



Patagonia

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Best National Parks & Reserves

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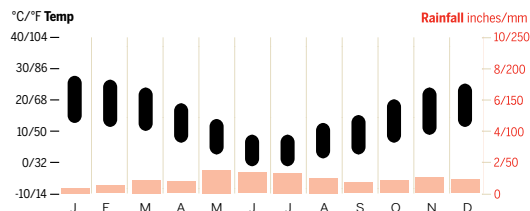
Why Go?

On South America's southern frontier, nature grows wild, barren and beautiful. Spaces are large, as are the silences that fill them. For the newly arrived, such emptiness can be as impressive as the sight of Patagonia's jagged peaks, pristine rivers and dusty backwater oases. In its enormous scale, Patagonia offers an innumerable wealth of potential experiences and landscapes.

Though no longer a dirt road, lonely RN 40 remains the iconic highway that stirred affection in personalities as disparate as Butch Cassidy and Bruce Chatwin. On the eastern seaboard, paved RN 3 shoots south, connecting oil boomtowns with ancient petrified forests, Welsh settlements and the incredible Península Valdés. Then there is the other, trendy Patagonia where faux-fur hoodies outnumber the guanacos. Don't miss the spectacular sights of El Calafate and El Chaltén, but remember that they're a world apart from the solitude of the steppe.

When to Go

El Calafate



Nov–Mar Warmest months, ideal for *estancia* visits and driving Ruta 40.

Jun–mid-Dec Right whales migrate to Península Valdés.

Mid-Sep–early Mar Coastal fauna, including penguins, marine birds and sea lions, abounds.

Getting There & Around

Patagonia is synonymous with unmaintained *ripio* (gravel) roads, missing transport links and interminable bus rides. Flights, though expensive, connect the highlights. Before skimping on your transport budget, bear in mind that the region comprises a third of the world's eighth-largest country.

If you're busing it along the eastern seaboard, note that schedules are based on the demands of Buenos Aires, with arrivals and departures frequently occurring in the dead of night. Low-season transport options are greatly reduced. In high season demand is high – buy tickets as far in advance as possible.

COASTAL PATAGONIA

Patagonia's cavorting right whales, penguin colonies and traditional Welsh settlements are all accessed by Argentina's coastal RN 3. While this paved road takes in some fascinating maritime history, it also travels long yawning stretches of landscape that blur the horizon like a never-ending blank slate. It's also a favored travel route for oversized trucks on long-haul trips.

Wildlife enthusiasts shouldn't miss the world-renowned *Península Valdés*, the continent's largest Magellanic penguin colonies at *Área Natural Protegida Punta Tombo*, and *Reserva Natural Ría Deseado*'s diverse seabird population. The quiet villages of Puerto San Julián and Camarones make for quiet seaside retreats, while Gaiman tells the story of Welsh settlement through a lazy afternoon of tea and cakes.

Puerto Madryn

 0280 / POP 73,600

The gateway to *Península Valdés*, Puerto Madryn bustles with tourism and industry. It retains a few small-town touches: the radio announces lost dogs, and locals are welcoming and unhurried. With summer temperatures matching those of Buenos Aires, Madryn holds its own as a modest beach destination, but from June to mid-December the visiting right whales take center stage. From July to September, these migrating whales come so close they can be viewed without taking a tour – either from the coast 20km north of town or from the town pier.

The city is the second-largest fishing port in the country and home to Aluar, Argentina's first aluminum plant, built in 1974. A


sheltered port facing Golfo Nuevo, Puerto Madryn was founded by Welsh settlers in 1886. Statues of immigrants and *Teheulche* along the shoreline pay tribute to its history. The *Universidad de la Patagonia* is known for its marine biology department, and ecological centers promote conservation and education.

Sights

Puerto Madryn is just east of RN 3, 1371km south of Buenos Aires and about 65km north of Trelew. The action in town centers on the *costanera* (seaside road) and two main parallel avenues, Av Roca and 25 de Mayo. Bulevar Brown is the main drag alongside the beaches to the south. Most hostels rent bikes, which is a convenient way to get around and see area beaches.

★ EcoCentro

MUSEUM

 445-7470; www.ecocentro.org.ar; J Verne 3784; admission AR\$125; ☉ 5-9pm Wed-Mon, cruise-ship days 10am-1pm Celebrating the area's unique marine ecosystem, this masterpiece brings an artistic sensitivity to extensive scientific research. There are exhibits on the breeding habits of right whales, dolphin sounds and southern elephant-seal harems, a touch-friendly tide pool and more. The building includes a three-story tower and library, the top features glass walls and comfy couches for reading.

Bring your binoculars: whales may be spotted from here. It's an enjoyable 40-minute walk or 15-minute bike ride along the *costanera* to the EcoCentro. Shuttles run three times daily from the tourist office on Av Roca, or you can catch a Línea 2 bus to the last stop and walk 1km.


Observatorio Punta Flecha

WILDLIFE RESERVE

(☉ high tide) **FREE** Run by Fundación Patagonia Natural, this whale-watching observatory sits 17km north of Puerto Madryn on Playa el Doradillo. Offers tourist information and opens at high tide, when there are more whales and visitors to the beach.

Museo Provincial de Ciencias Naturales y Oceanográfico

MUSEUM

 445-1139; cnr Domecq García & Menéndez; admission AR\$10, free Tue; ☉ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 3-7pm Sat Feeling strands of seaweed and ogling a preserved octopus give a hands-on museum experience. The 1917 Chalet Pujol features marine and land mammal exhibits, preserved specimens, plus collections of Welsh wares. Explanations in Spanish are geared to youth science classes, but it's visually