



Tierra del Fuego

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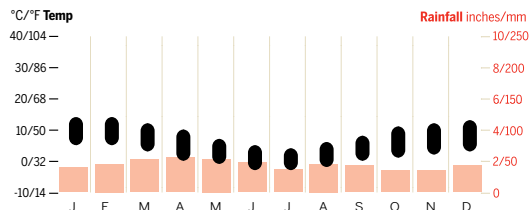
Why Go?

The southernmost extreme of the Americas, this windswept archipelago is as alluring as it is moody – at turns beautiful, ancient and strange. Travelers who first came for the ends-of-the-earth novelty discover a destination that's far more complex than these bragging rights. Intrigue still remains in a past storied with shipwrecks, native peoples and failed missions. In Tierra del Fuego, nature is writ bold and reckless, from the scoured plains, rusted peat bogs and mossy lenga forests to the snowy ranges above the Beagle Channel.

While distant and isolated, Tierra del Fuego is by no means cut off from the mainland, though the Argentine half is far more developed than its Chilean counterpart. Ports buzz with commerce and oil refineries prosper while adventure seekers descend in droves to fly-fish, hike and start Antarctic cruises. Shared with Chile, this archipelago features one large island, Isla Grande, Chile's Isla Navarino and many smaller uninhabited ones.

When to Go

Ushuaia



Nov–Mar Warmest months, best for hiking, penguin-watching and estancia (ranch) visits.

Mid-Nov–Mid-Apr Fly-fishing season.

Jul–Sep Optimal for skiing, snowboarding or dog sledding.

Getting There & Around

The most common overland route from Patagonia is via the ferry crossing at **Punta Delgada** (Primera Angostura; ☎ +56) 61-2728100; www.tabsa.cl; per car/passenger CH\$15,000/1700; ☀ daylight hours, 20min), Chile. Unlike the rest of Argentina, Tierra del Fuego doesn't have designated provincial highways but secondary roads known as *rutas complementarias*, modified by a lowercase letter. These roads are referred to as 'RC-a,' for example.

If renting a car in mainland Argentina, be aware that you must pass through Chile a couple of times to reach Tierra del Fuego. This requires special documents, special attention to banned items (mainly fruit, dairy products, meat and seeds) and additional international insurance coverage. Most car-rental agencies can arrange the paperwork with advance notice.

At the time of writing, Chile was building an alternate road to the southern end of the island. It currently links with Lago Fagnano, but a 4WD vehicle is required.

Visitors can fly into Río Grande or Ushuaia. Buses take the ferry from Chile's Punta Delgada; all pass through Río Grande before reaching Ushuaia.

Ushuaia

☎ 02901 / POP 57,000

A busy port and adventure hub, Ushuaia is a sliver of steep streets and jumbled buildings below the snowcapped Martial Range. Here the Andes meet the southern ocean in a sharp skid, making way for the city before reaching a sea of lapping currents.

It's a location matched by few, and chest-beating Ushuaia takes full advantage of its end-of-the-world status as an increasing number of Antarctica-bound vessels call in to port. Its endless mercantile hustle knows no irony: the souvenir shop named for Jimmy Button (a native kidnapped for show in England), the ski center named for a destructive invasive species... You get the idea. That said, with a pint of the world's southernmost microbrew in hand, you can happily plot the dazzling outdoor options: hiking, sailing, skiing, kayaking and even scuba diving are just minutes from town.

Tierra del Fuego's comparatively high wages draw Argentines from all over to resettle here, and some locals lament the loss of small-town culture. Meanwhile, expansion means haphazard development advancing in the few directions the mad geography allows.

History

In 1870 the British-based South American Missionary Society set its sights on the Yahgan (or Yámana), a nomadic tribe whose members faced brutal weather conditions almost entirely naked – they didn't have any permanent shelter to keep clothing dry, and believed that the natural oil of their skin was better protection than soaking wet animal fur. Charles Darwin branded them 'the lowest form of humanity on earth.' Missionary Thomas Bridges didn't agree. After years among them, he created a Yahgan-English dictionary in the late 19th century, deeming their language complex and subtle.

The mission made Ushuaia its first permanent Fuegian outpost, but the Yahgan, who had survived 6000 years without contact, were vulnerable to foreign-brought illnesses and faced increasing infringement by sealers, settlers and gold prospectors. Four Yámana, including a teenager dubbed 'Jimmy Button,' were kidnapped by the naval captain Robert Fitz Roy and shipped back to England to be educated and paraded around as examples of gentrified savages. One died of disease. After months of public criticism, Fitz Roy agreed to return the rest to their homeland.

The tribe's legacy is now reduced to shell mounds, Thomas Bridges' famous dictionary and Jimmy Button souvenirs. At the time of writing, one elderly Yámana woman was still alive on Isla Navarino, the only native speaker of the language.

Between 1884 and 1947 the city became a penal colony, incarcerating many notorious criminals and political prisoners, both here and on remote Isla de los Estados. Since 1950 the town has been an important naval base.

Sights

Paralleling the Beagle Channel, Av Maipú becomes Malvinas Argentinas west of the cemetery, then turns into RN 3, continuing 12km to Parque Nacional Tierra del Fuego. To the east, public access ends at Yaganes, which heads north to meet RN 3 going north toward Lago Fagnano. Most visitor services are on or near Av San Martín, a block from the waterfront.

The tourist office distributes a free city-tour map with information on the historic houses around town. The 1894 **Legislatura Provincial** (Provincial Legislature; Av Maipú 465) was the governor's official residence. The