

Willis's Walkabouts: Easy Patagonia 2025-26

Carretera Austral Southern Chile: 3-4 weeks: December 2025 - January 2026

Cost: \$2495. Additional expenses apply. Details at end.

This trip is a much easier version of the trip we are running at about the same time. Lots of day walks, but no need to carry an overnight pack. It is based on a number of trips we've run in the past as well as on a private trip that one of the guides did in January 2025. **There is a lot of work involved in finalising details so we won't take it any further unless we get a few expressions of interest by early April.**



[Baker River Rapids day walk](#)

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 one overnight walk, you may be able to pay for a horse to carry your pack for you. The rest of the time, you will need to be prepared to carry everything you need.

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

We've been doing these trips since 1990. 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 was the latter. We're still going strong and doing the same kind of trips.

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. We can't make the necessary transport and accommodation bookings until we have people booked on the trip. And, of course, there is the weather. We've had exceptionally good weather on some trips, average on others and, one occasion, wind so bad that one of our walks became impossible. We can adjust our itinerary to some degree based on the weather but we have to take what we get. As we go south then north along the same road in a couple of places, when we stop at a particular place will be determined by what is available when.

We begin in the city of Coyhaique in southern Chile. (The hills around the city mean that the airport is at Balmaceda, about 50 km by road.) This is Chile's frontier territory, the last part of the country to be settled early in the 20th century. Everyone will need to spend at least one full day in Coyhaique as we need to purchase supplies for at least the next week or two. 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 to Río Tranquilo where we will try and do a nice day walk in the hills above the town. Next day, we visit the Marble Caves. There is a choice of doing it by boat (which I've done before) or doing it by kayak (highly recommended by one of my guides).

In 2019, we visited the Leones Valley and camped at a small farm where there were some interesting walks. I



Lake Leones and Leones Glacier

I haven't been able to find anything recent, but this may be a good side trip. One of the guides on the harder patagonia trip recommended a 20 km, relatively easy but long, walk that finishes with a boat to the foot of the Leones glacier. We may decide to do that.

Continuing south, we pass through Puerto Bertrand. I stayed at some nice cabins there in 2019 and would like to go back. There is an interesting walk which we had to cut short. This time we should be able to do it all. We might spend two nights there.



Next Cochrane, the largest town south of Coyhaique. We will do a long day walk in nearby Tamango (now part of Parque Patagonia). Then it's south to Ñadis, a farm I first visited in 2011. I look forward to going back. More details later in this document.



Inside our cabin at Puerto Bertrand



View from the Bertrand day hike

Continuing south, we detour to

Caleta Tortel, an amazing town on stilts. There are some interesting walks in the hills as well as along the board walks so I hope to spend two nights there.

Back on the Carretera Austral, we drive to the end at Villa O'Higgins. We will do a day walk there, maybe two. We'll also do a boat trip to see the O'Higgins Glacier up close.

Now, it's time to turn around and head north back to Cochrane for a re-supply.

From Cochrane, we will visit Fundo San Lorenzo where we may do one or more day hikes, or, possibly an overnight where our packs get carried by pack horses.

Back to Cochrane, then north into a different part of Parque Patagonia where we do at least one long day walk before continuing across the border to Argentina via Paso Roballos. I've never done it, but the photos I've seen make it look interesting.

Paso Roballos, <https://www.robtunna.com/blog/7iavj76l8jo3palxj9vzphotpzlv5h>

Once across the border, we turn north onto Route 41. The next town is Los Antiguos, 100 km and a bit over 2½ hours away according to Google maps. The little I've seen suggests that it is quite scenic.

We may stop in Los Antiguos or we may continue to the Jeinimeini section of Parque Patagonia. There are a number of interesting day walks there. Which we do will depend on both the weather and what we feel like at the time. Worth noting that it can be pouring with rain on one walk while it is sunny and dry on another only 30 km away.

From Parque Patagonia, we drive through Chile Chico and then take the road along Lake General Carrera. This is one of the most spectacular drives in Chile. We finish in the tiny town of Puerto Guadal. We've stayed at two different places there. One very nice and one amazing. We'll take what we can get.

From there, it is a day's drive back to Coyhaique where we began.

Now for some details.

Villa O'Higgins is the southernmost town on the Carretera Austral. It was impossible to put a bridge over the last fiord so the government provides a free vehicle ferry. We need to time our arrival to get there soon enough so we catch the next boat rather than wait for a second one.



From Villa O'Higgins, there is a good day walk, up the Río Mosco Valley to a refugio (bushwalkers' hut) and another to a hill overlooking the town.

Another good walk is the day walk to the Tigre Glacier. Depending on the weather and the availability of a local guide, we may do it again. (If the weather is bad, this walk is out of the question.)



Approaching the Tigre glacier



Heading up the Mosco valley

Weather permitting (strong winds can stop the boat), we may do a boat trip to the base of the O'Higgins glacier.

