

Perfect peaks and condors on South America's most spectacular new walking route



Patagonia now has a new trail from the Estancia Helsingfors to Estancia Cristina Credit:

- [Chris Moss](#), Destination expert

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Chris Moss follows a new trail in Los Glaciares National Park

Three condors circled on an updraught, occasionally swooping low to give us the eye. I don't think I've ever seen the Andean vulture-king up so close. We were on a bald high mountain pass, and had paused to rest some very weary legs and guzzle down lots of water.

I wondered if we'd stumbled too close to an eyrie. Or perhaps the birds were hoping that one of us would drop, parched and spent, and provide some easy pickings later that week. Then again, not many people hike through this part of Argentine [Patagonia](#), so chances are the condors were just curious.

I was escorting a mini-expedition (two very fit local guides, two quite fit tour operators, and me) to recce a new hiking trail from the Estancia Helsingfors to Estancia Cristina – two grand old country pads that combine herding sheep and horses with stabling tourists.

Some sections of the path had been there for years, used by rangers to monitor wildlife and illegal fires, but the well-run estancias at the trailheads are now working with UK specialist operator Swoop to offer guided walks from north to south along a meandering 50-mile route.

I say "route". In reality, apart from a well-used, clearly marked path at the beginning and some easy open country at the close – notwithstanding having to wade through two chilly

rivers – the bulk of the walk was through boulder fields, peaty marshland and, most fun of all, swathes of the snagging, thorny, knee-high bushes that characterise the lower slopes of the Patagonian Andes.



Andean condors in Patagonia Credit: getty

While I have a lot of respect for the evolutionary processes that have made the hardy neneo razor-like and the calafate berry tree clingily friendly, I admit to getting a bit fed up when they slowed me down, or tripped me up, or pulled at my gaiter laces.

There were also windy passes, ominous-looking wild cattle, cold nights in the tent and some steep sections that more often than not led to even steeper sections – those tricky false summits that seep hope like scudding clouds and squalls of icy rain (which I didn't have to overcome, but which anyone heading this way has to be prepared for).

The reward for these (in retrospect, minor) challenges was a whole new angle on a region I thought I knew well.

Argentina's Parque Nacional Los Glaciares is a wonderland of turquoise lakes, hanging and lakeside glaciers, a magnificent continental ice field, extensive temperate rainforests and U-shaped valleys scored out by the ice. It is home to condors, guanacos, pumas, lesser rheas, parrots, woodpeckers and endangered huemul deer. It has epic skies and some of the most amazing cloud formations I've ever seen – lenticulars that fill the morning horizon like ghostly UFOs come down to collect us.

But it's short of trails – and too many people cluster either at bottlenecks like the famous Perito Moreno glacier, on excursion boats, and on the popular trails over the Andes in Chile's Torres del Paine.



Too many people cluster at bottlenecks like the famous Perito Moreno glacier Credit: getty

The trail I was following, or making, or occasionally cursing, was a way of opening up this terrain, ideal for the tenacious, tough hiker who is willing to use his or her poles and gritted teeth to get through some “technical” sections.

Day one was a fast, energetic traverse along the mountainside at the far end of Lake Viedma. Cerro Mascarello, Cerro Cono and Cerro Cuadrado are low by Andean heights – none break through the 8,000ft mark – but the conditions this far south mean their sharp summits are draped in snow and ice all year round. Mists and low clouds drift at gusting speeds across the region, but clear just as quickly, revealing the fragile-looking frosted walls of towering peaks; no wonder some of the cerros are as yet unconquered.

Day two was hard going, as we covered only a few miles wading through dense, prickly undergrowth and had to do some serious hillwork. It was here the condors came in close, raising our collective spirits as they dived and looped. A vast field of large rocks provided a testing but stimulating final obstacle.

The next two days were long and tiring, but I could walk with my head up, looking about me – always a good sign. The sun came out and the landscapes had a hyperreal glow, from the painterly lakes to the ice cream-like glaze of glacier walls.

Our campsites were glorious. One was on a mellow lakeside, another on the lip of a blue glacier with a fast-flowing river to bathe in. The last was a tin hut formerly used by mountaineers. I opted to sleep outside, where there were stars (and no snores).



One of the region's guanacos Credit: getty

Having estancias bookending the walk added a degree of jeopardy – none of us was in a hurry to leave the cosy loveliness of Helsingfors for the exposed slopes – but also a welcome wind-down at the end. Estancia Cristina is rather posh and tidy for a “ranch” but it gives tired walkers time to take in the steppe and vast Lago Argentina at an unhurried pace without the weight of a backpack.

But the real finale of the walk is the splendour of the ice-scape. To get to the aforementioned tin hut, we had to undertake one final clamber through one of the strangest rock-filled canyons I’ve ever seen. Huge, sharp-edged boulders in black and rusty red had tumbled from the cliffs and left a Martian scene.

The thinnest of paths wound through, with one last dash up a slope of scree and volcanic cinder to take in a view fit for legends: the Upsala glacier, streaming off the great southern ice field, was majestic, studded with seracs. It was mesmerising, but it is also retreating as climate change heats up these remnants of the last ice age.

A condor came out to drift on the cold thermals. I sat down and watched, and listened.

How to do it

Swoop Patagonia (0117 369 0196, swoop-patagonia.com) can organise a six-day guided hike in the Los Glaciares National Park from £1,900pp, including a night at Estancia Helsingfors on the shores of Lake Viedma plus four nights camping. All meals, transport, guides, porter support and accommodation are included in the price. For an additional £550pp you can add a night at Estancia Cristina at the end of the hike (price includes meals, excursions and return transport to the town of El Calafate). This price does not include international or domestic flights. Flights from London to El Calafate with British Airways and Latam, via Buenos Aires, start at about £1,100 return.