

The perfect holiday in Patagonia – our expert's ultimate itinerary



Our expert tour of Patagonia takes in whales, glaciers and jagged mountain peaks Credit: iStock

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Largely barren, thinly populated, [windswept in summer and bitterly cold in winter](#), Patagonia shouldn't be as enthralling as it is. But there's something about this triangle shaped vastness at the bottom of [South America](#) that stirs intrepid souls. Its political geography – the last region of South America to be colonised, it's shared by Argentina and Chile – is less relevant than its physical reality: comprising steppe and tundra, gelid ocean and lifeless lake, rain-lashed islets and ice-locked Andes, it's the closest land mass to Antarctica and the very embodiment of “Out-There”.

While Patagonia is far more well-trodden than it was in the Seventies when travel writers Paul Theroux and Bruce Chatwin launched their stellar careers there, a spirit of discovery still seems appropriate. On Sept 20 1519, Ferdinand Magellan set sail from Sanlúcar de Barrameda in Andalusia on the landmark expedition that would be hailed as the first circumnavigation of the world – though Magellan was killed in the Philippines, leaving master (and sometime mutineer) Juan Sebastian Elcano to complete the voyage.

The sailors accompanying them were the first Europeans to make landfall on the Patagonian coast – at Puerto San Julián a year into the voyage – where they met giants they dubbed “Patagones”. Later, Magellan battled along the zigzagging strait that now bears his name.

Today's traveller has it easy, but distances are still something to be reckoned with when planning a visit. From Buenos Aires to Ushuaia at the foot of Tierra del Fuego, an island generally regarded as part of Patagonia, it's 1,920 miles (3,090km) on the Ruta 3. The more picturesque Ruta 40, which starts at the Strait of Magellan, runs along the Andes for a mind-boggling 3,157 miles (5,080km), all the way to the Bolivian border.

Drive those when you retire. This 11-day trip is a taster, combining short flights, easy road trips, a bit of hiking and a boat trip, and showcasing coast and cordillera, north and south, desert and forest. In Argentina, you'll see the wild Atlantic, arid steppe, epic highways and lonely Beagle channel. In Chile, the southern ice field, the fjords where John Byron got lost, penguins and petrels.



Discover the wild frontier in Chile's Lake District Credit: iStock

Patagonia is very civilised these days. In Punta Arenas and Ushuaia you'll drink great Patagonian wines and eat delicious spider crab. Old estancias house bijou hotels. Treks into the "unknown" are well marked. Glaciers are used to source ice cubes for Scotch.

But the region is still unlike anywhere else. I first visited in 1992, and went back again and again, writing guidebooks and a cultural history – a kind of deconstruction of Chatwin's mythic memoir. But the legends still swirl and the mysteriousness has not been eroded by repeated visits.

"Try Patagonia!" proclaimed author W H Hudson, who saw it as a cure for ennui, fatigue, and dullness of spirit. He'd never got as far south as the start of this trip – but the advice holds.



Punta Arenas – the gateway to Patagonia Credit: iStock

Wilderness and whales

Day one

Fly British Airways direct to Buenos Aires (13 hours), arriving in the morning. It's a one hour, 55-minute flight onward from the city airport – Aeroparque – to Puerto Madryn. Collect a hire car for three nights. Drive 91 miles (148km/two hours 15 mins) to the Valdés Peninsula and check in to Estancia Rincón Chico (rinconchico.com.ar) for two nights. The landscape is classic Patagonia, with the Atlantic on your right and the empty steppe on the left.

The *estancia* has eight stylish rooms and a veranda with dramatic views of the arid scrub. Enjoy an evening walk to see the local sea lions and elephant seals. Hosts María and Agustín will help you plan your activities. All stays are full-board. Enjoy traditional fare such as grilled lamb, steaks, veggie pies, salads and good wines.

Day two

The *estancia* has nine miles (15km) of coastline you can explore on foot, bike, horseback or four-wheel drive vehicle. Keep an eye offshore as pods of orcas are routinely spotted, hunting for seals and sea lions. Dolphins, penguins and other whales can also be seen. Bird life is very rich, including waders such as oystercatchers, flamingos and herons, flightless lesser rhea, owls and eagles, petrels, tinamous and plovers. If you're here between June and December you should visit Puerto Pirámides to see the southern right whales – these gentle giants calve in the calm waters. At night, go stargazing after dinner.



Spot penguins at Punta Delgada in Península Valdés Credit: iStock

Into the (Welsh) valley

Day three

Head back towards Madryn to tour the sites associated with the Patagonian Welsh settlement. The large bay close to the town is Golf Nuevo, where 153 Welsh colonists landed in 1865, establishing a small colony on the Chubut river that endures.

Make stops at Trelew (which has an excellent dinosaur museum) and the two townships of Gaiman and Dolavon; the former the main hub of the local Argentine-Welsh community (with tea shops galore), the latter notable for its irrigation channels and waterwheel. Visit chapels in the towns and along the roadside.

