



TRAVEL ICON #17
51° 0'S/73° 0'W Chile

Torres del

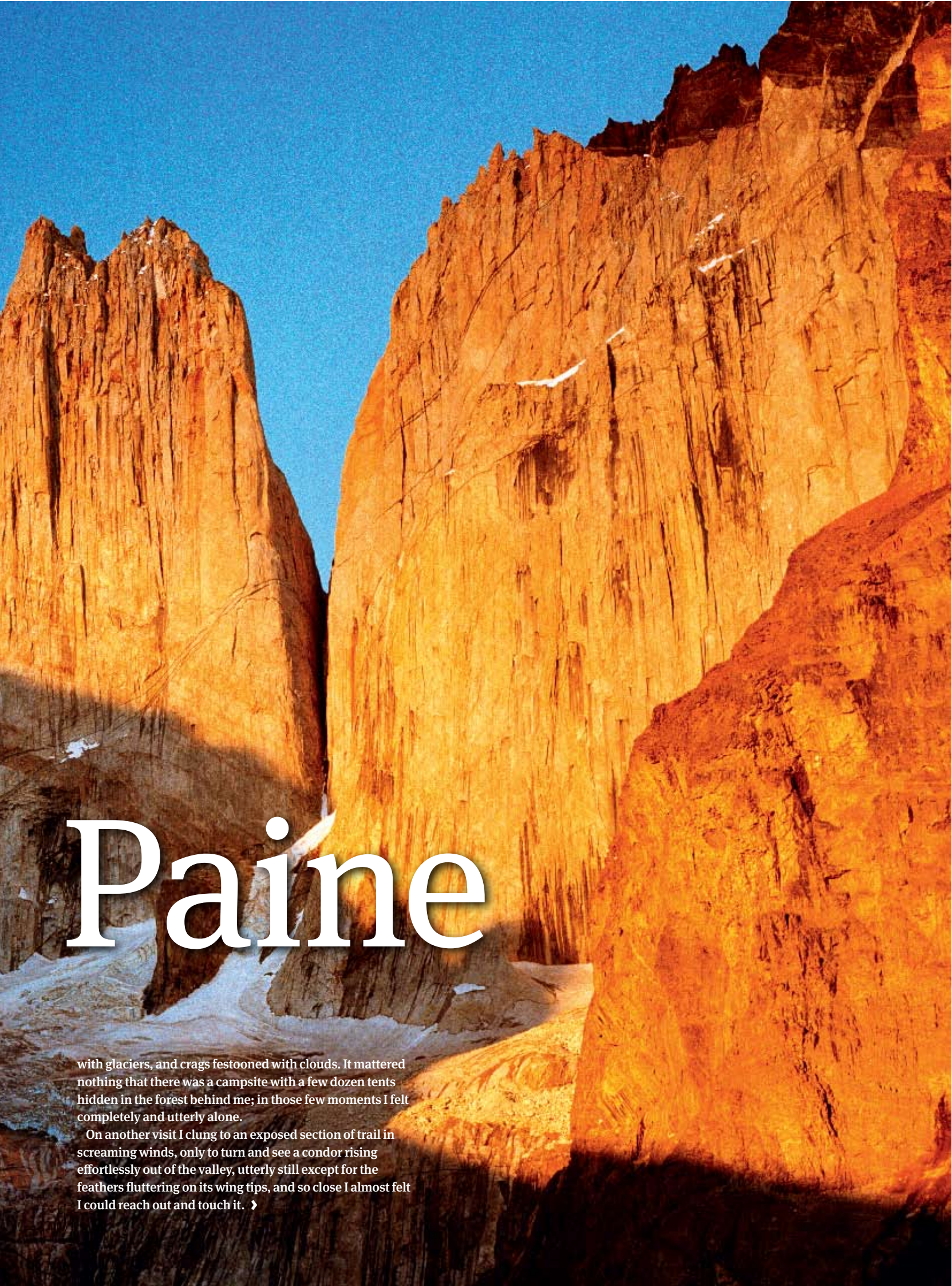
There's more to Patagonia's iconic national park than just those jagged spires. Rudolf Abraham guides you through the highlights – well-known and offbeat – of Chile's deep south

There is a feeling of immensity in the landscapes of Chile's most iconic national park – vast sheets of fractured blue ice, emerald-coloured lakes, primeval-looking forest, vertical spires of rock and seemingly limitless, cloud-streaked skies.

It is one of those rare destinations with which you think you are familiar even before arriving – one or more of its famous views decorate almost any piece of tourist literature associated with Patagonia – yet which have lost none of

their magic, and still manage to impress. It is, quite simply, a staggeringly beautiful place.

