

Willis's Walkabouts: Patagonia 2019-20

Carretera Austral Southern Chile: About 4 Weeks; December 2019 - January 2020

Several people have asked for a relatively easy trip so this will be the easiest Patagonia trip we've ever run. While there will be some strenuous walking and lots of camping, it might not be necessary to carry an overnight pack on any of the walks or we may choose to do a walk or two where carry a pack a relatively short distance to a shelter which we can use as a base for day walks.

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. On our longest intended walk, you can opt to pay for a horse to carry you pack for you.

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.

On our trips you do some of the lesser known walks, walks which take you away from the crowds that walk the well known tracks each season. Every trip is a mix of walks we have done before and walks that we are doing for the first time. 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. This trip will be based partly on three trips we did since 2011 and partly on an exploration of somewhat new territory. We expect the trip to begin in the city of Coyhaique in southern Chile. This is Chile's frontier territory. As on the other trips, we will hire two or three four wheel drives so that we can get to places that would otherwise be inaccessible. Unlike previous trips, we will try and organise the paperwork so that we can cross the border into Argentina. 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

The itinerary is a work in progress and will probably remain so until the trip is nearly over. That's the only way we can be sure to take advantage of the conditions we find. We had exceptionally good weather on one trip, average on others. We can adjust our itinerary to some degree based on the weather but we have to take what we get.

We'll spend at least one full day in Coyhaique as we need to purchase supplies for the next week or two trip. We may not see another really large supermarket again on the trip. Depending on how we go for time, there are at least two good day walks in nearby parks.

From Coyhaique, we drive straight through to Cochrane, a full day's drive on the main road, even though it is only slightly over 300 km. It's a spectacular drive, but the photo at right hints as to why it's so slow.



Looking down the Carretera Austral, the main 'highway' in southern Chile



Heading up the Mosco valley

The road ends at Villa O'Higgins, a small town of about 500 people, somewhat over 200 km further down the road. If we get that far, there are two good day walks, up the Río Mosco Valley to a refugio (bushwalkers' hut). (We have done this as an overnight on previous trips. You can download a 5MB brochure, half Spanish, half English, about the Río Mosco walk at <http://rutas.bienes.cl/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/03.pdf>

Another good acclimatisation walk is the day walk to the Tigre Glacier. We've now

done it three times. Depending on the weather, we may do it again. (If the weather is bad, this walk is out of the question.)

Not long before it reaches Villa O'Higgins, the road forks with one branch going to the small fishing village of Caleta Tortel. The road stops on the edge of town. There are no roads in town, just



Caleta Tortel

boardwalks and houses built on stilts. It's such an amazing place that we ought to stop there.

On our way south at the end of December 2011, we spotted a sign advertising camping and

accommodation at a small property on the Ñadis River. We thought we'd investigate. It was so good that we've been back three times. Besides the fresh produce straight from their garden, they have a lovely camping area, some nice, basic accommodation and two great day walks. The photos at right are from one of them.



Baker River gorge and rapids



Approaching the Tigre glacier



The old road. Prior to the construction of the Carretera Austral, people and horses used this route to avoid the Baker Rapids below.

While 4WD vehicles were useful to this point, they hadn't been strictly necessary. To get to our next walk, we needed them.

Cerro San Lorenzo is a mountain that beckons serious climbers from all over the world. For those not so keen on mountaineering, there is a great one or two night walk up to the base. If you don't want to carry a pack, you can arrange to have it carried up to the refugio on horseback. The people whose farm we stay at before and after the walk give you a chance to experience a traditional Patagonian banquet.

The three photos here were taken at the San Lorenzo base camp. The first shows the



refugio, the other two show Mount San Lorenzo. The one at right shows how the wind has stirred up a huge dust cloud going something like two kilometres into the sky. Down at base camp, the wind was no problem at all but we met a mountaineering group who had been forced to turn back because of it.



Lamb on the spit



Enjoying the Patagonian banquet.

The two photos at left show the traditional Patagonian banquet we enjoyed on the last three trips. Fresh salad, local potatoes, a special Patagonian bread and some wine to go with the lamb made for a real feast.

San Lorenzo is only a short distance from the town of Cochrane. Closer still is the Tamango Nature Reserve, one of the few places where it is relatively easy to see the rare and endangered huemul, a Patagonian deer.



Huemul



Viewpoint on the Tamango day walk

If we cross into Argentina, the southernmost vehicular crossing we can get to is on a road out of Cochrane. If we decide to enter Argentina here, we'll have more information later.

Moving north from Cochrane (or possibly on our way south at the start), we turn off to visit the relatively new Parque Patagonia. Here we find a number of pleasant day walks. See www.patagoniapark.org/hiking.htm. If we can organise it, there is a three-day through walk to Jenimeini National Park. Most of the group did this in 2014 as we were able to get one of the park staff to drive one vehicle while another of our party took the other to the end of the trail. In 2016, we solved the transport problem by having some go one way while the others did it in reverse. See



Parque Patagonia bridge

www.patagoniapark.org/overnight_backpacking.htm for a bit of information about the walk. If some of the group are keen on the through walk, the others can drive around and meet them. The swing bridge in the photo here is on both the through walk and a long loop walk in the park.



Lounge room in Puerto Guadal View over Lake General Carrera, the second largest lake in South America.

