

Peaceful Patagonia

Go beyond the borders of Torres del Paine National Park to find a quieter side of Chilean Patagonia, writes **Steph Dyson**

Patagonia is a place of spectacular mountain scenery, where hiking trails wriggle between granite peaks and glaciers hang vertiginously above cobalt-coloured lagoons. Considered one of the globe's finest hiking destinations, it's fast becoming a bucket-list destination for adventurous travellers.

The region – which covers the bottom third of Chile and Argentina, an area four times the size of the UK – is one of the world's most sparsely populated territories. It's thought of as largely untouched by tourism, but the cat's long been out of the bag for highlights such as Torres del Paine National Park, which swarms with visitors. That means those travelling to the region during high season (December to February) will find themselves surrounded by far more people than they bargained for.

But now, a wave of creative itineraries is showcasing new perspectives on Chilean Patagonia, not only offering a better match for travellers' expectations but also easing the pressure on its more touristed spots. For travellers keen to see the region's beguiling scenery without others blocking the view, here are a handful of ways to explore a more peaceful side of Patagonia.

TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK WITHOUT THE CROWDS

Most trips to Patagonia are multi-centre, combining Torres del Paine National Park with farther-flung destinations. Many visitors flock to the five-day W Trek, which winds around the dramatic Paine Massif mountain range at the centre of the park.

However, a more remote option is the O Circuit – a nine-day trek that allows clients to avoid the crowds in Chile's most famous destination.

The trail loops around the back of the Paine Massif, with either day one or day nine a steep clamber up to the dramatic granite towers after which the park is named. Part of the trail is along the W route, but for the rest, hikers venture far off the beaten track, with a kaleidoscopic backdrop of mountains, glaciers and steppe offering the potential for wild horse, guanaco (the wild cousin of the llama) and even puma sightings en route.

Book it: Intrepid Travel's 11-day Patagonia: Torres del Paine Full O Circuit starts at £4,820, including a guide and simple refuge accommodation, plus ice trekking and kayaking excursions. [intrepidtravel.com](https://www.intrepidtravel.com)

DESTINATIONS

LATIN AMERICA | CHILEAN PATAGONIA



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Grey Glacier and Lake Grey, southern Patagonia; king penguins in Tierra del Fuego; the Carretera Austral PICTURES: Shutterstock/David Ionut, Ijby Berg

How to SELL

CHILEAN PATAGONIA

British Airways runs four weekly flights to Chile's capital, Santiago. Frequent 3.5-hour flights depart for Punta Arenas, the well-connected capital of southern Chilean Patagonia, from where guests can transfer to Torres del Paine National Park, board cruises to Ushuaia or take overland transport to Tierra del Fuego. From Punta Arenas, it's also possible to fly to Puerto Montt, on the northern tip of Chilean Patagonia, from where most self-drive tours of the Carretera Austral begin.

SECLUDED STAYS IN TIERRA DEL FUEGO

For clients looking for an even remoter adventure, it's hard to beat Tierra del Fuego. Bookended by the Strait of Magellan in the north and the Beagle Channel in the south, this archipelago is split between Argentina and Chile, but the latter half is Patagonia at its most pristine.

Seemingly unending steppe is replaced by chiselled mountains folding into peat bog as you head south through the main island. The wildlife opportunities are as compelling as the scenery: honey-coloured guanacos are visible from the road, while the island hosts Chile's only king penguin colony and a resident population of southern elephant seals.

Abercrombie & Kent's Tierra del Fuego itinerary is worth the scenic, eight-hour drive to the southwestern corner of the island. Guests will hike through one of Patagonia's most remote national parks, Yendegaia, and learn about the settlers who came here on horseback in the 1950s, some 50 years before it was accessible by road.

Book it: Abercrombie & Kent's seven-day A Journey to Tierra del Fuego itinerary costs from £8,290 and includes Patagonian-influenced dining, all transport, and accommodation in simple, family-owned cabins; flights excluded. abercrombiekent.co.uk

ROAD TRIPPING ALONG THE CARRETERA AUSTRAL

Hiking might be Chilean Patagonia's main draw, but a self-drive adventure along the Carretera Austral in Aysén province farther north allows clients to explore Patagonia at a different pace.

"The scenery is spectacular," says Tom King, Chile specialist at Audley Travel. The 770-mile road threads between glacier-strewn mountains, rainbow-hued cave systems and turquoise rivers, with a scattering of isolated settlements in between.

"There is so much to explore and travelling by 4x4 allows the freedom to do that," says King. "With so many parks and protected areas on the route, there are countless opportunities to go for a hike, often with nobody else to be seen for miles."

Book it: Audley Travel's 24-day Complete Chilean Patagonia tour costs from £9,965 per person, including a 14-day self-drive and three days in Torres del Paine National Park. audleytravel.com

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CRUISING THE PATAGONIAN FJORDS

Land-based excursions in Patagonia abound, but Chile's labyrinthine fjords teem with dolphins and humpback whales, and exploring them from the water promises a radically different adventure.

"For clients seeking something truly off the beaten track in rarely explored waters, a cruise among the stunning glaciers of the Chilean fjords cannot be missed," says Latin Routes senior travel specialist Michelle McPherson.

"Going where you cannot simply go on foot – or by any other means – offers up-close encounters with incredible landscapes and wildlife, all from the comfort of an expedition ship. It's a unique and unforgettable experience."

Chilean-owned company Australis sails between Punta Arenas, in southern Chilean Patagonia, and Ushuaia, on the region's Argentine tip. Guests can expect Zodiac excursions to creaking, tidewater glaciers, and landings on remote outposts such as the legendary headland of Cape Horn, where the roiling waters of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans meet.

Book it: Latin Routes' Exploring the End of the World itinerary is priced from £7,999 per person, including five days onboard the 200-passenger *Stella Australis* or *Ventus Australis*. latinroutes.co.uk