

Southern Patagonia

HIGHLIGHTS

- Coming off John Gardner Pass to face the colossal **Glaciar Grey** (p182)
- Scrambling to the lookout for **Monte Fitz Roy** (p172) and its satellite peaks
- Ice trekking across the blue contours under **Cerro Torre's chiselled tower** (p171)
- Spying on *huemules*, the **endangered Andean deer** (p168), near Glaciar Tigre
- Following de Agostini's footsteps on the secluded approach to **Monte San Lorenzo** (p163)

Wind drives all here. It razes the barren plains, whittles granite monoliths and ripples long sheaths of ice. Glaciers also had a hand in forming these fine landscapes. Their presence continues: two vast continental icecaps known as Hielo Norte and Hielo Sur make this region the most intensely glaciated part of South America. Stretching from Lago Carrera/Buenos Aires to the Straits of Magellan, Southern Patagonia encompasses the renowned national parks of Torres del Paine and Los Glaciares, as well as many extraordinary little-known reserves.

For many, these landscapes represent the distilled essence of Patagonia. This selection takes trekkers in the wake of famous climbers and mountaineers, from Padre Agostini to Ferrari, to explore around Cerro Torre, San Lorenzo and Torres del Paine. Remote regions on the Carretera Austral and Ruta 40 also have their treasures. Here nature, long left to its own devices, grows wild, barren and beautiful. Spaces are large, as are the silences that fill them.

Southern Patagonia's celebrity attractions receive massive visitation. Please be aware of your impact on the area, practice 'leave-no-trace principles' and keep the community spirit alive on the trail.



FITZ ROY OR PAINE?

These two truly spectacular destinations are occasionally pitted against each other when travelers find themselves strapped for time. How do you choose just one?

The budget breakdown is ever-changing with these two flip-flopping economies. Some years one country is cheaper – so do your homework. If you plan to camp, the point might be moot, but if you're done with foam mattress nights, you will probably find the hostels in El Chaltén cheaper than the *refugios* in Torres del Paine. That's right, most of the treks in the Fitz Roy area can be done as day trips. The area is more compact; its glaciers are smaller yet still spectacular. What does this mean for you? Easy. If the weather turns grizzly, in hours you'll be in a warm pub with a cold pint.

But if you want a world-class trek of a week or more, the Paine Circuit is the clear choice. You will get to see a landscape that's diverse and magnificent, with great glaciers, big turquoise lakes and iconic peaks. In Paine you can trek for a week without retracing your steps. It doesn't have to be Woman/Man vs. Wild. Paine's *refugios* and catamaran services offer a level of back-packing comfort not found in Fitz Roy's *campamentos*.

There's one more consideration: what else do you want to do? El Chaltén isn't far from the massive Glaciar Moreno. On the other hand, Chile has penguins nearby.

The choice, if you must make it, is yours. A final word of caution, though. If you need guaranteed sunshine, we hear Aruba is nice.

GATEWAYS

See Coyhaique p155, Calafate p195 and Punta Arenas p199.

SAN LORENZO MASSIF

A colossal complex of towers and glaciers, the San Lorenzo massif straddles the Chile–Argentina border. Monte San Lorenzo's coveted 3706m summit is the second- or third-highest summit in the Patagonian Andes – depending on who's keeping score. Reminiscent of the Macizo Paine far to the south, this more isolated range sits a few dozen kilometers southeast of Cochrane.

Monte San Lorenzo, called Monte Cochrane in Chile (at least on government documents), is most accessible from its western (Chilean) side via private farms along the Río Tranquilo. However, the eastern side of the San Lorenzo massif enjoys much better environmental protection. It lies couched within Argentina's Parque Nacional Perito Moreno (see More Treks, p194) and the 154-sq-km Estancia El Rincón, protected by the private **Conservación Patagónica** (www.conservacionpatagonica.org).

ENVIRONMENT

Although rock and ice often block the way, the existence of several key passes and lower ridges in the San Lorenzo massif facilitates biological communication between flora and fauna on each side.

The vegetation cover is determined mainly by microclimatic variations in precipitation along with exposure to the sun and savage drying winds. The upper valleys are largely covered by light Magellanic (southern Patagonian) forest of deciduous *ñirre* and *lenga*, with an understorey of *bre-cillo* and *chaura*. The daisylike *chilca* grow in the forest or on moist sunny sites. On the lower or exposed slopes, sparse vegetation more typical of the Patagonian steppes predominates, including tussock grasses and saltbushlike *mogotes*.

Although grazing cattle are the most dominant herbivore, *huemul* and occasionally even guanaco are seen on the Chilean side, stalked by the furtive puma. Trekkers may also be lucky enough to spot the shy *piche* (Patagonian armadillo), which digs its burrow in soft earth.

The gregarious *bandurria* (black-necked ibis) is often seen in the lower valley and around moister areas, usually in flocks of a dozen or more, picking over the grassy areas with its long curved beak. The diminutive *rayadito* (thorntail) lives and nests