Chance can play an important part in our trips. In 2016, we decided to stop in Puerto Guadal, a small town we hadn't stopped in before. We found an amazing 'cottage' with a view out over the second largest lake in South America. Not only was it spectacular, it was very reasonably priced.

The road between Puerto Guadal and Chile Chico, a small town on the Argentine border is one of the most spectacular drives we do. The line near the edge of the lake in the photo is the road.



View stop on the road between Puerto Guadal and Chile Chico.



Needle rock, Jenimeini. Look closely and you can see a person at the base.

Chile Chico is the access town for Jenimeini National Park. The environment here is semi-desert, totally different to anything else we encounter on the trip. The walk to see some indigenous cave paintings gave us fantastic views over this amazing landscape. The paintings may not look like much compared to some of the rock art in Australia, but the fact that they include much more than hand prints makes them very unusual in Patagonia.



Cave paintings, Jenimeini



High view on the Jenimeini walk

Chile Chico is another one of our possible crossing points into Argentina. We will have more information about possible crossings into Argentina in a

later edition of these notes. Later editions will also include information about other possible places to visit in Chilean Patagonia.

Two of our former clients recommended hiking in to Refugio Valle Hermoso and using it as a base camp for day walks. I visited it on a through walk a couple of years ago. It's only a half day in from the end of the trail. While it's in Jenimeini, it's a very different landscape from the one near the paintings.

On our way south to (or coming back north from) Cochrane, we pass through Río Tranquilo, the base for boat trips to the "Marble Chapels". These rock formations in the lake can only be reached by boat. Our friends recommended a company south of town and closer to the formations. This lets you miss the hassle we sometimes have with windy weather.





Lake Leones and Leones Glacier

The same two people also recommended a visit to Lago Leones. “South of Rio Tranquilo is a road (X732) to the west that ends at a trail to Lago Leones with the Leones Glaciar at the far end of the lake (walk is 20 km return). Spectacular. There is a farm offering very basic accom (rooms with multiple beds) as well as camping, about 5kms along the road X732. They sell fresh bread and jams and when we were there they sold cherries. Maybe they would do a dinner but otherwise there is a camp kitchen with stove etc. About 5 groups camped the night that we were there. There are two companies offering jetboat access to just below Lago

Leones then a hike and another boat on the lake.” While none of our groups have done this, it sounds as if it could be worthwhile.

It has been years since we last visited Pumalin Park, <http://www.parquepumalin.cl/en/index.htm#>

There have been a number of new developments since then so maybe it's time to go back. Our friends said, “We had fabulous day-walks here to glaciers Michinmahuida and el Amarillo, to Volcan Chaiten and to the sendero Los Alerces (3000 year old trees) plus others. We camped at el Volcan and the Ventisquero campgrounds. Camping sites were wonderful with fantastic views but cold showers. Group areas and shelters were busy.”

Another benefit of travelling with Willis's Walkabouts – Our Network

As shown above, many of our former clients have gone on to do similar trips on their own. They pass new information along so we can always give you the best.

What does it cost?

Our fee is \$1895 for up to 4½ weeks. If people prefer a slightly longer trip, it will go up slightly. This covers the guide, who also acts as an interpreter, organiser and cook on overnight 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 US\$1000 per person not including fuel or ferries..

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 long walks, 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 on the walk. Or perhaps, the guide (or interpreter) might have to take time out to assist someone with something like making a phone call 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. Our overseas liability insurance requires that 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.

On a walk in Torres del Paine in late 2001, bad weather one day kept us from moving to a base camp from which we had hoped to be able to reach the southern ice cap. (We almost got there on a day walk the following day.) This left us with an extra day which some felt was wasted on a less spectacular day walk. In 2004 and 2006, poor weather prevented us from doing one of the walks we had planned. In January 2012, excessive wind meant that a boat which would have picked us up at the end of a walk was delayed by a day. **Whatever we plan, the weather has the final say.**

Note 6. Torres del Paine. Torres del Paine is the most popular trekking park in South America. When poor weather forced us to move from one campsite to another more popular one in 2006, we counted **102 tents** at that site. In addition, there were at least another 100 people in the huge refugio there. If it is open, doing the circuit walk will avoid some of the crowds. The friends mentioned earlier in these notes visited the park in early 2017, their comment was, "What a nightmare! So many people." Although it is not part of this itinerary, we are happy to help you organise a walk in Torres del Paine for yourself.

Note 7. Some of those taking part will have to share in the driving. The vehicle or vehicles are likely to be manual transmission 4WD.

Note 8. Some of the participants are interested in tango and may have a few days to a week in Buenos Aires at the end of the trip. Whether or not they are interested in tango, anyone taking part in this trip is welcome to include the stay there at no additional charge except for their expenses.

Note 9. It is almost impossible to have a completely vegetarian diet on a trip like this. If you don't eat red meat but do eat fish, it's much easier.

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. 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 quite difficult. Our walks will 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 Balmaceda, the airport that serves Coyhaique. 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 to Balmaceda. If you can't do the full trip, it might be possible to do only a part of it. This would involve catching a local bus to or from Coyhaique. If you are interested in this, please let us know and we'll see if it is possible.

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 may 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 1 August. Payment in full is due on 1 August or when you book, whichever is later.
2. Cancellation fees are \$200 before July, \$400 before 1 August, \$800 before 1 September and the full \$1895 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