

Willis's Walkabouts

2011-12 SOUTH AMERICAN SPECIAL

Carretera Austral Southern Chile: 4 Weeks: December 2011 - January 2012

First Draft: 5 February 2011

This trip will probably begin sometime between 27 December and 5 January. Those dates can be adjusted to suit the first people who book.

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 include aeroplanes, buses, taxis, boats and, of course, your own feet while carrying a backpack. We will do a number of walks of up to 10 days duration. People on most of the other tours being offered in South America do not use local transportation or carry a pack for more than two days, if at all.

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 lists 11 companies from five countries which offer treks in the region. Nine are listed without comment. One is listed as "recommended", one as "highly recommended." Willis's Walkabouts is the latter.

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. Most have been longer than the four weeks on offer here. Most have gone to better known places. On this trip we will hire a mini bus which should carry 8 people plus luggage. At August 2008 exchange rates, this comes to about A\$175 per day.

I (Russell Willis) will be leading the trip and will use it to explore an area which I have yet to visit, the southernmost part of the Carretera Austral. Where we stop and where we walk will depend on the condition of the road (mainly gravel) and on the weather at the time (often very wet). The trip will begin in Santiago or Puerto Montt sometime between 27 December and 5 January. This is Chile's frontier territory. 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.

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.

What does it cost?

Our fee is \$1495. This covers the guide, who also acts as organiser and cook and the evening meals served on the walks. In addition, 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. Our accommodation will cost anywhere from about US\$20 to US\$50 per night. 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 van will cost at least A\$1000 per person when you include fuel and ferries.

Public liability insurance for our overseas trips has been a problem in recent times. Our overseas trips were removed from our main policy and then insured individually. The cost for covering the last single trip we did like this \$1500. The actual cost above will depend on the final price we are quoted this year.

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 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 or sending a fax 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.

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. **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, 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. Although it is not part of this itinerary, we are happy to help you organise a walk in Torres del Paine for yourself.

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 Puerto Montt. 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.

When last we checked, Aerolineas Argentinas was somewhat cheaper than Lan Chile.

Puerto Montt or Santiago are the only places where it is likely to be possible to join the trip.

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 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 \$1495 after that.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance.

Russell Willis