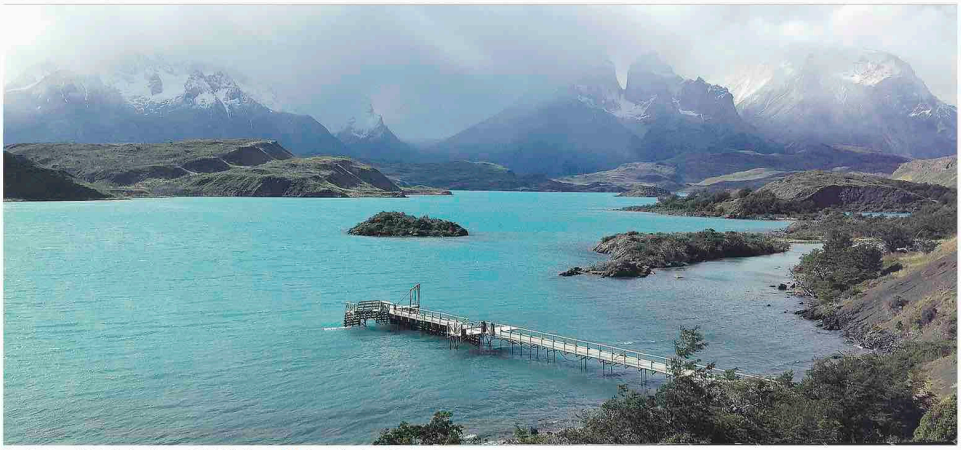


The view from Chile's Explora Patagonia hotel in Torres del Paine national park is stunning. PHOTOS: JOANNE BLAIN

A WALK ON CHILE'S WILD SIDE

South American country offers a wealth of options for adventure seekers

JOANNE BLAIN

The highway leading to Torres del Paine national park in Chile's Patagonia region is called Ruta del Fin del Mondo for a good reason — it leads almost to the end of the world.

At a latitude of 51 degrees south, the park is further south of the equator than Vancouver is north of it. Geographically speaking, it's a stone's throw from Antarctica.

That means getting there is neither cheap nor easy. But once you're in the midst of the park's jaw-dropping natural beauty, you'll forget the journey and revel in the destination.

The massive snowy peaks of Torres del Paine grew from a distant backdrop to a looming presence on the long van ride from the tiny Punta Arenas airport to Explora Patagonia hotel, home base for my exploration of the national park.

It was tempting to settle into the hotel's cushy lounge and spend the day watching clouds race over the peaks and the whitecaps churn the turquoise water below it, but there was too much else to do.

On Day 1, I opted for a gentle six-kilometre hike to Lake Nordenskjold that wound through an otherworldly forest of silver and black skeletons of trees, burned in a 2012 fire, but now enveloped by green regrowth.

On our way to a scenic overlook over the French Valley, we heard a distant rumble that sounded like thunder. "That was an avalanche," our guide Negra said, pointing to the snow-covered mountains to our left. It was a reminder, in case the ravaged forest and the bracing wind in our faces weren't enough, that the elements are in charge in this part of the world.

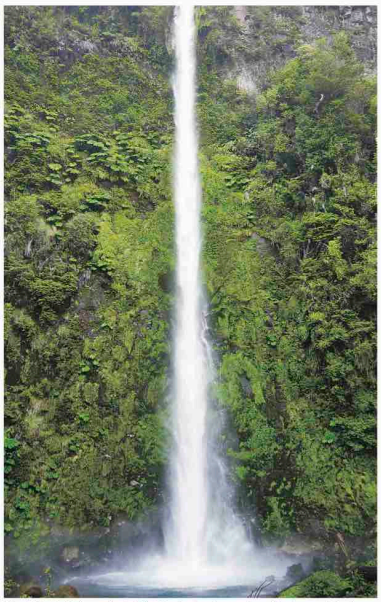
After lunch at the hotel, we set off for a horse ride led by one of Chile's famous gauchos. Our reward was a spectacular view of the Paine River and, back at the stables, sharing a cup of mate, a traditional herbal tea passed around and sipped through a silver straw.

After another guest and I expressed an interest in getting some wildlife photos, a guide set up a "photo safari" for us the next day. We were excited when we saw a single guanaco, a wild llama common in southern Chile and Argentina, perched on a distant hillside. But our guide, Javier, urged us to be patient. "I know where we'll see many more guanacos," he said.

Several kilometres down the road, the van stopped as a herd of guanacos loped across the road to a grassy field. Soon there were 100 or more, with the adults protecting the youngsters from the unseen pumas we were told might be lurking nearby. They didn't seem bothered by the human presence.

