

Willis's Walkabouts Cerro Castillo: February 2016

This walk is a one way walk that requires a car shuffle. It is not safe to leave a vehicle at the start.

Day 1 Nice sunny skies and quite cold when we got up. We left a bit past 9 and drove out to the start of the walk. Some of the group then drove back to town and left two cars before coming back with one of the locals we'd hired to help.

It was still quite cool when we started, so much so that I put on gloves. It warmed up as we went along. There was a small bridge at the beginning after which we walked through farmland before reaching the park boundary.



Crossing the bridge at the start



Rest stop among the cattle



First wade

There were a couple of creek crossings where we had to wade. Neither was too deep. Barefoot was possible. We had lunch on some gravel next to a small creek. Sheltered from the wind and warm in the sun. It clouded over after that.

We met a young Latvian girl walking the other way. Said she'd camped with lots of people the night before. Put gloves on her feet overnight to keep them warm.

The third ford was deeper but we were able to cross one channel on a plank and the second on a small log (walking poles helped a lot). Both would wash away in the next flood.

We found lots of large fuzzy caterpillars on the ground, more where we camped. They may have been responsible for stripping many of the trees bare. At first glance, I thought one area was dead forest. Plague proportions. Caused a slight itch if handled.



Itchy caterpillar



At the park entry boundary there was a ranger's hut, a campsite and a table as well as a long drop toilet.

It was reasonably early so we pushed on to the second camp. The water was glacial melt from the main creek but murky but OK. There were two tables and a long drop and better views

than the first site. Also more level ground. Three young Europeans came in later and setup camp among us. The sun went in and it got very cold. I was last into the tent at 8:15. Temp was still about 7°C but it felt bitter when not clothed properly. Most could have used another layer.



Camp 2, our first campsite

Day 2 I didn't get the morning temperature but it was cold. Needless to say, we did not get going early. There had been a fine light rain overnight so things were slightly damp.

Onwards and upwards. And up. And up. It was only a 400 m climb but it felt worse. Lots of broken scree in a creek bed. There had been a few small bridges to here so it was easy to keep feet dry. There were a couple of hundred metres of fairly flat ground going through the pass. Also two snow drifts. Fortunately the thawing and freezing had turned it into a reasonably hard surface so we didn't sink. The wind was a howling gale in our faces coming through the pass.



One of the small bridges



Climbing up the pass



Track through the snow

Once over the pass, it was a VERY steep descent to the valley below. The group soon spread out. One of the stronger walkers stayed behind to wait for the slower people. I was far behind the first, well ahead of the last.



The faster walkers at the bottom of the descent. Some were still climbing up.



Lunch break

We had lunch on the edge of the forest. It was warm in the sun when it came out without a breeze. But we didn't have enough of those conditions and people started getting cold. It was, as we later found out, only 40 min to the next official camp site. Before that was a bridge over the largest creek to this point.



Without this bridge, we'd have a problem.



Camp 2



Cerro Castillo from near camp 2

We got to camp about 2 pm. We then had a big discussion about staying or pushing on. The next site was only 2+ km (straight line) km further but is 300 m higher. There were not a lot of really flat places but it was in the shelter of the forest so eventually we had a consensus for staying. Bit early and a very long next day, but one thing against going on was that it would be colder and some people are on the edge of being warm enough at night.

The young Europeans had a French guide book which showed an 'emergency route' that goes straight back to Villa Cerro Castillo from not much further along the track. They had met a ranger who told them that it should be well marked and should be taken in bad weather.

Day 3. There were a few dribbles of rain overnight. We got a bit more before we left so the tent flies were all wet. It wasn't a hard rain, but enough to be enough of a nuisance that I didn't use my main camera before camp. The next photos were taken with a small waterproof camera.

The French guide book said it was 1 hour 45 min to La Tetera. It took us 1 hour 10. So far so good. The campsite looked better than I'd expected, definitely more sheltered. Some sites were on an open grassy area, at least one was in the forest. I didn't see a toilet or table. Not sure if they were there.

We pushed on to the lake. There appeared to be another track which we thought might have been the official emergency route. As it turned out, it wasn't. The actual track climbed up alongside the lake. And climbed. As we got to the top of the first rise, we found the real emergency route. The three photos below were taken before we got to the emergency route. It wasn't easy.

We had a regroup. I said we could split the group if we sorted food but everyone decided to go on. If



I had known what was ahead, I'd have gone down.

We still had light rain. Blue skies started to appear but we still got light rain more than not. The wind, already strong got stronger. There was a large rock just past the pass, (GPS measured it as 1700 m). Some of us sheltered there out of the worst of the wind, just long enough to have a snack. We moved out into a howling gale.

While we did get some great views, many got knocked down. I wound up inching along on my backside for a bit. One gust knocked me down and took one of my walking poles. I saw it sail 30 m or more before disappearing over a drop of some sort. I thought about trying to retrieve it but the wind was so strong, I thought it would have been suicidal.



I'd been wearing a poncho. When I tried to get something, the poncho came apart. It no longer covered my legs which got a little wet. Not much rain, so only a little. I'd been wearing wool gloves which got wet. The wind cut through them so my hands got very cold. Wet or not, when I put rubber gloves over them, it felt much better. At some point, I took my pack cover off and lost my hat which was under it.

Eventually, we began to descend. It was steep but the wind died down and we began to warm up. Eventually we got to Campamento Los Porteadores. The two photos show part of the descent.

We met two people going up about 4 pm. Given the conditions, that was madness. There were only 3 or 4 in the camp when we got there. Before we went to bed, I counted 17 tents, at least 22 people. One bloke was even carrying a guitar. That would have been a



disaster in the wind on the top. There was a young French couple, a number of Chileans and some Israelis. The latter wanted to buy a tent as they'd tried going cheap and it hadn't worked. No way they'd have paid anything like what I did so I didn't bother. We heard more English than might have been expected but with so many nationalities, it was the common language if there was one.



Campamento Los Porteadores

There was a bit of drizzle at dinner but only a trace. I'd worn shorts and thermals for the walk, better than my normal cotton pants but gaiters would have been good. When my assistant, Rafa, stood waiting for the others to come down, he was dressed in red so he really stood out.

We all felt that the days had become noticeably shorter since we started.

Day 4. Moderately leisurely start. Steve and Rafa walked up to the New Zealand camp, reported that it was very nice, empty and would have fit a lot more tents. Three of the others spent more time there and said it would be a good spot from which to do a day walk.

The descent took about two hours, first through forest, then open paddocks before reaching the gravel road. From there it is about 5 km back to the village of Cerro Castillo.



Resting in the meadow near the road.



Looking back toward Cerro Castillo on the descent.

Shorter Options.

1. If you can find the start of the emergency route, you can do a loop up and back via Campamento Los Porteadores. Good two day walk. I once did it as a 15 hour day walk.
2. Start at the end, walk up to Campamento Los Porteadores or the New Zealand camp. This can be done as an overnight or a day hike.