

Willis's Walkabouts: Patagonia 2025-26

Carretera Austral Southern Chile: 17 December 2025 - 18 January 2026

This trip 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. It contains a number of multi-day treks, as well as some shorter ones and rest time. Those who take part will visit places no one else will take you to.

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.



Baker River Rapids day walk

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 once, 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.

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.

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| 17 Dec | Last day to arrive in Coyhaique. (Balmaceda airport: 50 km from Coyhaique). Feel free to arrive sooner. Accom to be confirmed. |
| 18 Dec | Pre-trip preparation and shopping. Accom to be confirmed. |
| 19 Dec | Drive to the start and begin the Villa Cerro Castillo trek |

- 20-22 Dec On the Cerro Castillo walk.
- 23 Dec Finish the walk and drive to Río Tranquilo.
- 24 Dec Optional morning kayak trip visiting the Marble Caves. Drive south to Ñadis farmstay, passing through the town of Cochrane on the way. Last half-decent supermarket. You will have the choice of staying in their budget accommodation or camping.
- 25-27 Dec At Ñadis, possible rest day. Day walks. The Baker River Rapids photo at the beginning of this document was taken on one of the walks.
- 28 Dec Drive to Villa O'Higgins, the end of the Carretera Austral. There is a ferry so we need to time it right or have a long wait. If time permits, side trip to Caleta Tortel, an amazing village on stilts.
- 29 Dec Tigre Glacier day hike. Weather dependent.
- 30-31 Dec Río Mosco walk. Base camp walks over 2 days in the valley. (Timing is weather/group dependent).
- 1 Jan Return to Villa O'Higgins. Overnight accom or camping, your choice.
- 2 Jan Boat to Candelario Mancilla. Begin the O'Higgins Glacier trek. Boat and weather dependent.
- 3-5 Jan On the glacier trek
- 6 Jan Finish the trek at Candelario Mancilla. Boat back to Villa O'Higgins. Overnight there.
- 7 Jan Drive to Cochrane. Restock and stay overnight.
- 8 Jan Drive to San Lorenzo, walk to the mountain hut, camp or stay in hut.
- 9 Jan Day walk above the hut. How far you get will depend on the weather and how you feel.
- 10 Jan Return to farm, overnight there.
- 11-14 Jan Through walk in Parque Patagonia between what used to be Tamango and Jeinimeini National Parks. The group will split with one group starting from each end, swapping keys in the middle.
- 15 Jan Finish the trek. Both groups meet in Chile Chico or Puerto Guadal.
- 16 Jan Spare day that we may need elsewhere if the weather isn't kind.
- 17 Jan Return to Coyhaique
- 18 Jan Early morning, trip ends. People can go wherever.

From Coyhaique, we drive 1½-2 hours south to our first walk, the Cerro Castillo trek. This trek should provide a good backdrop to your expectations for the remainder of this spectacular region. You can find a good description of the trek at

<https://stingynomads.com/cerro-castillo-circuit-4-day-trek/>

At the end of this trek we will drive to and stay in Rio Tranquillo, about 1.5 hours further south where you will begin to understand why travel takes so long in Patagonia. The road is slow, winding and spectacular, but the photo at right hints as to why it's so slow.



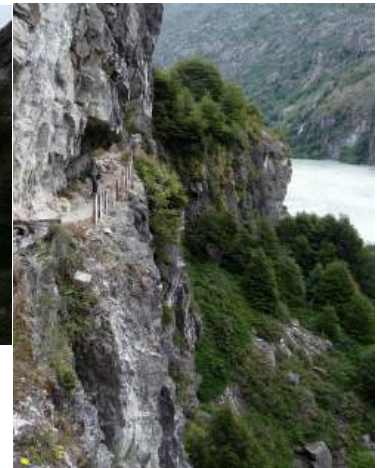
At Rio Tranquillo, there is the option to do a very early morning kayak trip to the Marble Caves. In our guide's opinion this is the only time and way to see these incredible caves, in the calm and quiet of the morning sunrise before the crowds arrive in their boats that damage the soft marble inside.

We then travel further south to Refugio Ñadis (staying in their budget accommodation or camping) via Cochrane (last supermarket for several days). We plan to complete day walks in this region including the Baker River (the two images below are taken from this location) and enjoy Christmas over what we hope to be a memorable Chilean meal shared together.

Our next section, centres around Villa O'Higgins, the end of the Carretera Austral. In this area, options include a Tigre Glacier walk and a 2 day base camp hike up the Rio Mosco River. A visit to Caleta Tortel, an amazing village on stilts, as a side trip on the journey down, is also a possibility.



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.



Approaching the Tigre glacier



Heading up the Mosco valley

Leaving Villa O'Higgins, we will take a boat to Candelario Mancilla to undertake the O'Higgins Glacier trek (Boat and weather dependent), returning to Candelario Mancilla and staying overnight at Villa O'Higgins.



Caleta Tortel

The big one. Don't believe the maps? The southern icefield walk was and is a great walk but the best maps available when we last did it left something to be desired. The trek began with a bit of a 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.



Fording the river



On the climb

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.

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



The short wade



Walking on the main plateau.



View from the top before the big descent.

