great tabula rasa. At a practical level, the tourism offering is ever more diverse: 4x4 adventures, golfing, salmon fishing, cruising, riding, quad-biking and skiing. For those who need a break, the remote – and increasingly luxurious – estancias are an opportunity to read, drink good (Patagonian) wines and dine on the finest barbecued lamb. But Patagonia is like nowhere else on Earth and needs patience and a willingness to move slowly – it is geological time down here and hasty visitors will miss everything that matters.

### **When to go**

South of the 40th parallel, South America has a temperate climate and a true winter season. The best months to go are from November to March (the southern summer), when the mean daytime temperature hovers around the twenties in the Bariloche area and the low teens at Ushuaia and Punta Arenas. On the Argentine side, expect strong winds in the steppe areas; on the Chilean side, rainfall is likely the closer you are to the Pacific Ocean. Note that South Americans holiday in January and February, so November, December and March are ideal.



Ice tumbles off the Perito Moreno glacier

## How to book

Most people travel to Patagonia on tours – in small groups or self-guided – allowing tour operators to sort out the boring stuff, such as a night's rest in Santiago or Buenos Aires after the long flight, as well as internal flights, land transfers and itineraries. More than 40 specialist firms, ranging from medium-budget group operators to high-end bespoke holiday companies, can be found on the website of the Latin American Travel Association ([lata.org](http://lata.org)). Those who want to go independently should start by browsing the excellent website [destinationargentina.com](http://destinationargentina.com), and the not-so-slick, government-run [turismo.gov.ar](http://turismo.gov.ar) and [chile.travel](http://chile.travel), and take a look at accommodation and local service providers. Many can be booked on the phone or via email using credit cards. Always allow more time between flights and activities than you think you'll need.

## Tactics

### Which side and where?

Argentine Patagonia is vast, wide open and pretty empty. The interior is made up of arid scrub and steppe, with towns (many with jet-standard airports) spread along the coast and inland along the foothills of the Andes. Tourism has moved on since the Seventies, when Patagonia drew hippies and mountaineers. In the past two decades, lots of estancias have opened their doors to travellers and hotel firms have built new estancia-type properties. Some regions – especially Río Negro and Neuquén provinces in northern Patagonia – are very popular with Argentine visitors.



The big open road

Some of the more remote towns are more like existential film sets than tourist centres, but Ushuaia, the southernmost city, and El Chaltén, Argentina's official trekking capital, have cosy bars and restaurants as well as smart hotels. Puerto Madryn, Bariloche, San Martín de los Andes and El Calafate are all developed and, in season, lively hubs. The best way to visit Argentina is to choose an airport, a region and/or a national park and stick to it. The really intrepid might want to hire a car and explore out-of-the-way parts, such as the Perito Moreno national park (not to be confused with the glacier of the same name) or the atmospheric coastal towns of San Julián and Puerto Deseado.

Chilean Patagonia is, like Chile, a slender affair: wherever you go, you are close to the ocean as well as the Andes. In three weeks, it's feasible to see the whole country – just.

The lake district in the north and the island of Chiloé are well-established tourist regions with good campsites, paved roads, hot-spring resorts and national parks. Puerto Montt is the departure point for a range of cruises into the Chilean fjords and for the local ferry to Chaitén and the beautiful Pumalín nature reserve.

Long ignored, the Aisén province in central Patagonia is opening up to tour groups and independent travellers – **Journey Latin America** ([journeylatinamerica.co.uk](http://journeylatinamerica.co.uk)) offers a self-drive holiday there – and has South America's second-biggest lake (Lago General Carrera). Punta Arenas is the Patagonian city with the richest history; it was colonised when the region was wilderness and was a major port until the Panama Canal opened in 1914. Its airport is also the access point for trips to Torres del Paine and for cruises around Tierra del Fuego with an excellent Chilean firm, Cruceros Australis ([australis.com](http://australis.com)).



Neuquen Province near San Carlos de Bariloche

## On a Budget

**Trekking Swoop Patagonia** ((0117 369 0196; [swoop-patagonia.co.uk](http://swoop-patagonia.co.uk)) offers a 14-day tour hiking along southern Patagonia's best trails around Torres del Paine in Chile and near Mt Fitzroy in Argentina. From £1,590 per person, including guide, accommodation in huts and basic hotels and local transport and airport transfers, but not international or domestic flights. Departing January 31 2013.

## In comfort

### Northern Patagonia

**Wexas Travel** (0207 838 5892, [www.wexas.com](http://www.wexas.com)) has a seven-night trip combining Buenos Aires and Northern Patagonia in Argentina, with three nights b&b at the new Hub Porteño in Buenos Aires and two nights each at the Valle Perdido wine estate and the Estancia Tipiliuke on a fully-inclusive basis with horse-riding and other activities included. From £2,499 per person, including international and domestic flights and transfers.

Whale watching and Welsh watching **Last Frontiers** (01296 653000; [lastfrontiers.com](http://lastfrontiers.com)) has a 14-day self-drive itinerary that takes in Buenos Aires, Bariloche (where you pick up the car), the Seven Lakes route, Esquel and Gaiman and other Welsh towns, and a stay on Peninsula Valdés at the Estancia Rincón Chico. From £4,710, including all flights.

## Before you go

No vaccinations are required for this region, but check your insurance. Books to read in advance, en route and in your cosy estancia include Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Wind, Sand and Stars*, about the aviator's daring postal deliveries in Patagonia, and WH Hudson's *Idle Days in Patagonia*. Online, check out [patbrit.org](http://patbrit.org) (about British settlement) and the detailed [interpatagonia.com](http://interpatagonia.com).



Tourist walking on the Perito Moreno glacier in Argentina