Yet despite the huge number of visitors the area attracts, and the frankly intrusive commercialism of large hotel complexes within the park boundaries, it is still possible to find solitude. On my first visit to Torres del Paine I sat among boulders by a stream in the Valle Francés, mesmerised, as shafts of early morning sunlight struck the enormous east face of Paine Grande, all dark rock slung



Paine

with glaciers, and crags festooned with clouds. It mattered nothing that there was a campsite with a few dozen tents hidden in the forest behind me; in those few moments I felt completely and utterly alone.

On another visit I clung to an exposed section of trail in screaming winds, only to turn and see a condor rising effortlessly out of the valley, utterly still except for the feathers fluttering on its wing tips, and so close I almost felt I could reach out and touch it. ▶

IN CONTEXT



The 12-million-year history of a marvel

Parque Nacional Torres del Paine lies some 2,000km south of the Chilean capital Santiago (as the crow flies; 3,100km by road) on the edge of the vast **Campo de Hielo Sur** (Southern Ice Field). Fingers of the ice field – **Glaciares Grey, Tyndall and Dickson** – penetrate deep into the national park, feeding lakes and rivers which, in turn, drain southward into **Seno Última Esperanza** – Last Hope Sound.

The 'towers' themselves are formed of granite, remains of igneous rock injected up into the earth's crust some 12 million years ago. Since then the surrounding sedimentary rock has been gradually eroded, leaving the more resistant granite 'towers' standing – though it still forms a dark, spiky upper band on the **Cuernos** ('horns').

The first European to see and describe Torres del Paine was **Lady Florence Dixie** who passed this way on horseback in the late 1870s, describing the towers in her book *Across Patagonia* (1880) as 'Cleopatra's Needles'. The great Swedish explorer **Otto Nordenskjöld** visited the area in the 1890s and 1920s, while priest and mountaineer **Alberto de Agostini** explored the Southern Ice Field in the 1930s and 40s – whence **Lago Nordenskjöld** and **Torre de Agostini**. A cattle ranch was established here in 1896, running until the 1970s; some of the national park still lies on private land.

Part of the area was declared a national park in 1959 (though not before large tracts had been cleared), and later enlarged until reaching its present size of over 2,400 sq km. It was declared a **Unesco World Biosphere Reserve** in 1978.

All photographs by Rudolf Abraham and Peter Mallet

HOW TO DO IT

Torres by foot – the hiker's dilemma

With two classic trails, trekkers are spoilt for choice

While some may prefer to make only day trips into the national park, visiting one or two areas by bus or boat, the real way to see the area is on foot: either as a day hike up to Mirador las Torres or the snout of Glaciar Grey, or – infinitely more rewarding – by completing one of the two world-class treks, the so-called 'W' or the 'Circuit'.

The Torres del Paine Circuit is an extended trek through remote, ever-changing and spectacular mountain scenery. The route includes side trips to the 'towers' and the sublimely

beautiful Valle Francés, and passes beneath the iconic Cuernos as well as above and alongside the awe-inspiring expanse of Glaciar Grey, through beautiful forests of Magellanic coigüe, Antarctic beech and lenga. Though not technically difficult, it requires commitment – there's no convenient exit point halfway through. The highest point on the Circuit is John Gardner Pass – hardly the top of the world at 1,180m, but the wind can make it almost impossible to stand up.

The 'W' is basically a shorter (and busier) version, following the southern



Swathes of Grey
The Circuit trek yields epic views of Glaciar Grey

IN NUMBERS: 16,800 SQ KM AREA OF THE SOUTHERN PATAGONIAN ICE FIELD –

ISSUES

Crowds & climate change

Torres del Paine attracted 146,000 visitors in the 2007-08 season – which inevitably places strains on the park, from trail erosion to waste management.

Over the years a number of large luxury hotels have sprung up (unlike the Fitz Roy area of Argentina's Los Glaciares NP, where such developments are barred), and in 2005 a fire broke out when a camp stove was accidentally knocked over, which consumed an area of 150 sq km before it could be brought under control.

On another level, climate change has resulted in many of the region's glaciers retreating at an alarming rate – Glaciar Grey by some 2.3km, Glaciar Tyndall by 1.6km over the past 22 years.

Both Torres del Paine NP and Bernardo O'Higgins NP have been on the Tentative List of Unesco World Heritage Sites since 1994.

section of the Circuit and taking in some – but not all – of its highlights.