Overnight at Posada Los Mimbres (posadalosmimbres.com.ar), a delightful hotel on the banks of the Río Chubut near Gaiman. Comprising three small properties, Ca Sa Galesa is the oldest and most characterful. Dine in the hotel on excellent salads, meat dishes and fresh fruit



Ushuaia is often described as the "end of the world" Credit: iStock

End of the world

Day four

Fly Trelew to Ushuaia (two hours 15 minutes). Check in for two nights at Arakur Ushuaia Resort & Spa (arakur.com), a striking, sustainably built spa hotel perched on an outcrop in a nature reserve 10 miles north-east of the airport.

Ushuaia is Argentina's most southerly conurbation, at latitude 54 degrees south – the same as Harrogate in the north of England, but the weather is far more dramatic due to its location on the Beagle Channel. Both the Maritime and Prison Museum and the End of the World Museum give insights into the region's indigenous, shipping and natural history and its British connections; from the 1880s Ushuaia served as a penal colony.

Visit the Parque Nacional Tierra del Fuego, 20 minutes by bus/taxi (or one hour 10 minutes if you ride part way on the former prison train; trendelfindelmundo.com.ar), which protects subantarctic forests of beech and peat bogs, and fauna such as guanaco, Andean fox, condor, a native parrot and the Magellanic woodpecker.



Acigami Lake in Parque Nacional Tierra del Fuego Credit: iStock

Day five

Take a yacht trip aboard the Kams or Telienka (patagoniaadvent.com.ar, departures 9.30am and 3pm) along the Beagle Channel, named after the brig-sloop in which Captain FitzRoy explored and mapped the region in the 1830s. His famous passenger, Charles Darwin, kept a journal and scientific records that became the basis for his later epoch-making publications. En route you will see several small islands, cormorants, fur seals, the Les Eclaireurs Lighthouse and the Estancia Harberton, home of the Bridges family. Reverend Thomas Bridges was an Anglican missionary who worked closely with native Fuegians. For dinner, try the king crab at gourmet restaurant Maria Lola's (00 54 2901 42 1185).

Glacier trek

Day six

Fly to El Calafate (one hour 20 minutes) and transfer to Nibepo Aike, a cosy and characterful lakeside estancia dating from the early 1900s – this will be your base for two nights. Spend the afternoon exploring the estancia grounds and ride a horse to take in Lago Argentino.

Day seven

Visit the Parque Nacional Los Glaciares, which contains the largest ice-cap outside Antarctica, Greenland or Iceland. Guanaco, puma, lesser rhea and small huemul deer live here. From special balconies you'll survey the Perito Moreno glacier. This nearly 200ft wall of ice rises above the western reaches of Lago Argentino, expanding for years and breaking up (over two to four-year cycles) when the water beneath undermines it. The 2016 collapse was seen by many; last March an ice bridge collapsed – but at night. An ice-hike over the glacier, with crampons, affords you a chance to get up close to the wavelike surface and observe the shimmering sky-blue pools that form in the crevasses.

Across the Andes to Chile

Day eight

Take the bus down Ruta 40 and over the Andes, crossing the Argentina/Chile frontier, to arrive at Parque Nacional Torres del Paine. Look out for Chilean flamingos, black-necked swans, buff-necked ibis and Andean geese along the water's edge.

This afternoon you will do an easy walk to see the Río Paine waterfall and Laguna Azul. In the background is the Paine massif.

Enjoy dinner at Hotel Las Torres (lastorres.com/en), your base for the night. Suites here have Jacuzzis and there's a spa if you want to soothe your muscles.

Day nine

The steep hike up Ascencio Valley culminates over a terminal moraine and the base of the towers. Afterwards, drive to the Salto Grande waterfall and Nordenskjold Lake, and catch a view of Paine Grande, the 10,000ft mountain that forms the summit of the massif.

Check in to the Hotel Lago Grey (lagogrey.com/en), at the southern end of the lake.



The Grey Glacier, in Patagonia Credit: iStock

Day ten

Today you'll go by boat to see the Grey Glacier up close.

In the afternoon, undertake a medium-length (five-hour) trek along the little-used trail to Estancia Lazo, taking in views over the Paine massif and Laguna Verde. The diverse flora along the route includes orchids.

In the evening, check into quaint Estancia-Hostería Mirador del Payne (miradordelpayne.cl), and enjoy a traditional barbecue of Patagonian lamb.

Day eleven

After breakfast, transfer to Puerto Natales (January to March) or Punta Arenas for the flight to Santiago and onward to the UK.

How to do it

Patagonia specialist Swoop (0117 369 0196; swoop-patagonia.com) can provide a comparable tour for groups for around £2,700 or as a bespoke package from £3,400; budget £1,500 for flights. Optional add-ons include Buenos Aires, Antarctica, and the Falkland Islands, or a short luxury cruise out of Puerto Natales into the Chilean fjords. The tour includes guided and independent excursions around the estancia at Valdés; local guide in the Welsh valleys; glacier hike in Lago Argentino; guided hikes in Torres del Paine; boat trips to the Grey Glacier and on the Beagle Channel. Flights not included.

When to go

October to March is the optimum visiting time. While the Argentine coast can be very windy, temperatures across the region are pleasant and the days long. Rain is always a possibility in the Andes, but it is usually shortlived and rather refreshing. In winter (July–September), there's snow and the roads can become blocked. Southern right whales can be seen off the coast of Argentina between June and December