Caleta Tortel



Caleta Tortel



Not long before it reaches the ferry, 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 boardwalks and houses built on stilts. It's such an amazing place that I'd like to spend two nights there.

Ñadis

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 five 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



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

San Lorenzo

The only way to get to San Lorenzo is with a 4WD.

Cerro San Lorenzo is a mountain that beckons serious climbers from all over the world. For those not so keen on mountaineering, you can visit the refugio on a day walk. If you'd like to spend a night there and 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 but we met a mountaineering group who had been forced to turn back because of it. Those interested in the longer walks might wish to spend two nights there and do a long day walk higher up into the mountains. Other good walks are available.



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.

Tamango

The Tamango Nature Reserve, now part of Parque Patagonia, is 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

The photos at right were taken on a day walk in Tamango.

Carretera Austral

This is the main road in part of southern Chile that we visit. Mostly gravel and quite scenic. The

three photos here give you a taste.



The view point in the first photo is only about 50 m off the road, unmarked but we know where it is.

Parque Patagonia

The new Parque Patagonia consists of three parts: the original Tamango Reserve, the Jeinimeini Reserve and the once private Parque Patagonia which Doug Tomkins (or his widow) donated to the Chilean government. As mentioned early in this document, we plan to drive through and enter Argentina via Paso Roballos.



There are a number of day walks we can do.

The four photos here were taken on one of the longer ones. We cross the bridge shown in the photo above— one person at a time.



Parque Patagonia bridge



Jeinimeini

Now part of Parque Patagonia, the old Jeinimeini Reserve is normally accessed via Chile Chico. We'll be coming in from Argentina. As mentioned early in this document, there are some dramatically different landscapes here. It can be pouring with rain on walk while it is sunny and dry on another only 30 km away. The environment in the northern part 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.



High view on the Jeinimeini walk



Cave paintings, Jeinimeini



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

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 in 2016. While it's in Jenimeini, it's a very different landscape from the one near the paintings. Carrying full packs might be too much for this trip, but walking back toward the refugio should give us some amazing mountain scenery.

Puerto Guadal and Lago General Carrera

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 is one of the most spectacular drives we do. The line near the edge of the lake in the photo is the road.

The two photos below were taken from our preferred accom in 2016. We couldn't get in in 2019, but did find another nice place to stay. Not as spectacular but clean and comfortable.



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



Lounge room in Puerto Guadal



View over Lake General Carrera, the second largest lake in South America.

There are many other interesting places to visit and short walks to do. Exactly what we do and where we stay will be determined when we start making bookings – which will be after we have enough people to run the trip.

What does it cost?

Our fee is \$2495. 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 where we cater for ourselves. (You are welcome to assist.) 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 probably cost about US\$1000 per person not including fuel.

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 where we have to cater for ourselves, organising accommodation etc. You get someone who will provide all the group equipment will cook the evening meals where are self-catering. This allows 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 unless otherwise shown, 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. It must be booked several months in advance. One of the guides did 5 days of the trek in January 2025 with the comments that 'it was akin to walking with 500 box tickers who had never put on a pair of boots'. Crowded and dangerous due to the excessive number of poorly prepared people. Doing the circuit walk will avoid some of the crowds. 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. 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 essential.

Our guides love what they do and it is because they are amazing collaborators and organisers. With trips like this you will be expected to contribute to decision making and take on a much greater degree of responsibility than on most other tours.

All members of the group, including the guides, 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.

You must be prepared to look out for others: Consider hypothermia person who becomes hypothermic is unlikely to realise it. Your guides will be relying on everyone to watch out for others. 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 they will be the one to get injured or otherwise incapacitated.

Similarly, overstating your own abilities can and will endanger those of others in the group if they are forced into a situation of your creation. This has happened.

Accepting the responsibility that goes with a trip like this is part of the experience we offer, this includes taking responsibility for yourself and your effect on the well-being of others. 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 are unlikely to enjoy the trip and plan for a more formal tour.

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 Latam who fly direct from Melbourne and Sydney to Santiago (Chile). There are regular connections to Coyhaique with Latam. In the experience of our guide this year, Latam was efficient and punctual. This is personal experience only.

Our guides are happy to suggest options if you would like to communicate directly with them.

Communication in country

Some of our guides use and recommend [Airalo Esims](#) for in country communication which is becoming increasingly available in Chile (no promises here, there are still plenty of black spots and definitely no access in remote areas and some longer sections of road). An alternative is a Chilean Sim card.

Please do your own research for what suits you best. Some Sim cards do not work in this region, be careful when choosing which provider to go with and always check their coverage.

WiFi is also patchy and only available in larger towns for the most part.

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 \$500 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 \$500 before 1 July, \$800 before 1 August, \$1200 before 1 September and the full \$2495 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.
4. A medical clearance for remote area trekking may be requested prior to our acceptance of your application.
5. Payment of an estimate of your share of expenses will be required prior to departure. Unused funds will be reimbursed. Additional funds may be requested during the trip.