

Willis's Walkabouts

2012-13 SOUTH AMERICAN SPECIAL

Carretera Austral Southern Chile: 4 Weeks: December 2012 - January 2013

First Draft: 8 March 2012

This trip will probably begin sometime between 15 and 27 December. 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. 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. Bruce Swain, one of our most experienced Patagonia guides, will be leading the trip which will be based on the trip that Russell did beginning in December 2011. The things we learned on that trip should make this one even better. The trip will begin in the city of Coyhaique in southern Chile. This is Chile's frontier territory. As on the 2011-12 trip, we will hire two or three four wheel drives 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.

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 following itinerary is based on our 2011-12 trip. We had exceptionally good weather as the region was entering the third year of a drought – good for us, not so good for the locals.

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

From Coyhaique, we drove straight through to Cochrane, a full day's drive on the main road. even though it was 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

The road ends at Villa O'Higgins, a small town of about 500 people, somewhat over 200 km further down the road. We have to catch a ferry at one point. In 2011-12 it was running three times a day (in winter it is twice). We are restricted by the time the boat leaves.



Heading up the Mosco valley

Our first walk was an overnight walk up the Río Mosco Valley to a refugio (bushwalkers' hut). Most chose to pitch tents. One slept inside. Doing a short walk first allows people to get used to their packs and see what they might want to add or remove for the much longer trek which follows. You can download a brochure, half Spanish, half English, about the Río Mosco walk at <http://www.thisischile.cl/Recursos/documento/03.pdf>

Getting to the big trek requires a boat across Lake O'Higgins, the deepest in South America. The boats don't run every day. In January 2012, this gave us a day to spare which we used to do a guided day walk to the Tigre Glacier. That was good enough so we should do it again. Whether we do it before or after the main walk will depend on the boat schedule.



Approaching the Tigre glacier

Don't believe the maps! The southern icefield walk was and is a great walk but the best maps available left something to be desired. The trek began with a bit of a



Fording the river

slog along a gravel road to a nice campsite with a good view down toward Mount Fitzroy. Nice spot, but it meant that we had an interesting wade across the Obstáculo river the next morning – flowing fast, waist deep through icy water. It's not described in the track notes, but it should be possible to avoid the wade by crossing a bridge much further downstream and following the river up to join the walking trail.

From here, it's a long climb to the plateau above. Eventually it levels out and you have another small creek crossing – no avoiding this one. Once on the top, the terrain is gently undulating and easy going. There were a few potential campsites but camping on top isn't recommended because of the wind coming off the southern ice cap.



On the climb



The short wade



Walking on the main plateau.



View from the top before the big descent.

Given the wind on what we were later told was a relatively calm day, we'll try and make it all the way across.

From the viewpoint shown in the photo at right above, we had a descent of 700 metres. We camped near a small farm at the bottom that night. The next morning, we walked to the river on the far side of the photo, got a boat across and climbed the hill you can see in the background.

The climb wasn't particularly difficult. We found a nice, sheltered campsite not long after lunch. Those who were feeling energetic did an afternoon walk past the 'official' campsite to another viewpoint. They said we'd picked the best spot. As it was light until nearly 11 pm, there was no problem getting back in daylight. We'll probably do the same on this trip as the loop walk shown in the track notes is rated as much more difficult and harder to follow.

From here, we return the way we came back to the campsite we used after the big walk.

Rather than go back the way we came, we will probably do what we did in 2012 and follow a route along the lake.



Sheltered forest campsite next to a stream



O'Higgins glacier from just above the camp

The track which is shown on the best available map of the area is not well defined. We lost it several times but it didn't really matter as we always had great views while keeping between the



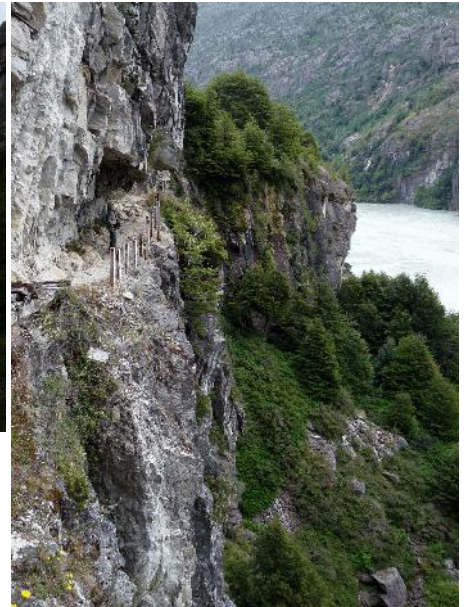
lake and the higher hills kept us going in the right direction. The two photos at left show the 2012 group walking along the lake. We found a nice sheltered campsite next to the ruins of an old farm, good enough so we'll aim to get there again.

From there is only a half day walk back to where we began. If we arrive early enough, we may take the boat up to the base of the O'Higgins glacier for a very different view. That boat brings us back to Villa O'Higgins from where we head north again. (In 2012, the boat was \$80 each way plus an extra \$50 to go to the glacier.) See <http://www.thisischile.cl/Recursos/documento/06.pdf> for more information.

On our way south at the end of December, 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 got to go back.



Baker River gorge and rapids



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

Besides the fresh produce straight from their garden, they had a lovely camping area, some nice, basic accommodation and a great day walk. The photos above and right are from that walk. Sadly, if the proposal to dam the Baker River goes ahead, everything upstream of the rapids, including the farm where we stayed, will disappear under water.

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. 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.



River crossing on the way to San Lorenzo



Lamb on the spit



Enjoying the Patagonian banquet.

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. We did a day walk in 2012 but may choose an overnight option on this trip.



Huemul



Viewpoint on the Tamango day walk

On our 2012 trip we only did one walk of more than three days. Everyone agreed that we should have had more time and done at least one more long walk. One possibility would take us from Tamango to a new nature reserve to the north. If some of the group didn't want to do the full walk, they could drive around to an end point and turn it into a one way instead of a loop. The new reserve had not yet opened to the public when we were there, but may be by the time this trip is underway.

Continuing north by road, we stopped to have a look at the confluence of the Baker and Nef rivers, a short walk of about 20 minutes each way from the vehicles. Spectacular and well worth while. From there, we drove around the southern shore of Lake General Carrera, the second largest in South America, to the town of Chile Chico and thence to 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



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

From Chile Chico, it is a very long drive or a two hour ferry ride to get to the other side of the lake. We'll time it for the ferry. The ferry takes us to Puerto Ibañez, a short distance from which we stop for a look at Ibañez Falls. Anyone feeling energetic can do a walk to the top.

A drive of less than 50 km brings us to the small town of Villa Cerro Castillo and our final walk. In 2002, we were out of time and had to restrict ourselves to a day walk. If time permits, we will do a four daythrough walk overlapping our 2012 day walk.



Ibañez Falls. Look closely and you can see someone in the centre of the photo.

What does it cost?

Our fee is \$1795. 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 2011-12, 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..



Cerro Castillo, view from trail.

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 2011-12 trip was \$1900. With nine people, that worked out at about \$200 each. The actual cost above will depend on the final price we are quoted this year. If someone were to make a claim on their travel insurance, it is possible for their insurer to sue us. We can't afford to take that chance.

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 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. 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. 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 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 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 \$1795 after that.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance.

Russell Willis