

Central Patagonia

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the wild back country around the cathedral peaks of **Cerro Castillo** (p145)
- Exclaiming 'Futalaufquen!' as you plunge into the icy lake in **Parque Nacional Los Alerces** (p140)
- Tracing the towering trunks of ancient alerces in **Parque Pumalín** (p131)
- Braving the rickety bridges and cruising through the hush *lenga* forests of the **Comarca Andina** (p135)

Wild and isolated, central Patagonia is the untamed heart of the region, less feted and crowded than other famous hotspots. Few visitors arrive at these remote outposts. For starters, just getting here is work. On the Chilean side, heavy rains wash out roads, and big rivers and thick undergrowth slow progress on the trail. On the Argentine side, Ruta 40 challenges travelers with scant transport, whipping winds and sometimes snow. But hey, the rewards always fit the challenge.

Those who brave this backwater can plot a course through dense forests, clear streams, unnamed peaks and sprawling glaciers. Isolation has kept the local character self-reliant and tied to nature's clock. In Chile, the Carretera Austral (Hwy 7) was the first road to effectively link these remote regions in the 1980s. The Argentine side moves (a touch) faster. Pavement may be coming to the mythical Ruta 40, but big sky landscapes still rule over its dusty settlements.

With the potential to transform the region, a dozen hydroelectric dams on major Chilean waterways have been proposed. These would inundate virgin forest, disrupt wildlife and require massive tree clearing to create the longest transmission lines in the world. While the Chilean government's priority is to avert a looming energy crunch without the dams, the proposals herald sad tidings for the great Patagonian wilderness.

It may be wise to see it while you can. This section runs north to south, with the hub of Coyhaique also useful to trekkers accessing Southern Patagonia treks around Villa O'Higgins.



GATEWAYS

See Coyhaique (p155) and Esquel (p157). For the latest on Chaitén, in the path of Volcán Chaitén's latest series of eruptions, see boxed text p133.

PARQUE PUMALÍN

Verdant and pristine, this 3300-sq-km park encompasses vast extensions of temperate rainforest, clear rivers, seascapes and farmland. A remarkable forest conservation effort, Parque Pumalín attracts 10,000 visitors yearly (no small number, considering that tourist season is a three-month period) to explore these tracts of forest stretching from near Hornopirén to Chaitén. Owned by American Doug Tompkins (see boxed text, below), it is Chile's largest private park and one of the largest private parks in the world. For Chile it's a model park, with well-maintained roads and trails, extensive infrastructure and minimal impact. Concessions are local businesses a boost.

Agricultural use goes on alongside forest preservation in a park model that's 'unique in the world', according to Dagoberto Guzmán, park manager. Staff participate in projects that range from bee-keeping and

organic farming to animal husbandry and ecotourism. Private *fundos* (small farms) within the park boundaries continue to operate, but with an emphasis on sustainable living. The park maintains a free *refugio* (rustic shelter) for the local workers, and it doesn't charge admission. Tompkins' goal is to allow visitors to immerse themselves in pristine nature and come out with a deeper appreciation for the natural environment.

There are three short but rewarding treks, which all begin quite close together from the Carretera Austral, and can be done either individually, together over a long day, or over two days by camping at Cascadas Escondidas or Tronador.

With the recent activity of Volcán Chaitén (see boxed text p133), Parque Pumalín has closed its infrastructure for a time and may relocate services to El Amarillo, south of Chaitén. Given the unpredictability of volcanoes, visitors should check the region's most recent status before traveling. You can check the park website (www.pumalínpark.org) or contact the Centro de Visitantes Parque Pumalín office (☎ 02945-465-250079; www.pumalínpark.org; Klenner 299, Puerto Varas; 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) for the latest details.

For more treks in this area, see p151.

THE TOMPKINS' LEGACY

Ecobaron – the wealthy philanthropists recycling their greenbacks into green causes – have become a powerful force in the push for Southern Cone conservation, and none more so than US entrepreneur Douglas Tompkins. The founder of Esprit clothing and North Face outdoor-equipment stores, along with his wife Kris Tompkins (a former CEO of Patagonia-brand clothing), started by creating Parque Pumalín, a Rhode Island-sized conservation project cobbled together from small Patagonian farms abutting ancient forest. Donated to the Fundación Pumalín in 2005, it will eventually become a national park.

This gift, however, hasn't left the dynamic duo empty-handed. Today the couple's holdings have burgeoned into an impressive 5180 sq km in Chile and 2924 sq km in Argentina. Kris Tompkins' *Conservación Patagónica* (www.conservacionpatagonica.org) has added important wildlife corridors like Valle Chacabuco and Estancia El Rincón to the region.

More importantly, the couple's hands-on approach has inspired similar contributions, such as Chilean presidential candidate Sebastian Piñera's Parque Tantauco in Chiloé (p124).

Not surprisingly, Douglas Tompkins' interventionist style has attracted its share of controversy. After decades of clamoring by locals for a more convenient road alternative to the Hornopirén-Caleta Gonzalo ferry, the Chilean government proposed a direct route through the heart of Pumalín. Despite local support for the project, Tompkins has opposed the current plan, proposing instead a less-costly coastal route that would more closely follow the settlement pattern.

Beyond the politics, however, many Chileans have found the parks to be a worthwhile contribution. Are the Tompkins environmental visionaries or part of a wave of wealthy foreigners with designs on Patagonia? One thing is for sure: it's not easy being green.