You should allow four to five days for the 'W', eight to ten for the Circuit. Never underestimate the fickle Patagonian climate: gale-force winds can make it impossible – or extremely dangerous – for trekkers to cross the pass, while streams and rivers can flood, bridges become submerged, forest trails turn into mud slurries and temperatures plummet. At the same time thick, low cloud can roll in and completely obscure that view you've come halfway around the world to see – factor in an extra day or two so you can wait for the weather to clear up.

Unless you're on an organised trek, you'll need to carry a tent and sleeping bag, as well as food and a stove for at least some of the stages – though you can order meals when staying at or camping by a hut. Wet-weather

gear is mandatory – if you manage to walk the entire circuit in fine weather, count yourself lucky.

There are also a couple of other, less well-known walks – to Laguna Verde, and to Lago Pingo and Glaciar Zapata in the south – with far fewer people than on the main trails.

While the view of the 'towers' from Mirador las Torres, towards the head of Valle Ascencio, is undoubtedly fine – you'll need a pre-dawn start from nearby Campamento Torres to see them glow red with the first rays of the sun – some of the most beautiful views in the park are to be found south of Paine Grande hut, looking across Lago Pehoé, and from the short trail beyond the roaring falls at Salto Grande. And however impressive Glaciar Grey might appear at its snout, its true scale (40km long and over 5km wide) can only be appreciated from the pass. >



'The Circuit is an extended trek through remote, ever-changing and spectacular mountain scenery'

THE LARGEST EXPANSE OF ICE IN THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE OUTSIDE ANTARCTICA





WHILE YOU'RE THERE

3 little-known highlights around Torres del Paine

1 Sierra Baguales Wildlife & weird rocks

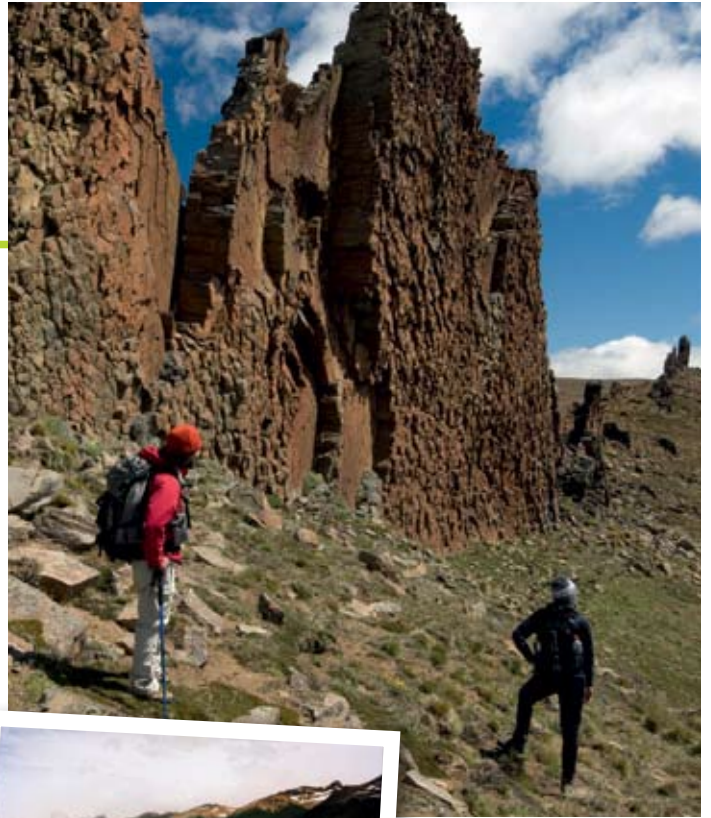
Sierra Baguales is a remote and little-known area north-east of Torres del Paine, on the border with Argentina. Red-brown cliffs frown above lush rolling hills, and rivers meander through stony valleys like silver snakes. A series of wild-looking rock formations runs along a ridge-top, leaning at a precarious angle – rather like a Giant's Causeway stacked on its side – and the landscape is scattered with fossil remains and traces of petrified forest.

There is no public transport, and the whole area lies on private land, so it is very little visited. Currently only one company (Hotel Remota; +56 2 387 1500, www.remota.cl) organises excursions here, and even the guanaco are still relatively unaccustomed to seeing humans – when walking up a valley, a small, inquisitive group of them shadowed our progress on the opposite side, stopping whenever we did and calling frequently.

There is plenty of scope for seeing other wildlife too – from condor and lesser rhea, to Patagonian grey fox and the less common chimango caracara. It's thought that the Verlika Pass at the head of the main valley was used by the first indigenous inhabitants – the Tehuelche – who crossed into the area from further north.

