

Willis's Walkabouts: Northern Chile 2017

Approx: 16 Dec 2017 to 13 January 2018

First Draft: August 2017

Two of our former Patagonia clients are keen to do a similar trip in northern Chile. I've been to parts of the area before but have never been able to spend as much time there as I'd like. Combine the two and it's on. While the dates above are not yet fixed, we do not expect them to change by more than a day or two in either direction.

There is no other tour like this on the travel market. Instead of a fixed itinerary, there is a general outline and a rough indication of how much time each section will take. If one area turns out to be especially good, we have the flexibility to spend extra time there. Transport during the trip will be primarily rental cars and, of course, your own feet. Given the high altitude and lack of water in many places, we may or may not do any overnight walks. If we do, they won't be major ones.



We expect to use vehicles similar to this, twin cab 4WD and expect to spend substantial time on roads like this.

Why use a Darwin-based firm for a South American tour?

On pages 69 and 70 of the 1998 edition of the Lonely Planet book, *Trekking in the Patagonian Andes*, the author listed 11 companies from five countries which offer treks in the region. Nine were listed without comment. One was listed as "recommended", one as "highly recommended." Willis's Walkabouts is the latter. We're still going strong and doing the same kind of trips. We offer a wilderness experience of a kind not offered by more mainstream operators.

Willis's Walkabouts began offering trips to South America in 1990. We've averaged about one a year since. As on most of our recent trips, we will hire one or two vehicles so that we can get to places that would otherwise be inaccessible. There is very little public transport here so this is the best possible way to see as much as possible of what it has to offer at our own pace.

Why go with someone else?

Our trips are not for everyone. They go off the beaten track. No two itineraries are the same. Every trip includes visits to places we have never been before. There are many local and international operators who can give you something more mainstream. Choose one of them if you would prefer:

- to do the "big name" walks like the Torres del Paine W circuit in the peak season or
- if you want to go with an operator who does the same thing over and over again or
- if you prefer a certain itinerary to a flexible one that can change with circumstances or
- if you don't want to walk with a guide who has not done some of the walks on the trip or
- if you don't want to explore places untouched by other tour operators.

The itinerary

We may fly to Calama and leave from Arica or we may do it in reverse. A one way car hire costs more but it gives us more flexibility as to what we can see on the way. Given the roads, we will probably need a 4WD. We will definitely need to carry a substantial amount of water in the vehicle(s). The following is a list of some of the places we are considering. They are listed from north to south to match my sources of information.

Note. If any of the links on the next two pages don't work, you will have to copy and paste it into your browser.

- Arica. A short walk to the top of El Morro gives great views of the city.
- Putre and Lauca National Park. Although it's only 145 km from Arica, Arica is at sea level and Putre is at 3500 m. Parts of Lauca are higher still. Great mountain scenery & lots of good day walks. Here are some good links. A lot of the best sites are in Spanish but I've limited this to those in English.



Pomerape and Parinacota volcanoes in Lauca

- Wikipedia
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lauca_National_Park – a good overview
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tl9jyTsCH1k> – video, less than 2 minutes, good overview of things we might see.
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImN4CgY0v8I&t=21s> – this video lasts almost four minutes, bit slow paced but the variety shows why we could easily spend a week in the one park. The little animals that look a bit like rabbits are viscachas, endemic to the altiplano.
 - Night videos from Lauca – amazing photography
 - <http://twanight.org/newTWAN/galleries.asp?Sort=Site&Value=Lauca%20National%20Park&page=1>
- Las Vicuñas National Reserve – <http://www.turismochile.com/en/las-vicunas-national-reserve>
This is a good area for cycling. We might consider hiring bikes and spending a day travelling on bicycles.
- Isluga Volcano National Park – <http://www.turismochile.com/en/isluga-volcano-national-park/>
- Pampa de Tamarugal National Reserve – the last remaining native tamarugal forest plus plantations of the tree. Also some amazing pre-Colombian geoglyphs.