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



Sheltered forest campsite next to a stream

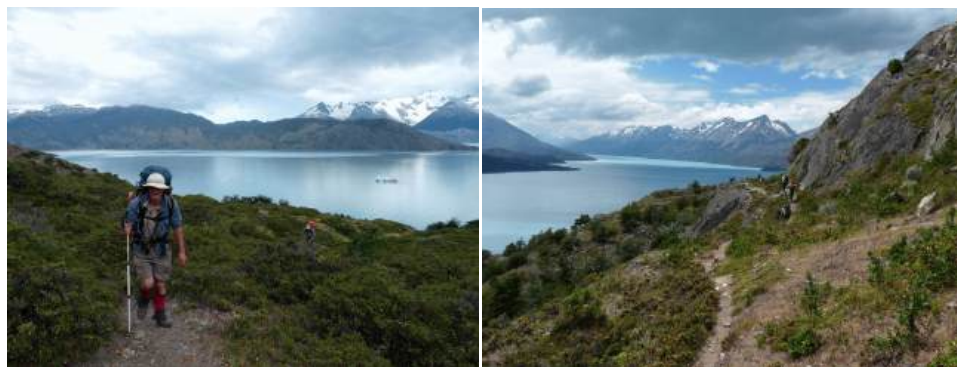


O'Higgins glacier from just above the camp

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. 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 right show our 2012 group walking along the lake. We found a nice sheltered campsite next to the ruins of an old farm. From there it was 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.

The following day we make our way to Cochrane where we restock & stay overnight before heading to Fundo San Lorenzo where we begin a two night trek.

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 after the walk give you a chance to experience a traditional Patagonian banquet.

The three photos at right 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. There are options here to stay at the base camp and do day walks or we can complete the overnight stay at the hut. This will be weather dependent.



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.



Nearing the northern end of the trek



One of many river crossings



Parque Patagonia bridge

This area is vast but it is our plan to move north from Cochrane toward Parque Patagonia. Here, we plan a 4 or 5 day through walk, taking in the best of this astonishing park which can include indigenous cave paintings by dividing into 2 groups with a vehicle at each end, meeting midway and culminating by regrouping in Chile Chico or Puerto Guadal. The three photos above were taken on one of our earlier through walks. If time permits, we may include a day walk to ‘Needle Rock’ in the northern part of the park.

Puerto Guadal, is a small town with some impressive accommodation with views over the second largest lake in South America. We will certainly look out for opportunities such as these.



Needle rock, northern Parque Patagonia. Look closely and you can see a person at the base.



Lounge room in Puerto Guadal



View from the lounge shown at left. Lake General Carrera, the second largest lake in South America.

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.

SIDE TRIP OPTIONS (others may become available before the trip):



Lake Leones and Leones Glacier

Leones Glacier, from Rio Tranquillo:

20 km return walk. Side trip with guides only (across private land) to the Leones Glacier. Includes a boat trip on Lago Leones to the glacier face and a spectacular lunch One of our guides did this in January 2025. Highly recommended. It is a full day so consideration will be to be given to camping that night.



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

What does it cost? AUD \$2995

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 \$2995 after that.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance that covers trekking. We cannot finalise your booking until we have proof that you have travel insurance. See www.bushwalkingholidays.org/pdf/TravelInsurance.pdf – updates welcome.
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.

Inclusions:

1. Pick up and drop off Balmaceda (Coyhaique) airport (you must notify us ahead of time)
2. Guides x 2.
 - Both wilderness first aid trained. One of whom is a critical care nurse. Both extremely experienced in remote area trekking.
 - Interpreters
 - Organisers for Chilean travel arrangements, food shopping for walks, organising accommodation, etc.
 - Remote area travel expertise.
 - Cooks: who provide all the group equipment (billies, stoves, etc) and who will cook all the evening meals on the walks
3. Small group of like minded people with whom you can share your experiences and expenses.

What is not included:

- Your share of all the expenses for food, accommodation, transport, ferries etc. (an estimate of these will be provided and your share will be requested before the trip. Any outstanding amount will be refunded).
- 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 (allow approximately US\$15 to US\$45 per night plus a few nights in higher end accommodation where appropriate and available).
- 4WD Vehicle hire and fuel costs (hiring a vehicle as part of a group costs far less than hiring it with only two or three).
- Compulsory International travel insurance (Our overseas liability insurance requires that everyone who participates in this trip must have travel insurance which covers them for trekking).
- Visas for Chile
- Personal gear

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 to 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.

Notes

1. Prices are subject to change.
2. All prices are quoted in Australian dollars.
3. 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.
4. 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. For example: 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.
5. 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.

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 these trips 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:

1. 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.
2. 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 surroundings 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

Our guides use and recommend [Airalto 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).

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. As much as we can try, we can only be guided by what is happening locally. If you want to get maximum value for your money, you can go sightseeing or simply relax while the guides do the food shopping or stand in line for tickets etc. Or, if you wish, you are welcome to join them while they do these things.

There may be occasional days between sections where you will be left to your own devices while the guides do the organising. You are also welcome to join them while they do these things.

There will also be days between sections where you will be left to your own devices while the guides slow down and relax a bit and catch up on the organising. Based on past experience, things will run more smoothly if the guides do this.