A pair of flamingos on a shallow pond were more skittish, as were a small group of rheas, an ostrich-like bird that Javier said defends itself with a ferocious kick. But back at the hotel, an endangered south Andean deer named Soledad, who hangs out near the lobby entrance, was happy to pose for photos.

Patagonia is undeniably spectacular, but it's not the only area worth visiting in Chile, which stretches more than 4,300 kilometres along the South American coast.



The Salto la China waterfall is 45 minutes by car from the town of Pucón.



Guanacos, wild llamas found in southern Chile, graze at the base of the mountains in Torres del Paine national park.

The Pucón region, about 800 kilometres south of Santiago, is less well known than Patagonia but is a great destination for adventure seekers, both soft and hard. It's easily reached by a short flight from Santiago to Temuco.

Waterfalls, volcanoes and hot springs — what more could you ask for? Pucón is a paradise for hikers, and the striking glacier-fed waterfalls Salto la China and Salto El Leon, both a 45-minute drive from the town of Pucón, are good places to start. Both are easy hikes with great photo opportunities at the end.

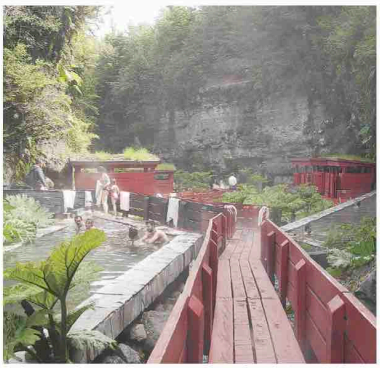
The Lago Caburgua waterfall is a photo op on the way to Vicente Pérez Rosales National Park, where you can venture into the depths of a lava tube and get a spectacular view of the Villarrica volcano. It's the most active of the 43 volcanoes in the Pucón area, belching out a steady stream of gas from its snowy peak.

If you've never tried white-water rafting, this is a good place to do it — the rapids here are tame enough for beginners. But don't be surprised if you channel your inner Meryl Streep (The River Wild version) when you're perched on the outer edge of a rubber raft, plunging an oar into the churning water.

Afterwards, the perfect place to soothe aching paddling muscles is at the Termas Geométricas hot-springs complex, a string of 17 naturally fed pools connected by a wooden walkway and nestled in a forest of broad-leafed gunneras.

When you've had your fill of outdoor adventure, spend a bit of city time in the bustling capital, Santiago, then head to Valparaiso, about 100 kilometres away on the coast.

This city of about 300,000 dates back to the 1540s and has seen some hard times — a major earthquake in 1906 destroyed half the city and the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 diminished its importance as a port. But a boom in tourism in Chile in the last few years has breathed new life into Valparaiso.



Bathers enjoy the natural hot springs at Termas Geométricas in the Pucón region, a string of 17 naturally fed pools connected by a wooden walkway.

It's still a bit gritty around the edges, but new restaurants and cafés are popping up throughout the city. After the city commissioned local artists to paint street murals a few years ago, Valparaiso has become a mecca for street artists who have turned the city into a canvas for their often spectacular work. Don't miss a visit to La Sebastiana, one of three homes owned by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (the other two are in Santiago and Isla Negra) that are still furnished the way they were when he lived there.

The neighbouring city of Vina del Mar is more polished but less interesting than Valparaiso, but it's worth the short drive to see the Easter Island moai (giant head) outside the Museo Fonck and, around the corner, an all-but-ignored Rodin sculpture.

On the drive back to Santiago to catch your flight home, stop off in the Casablanca Valley wine country to taste (and take home) some excellent Chilean wine. The Casas del Bosque and Bodegas RE wineries are both worth a visit.

Joanne Blain's trip to Chile was hosted by Turismo Chile and Explora, which did not review this story.

IF YOU GO

You can't fly direct to Santiago from Vancouver, so plan on a layover in Toronto, the U.S. or Mexico. From Santiago, Chilean carriers Latam and Sky Airline fly to Temuco and to Punta Arenas, the gateway to Patagonia.

Staying there:

- In Patagonia, Explora Patagonia is a luxurious but relaxed all-inclusive hotel in Torres del Paine national park. explora.com
- Near Pucón, the Hotel Antumalal is a very comfortable family-owned hotel with a mid-century flair and a lovely spa. antumalal.com
- In Santiago, the Luciano K Hotel is a beautifully renovated art deco hotel close to restaurants and shops. lucianokhotel.com
- In Valparaiso, the Hotel Palacio Astoreca is in a stunning heritage building in the city centre. hotelpalacioastoreca.com

For more information:

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