Flamingos in Reserva Los Flamencos

- San Pedro de Atacama, altitude 2400 m. – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Pedro_de_Atacama
December is the beginning of the peak tourist season. San Pedro de Atacama is at a lower elevation than Lauca. Both of these are good reasons to start here and work our way north. Calama is the closest major airport to San Pedro de Atacama. Here are some of the attractions.
 - Los Flamencos National Reserve – The Wikipedia page gives a good summary of the things we can see, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los_Flamencos_National_Reserve
 - Another bit on Los Flamencos, <http://www.gosanpedrodeatacama.com/en/what-to-see/the-national-flamingos-reserve>
 - General info about San Pedro de Atacama, <http://www.gosanpedrodeatacama.com/en/welcome>
This page has lots of links for more info about the area.
 - The Loa River, Chile's longest, has a number of pre-Colombian sites, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loa_River

There are thermal springs and pre-Colombian art sites scattered throughout the whole of the area we will be visiting on this trip.

What does it cost?

Our fee is \$1695. This covers the guide, who also acts as an interpreter, organiser and cook on the walks. It includes the evening meals served on the walks. You will have to pay your share of all the expenses for food, accommodation, transport, etc. The guide will pay the same fees and fares as everyone else and will keep these as low as reasonable comfort, reliability and availability will allow. In recent years, our accommodation cost anywhere from about US\$15 to US\$45 per night. We expect it to be similar this time. Expect most of the places to be toward the low end of the range, but it might be nice to enjoy a bit of luxury once in a while.

Hiring the vehicles will cost about AUD \$1000 per person not including fuel. It could be more or less depending on the number of passengers and the extra insurance, if any, we decide to take.

If we did not have public liability insurance and you were to make a claim on your travel insurance, it would be possible for your travel insurance provider to sue either or both the guide and Walkabouts owner Russell Willis. That's the way the law works in Australia. It's not a chance we can afford to take.

What do you get for the fee?

You get expert advice on the things to bring. You get an interpreter. You get someone who will handle the mundane details of making the Chilean travel arrangements, doing the food shopping for the walks, organising accommodation etc. You get someone who will provide all the group equipment (billies, stoves, etc) and who will cook all the evening meals on the walks allowing you to relax and enjoy yourself. You also get a small, like-minded group of people with whom you can share your experiences and expenses. Hiring a vehicle as part of a group costs far less than hiring it with only two or three.

Note 1. Some of what you get for your money is not very visible. For example, prior to one of the sections that takes us away from major towns, you might spend a day relaxing or sightseeing while the guide goes out and hits the supermarkets, then spends an hour (or two or three) doing the final organising for the meals that we will cook.

Or perhaps, the guide (or interpreter) might have to take time out to assist someone with something like making a phone call or connecting to emails (Spanish can be essential in some locations) while you are free to do whatever appeals. If you can't see the value in services like these, you are unlikely to feel that you are getting real value for your fee.

Note 2. Prices are subject to change.

Note 3. Travel Insurance. Everyone who participates in this trip must have travel insurance which covers them for trekking.

Note 4. A large majority of those who have taken part in our South American tours are Australian so all prices are quoted in Australian dollars. We have had several people from other countries take part by making their own travel arrangements to and from the start and finish points.

Note 5. All bushwalks are subject to change due to weather conditions. If we get really foul weather at the start of a walk, we may wish to abort it, at least temporarily. If we get really foul weather later on, we may have to cut a route short. If we get really foul weather late in a walk, we could miss a connection.

Altiplanic Winter. From December through February (less so in December), sudden rainstorms can produce serious erosion with some roads washing out entirely. The effect diminishes toward the south and disappears around San Pedro de Atacama. **Whatever we plan, the weather has the final say.**

What you don't get?

You do not get a guide who will hold your hand and make every decision for you. **You** must be prepared to take on a much greater degree of responsibility than on most other tours. All members of the group, including the guide, are expected to work together in establishing how the group will function, who will lead on the walks, who will look after the stragglers, etc.

A trip such as this cannot work unless everyone helps out. A few examples may help you understand just how important this is.

Hypothermia is another potential problem. While most of the trip will be in the tropics, we will be at high altitude much of the time. Cold temperatures are inevitable. A person who becomes hypothermic is unlikely to realise it. In an extreme case, he or she may have to be physically restrained from doing something which a rational person would describe as insane. There is no way that any one person, no matter how experienced, can look after an entire group 100% of the time. No matter how careful the guide may be, there is always a possibility that he will be the one to get injured or otherwise incapacitated.

Accepting the responsibility that goes with a trip like this is part of the experience we offer. It is one of the things that sets our trips apart from the vast majority of "adventure" trips on the market. For those prepared to accept this responsibility, it makes the experience doubly rewarding. Those who are not prepared to accept such responsibility would be better off going on a "normal" tour.

Is it for you?

This trip is not for the average tourist. We can neither control nor predict the weather, only accept it as it comes. If you do not want to take the necessary responsibility and/or you cannot obtain the necessary equipment, it is not for you. Good physical fitness and a good mental attitude are both necessary.

Terrain and difficulty. Some of the walking will be relatively easy. Some may be moderately difficult. Much of it will be at high altitude. We will have to take out time at the beginning to allow ourselves to acclimatise.

Our walks may include everything from easy relatively flat trails to scrambling up or down steep hills covered in thick scrub with no sign of a track. Even on some of the trails, the path can be quite broken and involve scrambling up and down over boulders and/or loose rocks of all sizes. If you have never carried a pack on an overnight walk, have never walked off trail, have never camped in cold, windy and wet conditions, it will be harder for you to cope with the likely conditions than for a person who has had the relevant experience. As an example, one of our clients who could happily cover more ground than anyone else in the group on easy terrain was the slowest on the rougher ground. Past experience has shown us that a fit, experienced 70 year old may cope better than a fitter 25 year old who does not have experience in coping with adverse conditions.

Mental attitude. If you are goal oriented rather than experience oriented, you would probably be better off going with someone else. Picture yourself in the following situations, both of which occurred on one of our recent trips.

- We planned to do a walk which would take us to a base camp from which we hoped to visit the southern ice cap. We got to a hut a day's walk from our proposed camp. The following day it was raining and foggy so we decided to remain where we were. This did not leave us enough time to continue to our proposed camp for two nights so we did a long day walk the following day. This left us with one extra day. Some were content to relax and do short walks near the hut. Some felt that this time was wasted and that we should never have planned the longer walk.
- On another walk, we had allowed for sitting out at least one day's bad weather. We never got it and finished up with a day to spare half a day's walk from town. The weather was good. Most of the group were content to relax and enjoy their surroundings. Some could not wait to get back to town.

If you would have been happy to relax and enjoy your surrounds in both cases, our trips could be just what you are looking for. If not, then you might be better off on a different type of tour.

Getting There

If you are coming from eastern Australia, the best bet is likely to be a return airfare with Aerolineas Argentinas or Lan Chile to Santiago. With Lan Chile you can connect direct to Calama and Arica, the two domestic airports we will be using. If you are coming from elsewhere in Australia, an around the world airfare might be about the same price. This can include two flights within Chile. Aerolineas Argentinas is sometimes cheaper than Lan Chile but does not go anywhere other than Santiago in Chile.

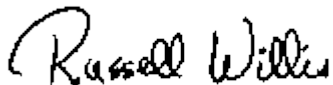
A Final Caution

Do not expect everything to run like clockwork. Such things do not happen in South America. If you want to get maximum value for your money, you can go off and go sightseeing or simply relax while the guide does the food shopping or standing in line for tickets etc. Or, if you wish, you are welcome to join him while he does these things.

There will be occasional days between sections where you will be left to your own devices while the guide slows down and relaxes a bit and catch up on the organising. Based on past experience, things will run more smoothly if the guide does this.

Conditions

1. A deposit of \$200 is payable on booking. This will be refunded in full if five people have not booked by 10 September. Payment in full is due on 10 September or when you book, whichever is later.
2. Cancellation fees are \$200 before 10 September and the full \$1695 after that.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance. We cannot finalise your booking until we have proof that you have travel insurance.



Russell Willis