2 Glaciar Balmaceda & Seno Ultima Esperanza A boat ride to end them all

A two-hour trip by catamaran from Puerto Natales, at the far end of Seno Última Esperanza (Last Hope Sound), Glaciar Balmaceda spews out from

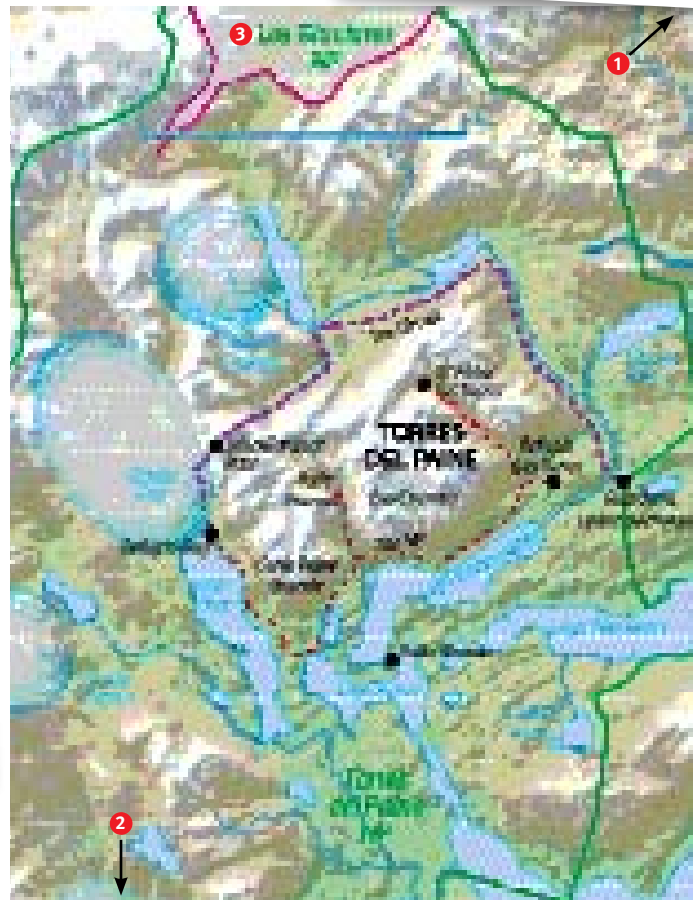


between black, mist-clad crags, a mass of blue ice bristling with *seracs* (ice towers). Not far away, Glaciar Serrano tumbles into a small bay, shedding icebergs from its snout. This whole area forms part of Bernardo O'Higgins NP, which covers some 35,000 sq km, most of it accessible only by boat or helicopter. Most agencies in Puerto Natales organise trips to Glaciares Balmaceda and Serrano.

3 Los Glaciares National Park (Argentina)

Border-hopping to a world icon

It doesn't take much more than a cursory glance at a map of southern Patagonia to see just how close Torres del Paine is to Los Glaciares NP in Argentina – where the great attractions are the spectacular trekking around El Chaltén (particularly Mt Fitz Roy), and the vast expanse of Glaciar Perito Moreno, one of the world's few non-retreating glaciers. Agencies in Puerto Natales organise day trips to the Perito Moreno glacier – try Servitur (+56 61 411 858, www.servitur.cl); for those with more time buses run (5 hours) to El Calafate, from where frequent buses run to El Chaltén (3.5 hours). >



Nature on the move: Marvel at the rock towers of Sierra Baguales (top right), the remote Balmaceda glacier (above) and Argentina's Perito Moreno glacier (inset)

2,460M HEIGHT OF TORRE CENTRAL, FIRST CLIMBED IN 1963 BY SIR CHRIS BONINGTON



This image: Clouds circle the park's spires
Below: Hiking the Circuit offers grand views of the Sierra Maste

◀ Planning your trip

When to go

The trekking season in Torres del Paine extends roughly from December to April. During peak season (January-February), when Chileans take their summer holidays, the park can get very busy – although it tends to be the ‘W’ that sees the worst of the crowds. March is perhaps the best time of year to visit, when you’ll still get the best of the weather without quite the crowds (or the mosquitoes, which are at their worst during the peak season). Come outside these months and you face bitter temperatures and heavy snowfall – though there’s less wind, and some agencies offer winter ski touring.

Getting there

To get to Torres del Paine you first need to get to Puerto Natales, its functional gateway town. From the UK you can fly with LAN (0800 977 6100, www.lan.com) to Santiago via Madrid (17 hours+) from £713 return, and from Santiago to Punta Arenas (3.5 hours), from where there are about five buses daily to Puerto Natales (3 hours; +56 61 225527, www.busespacheco.com).

For those arriving from Argentina’s Los Glaciares NP, there are direct buses between El Calafate and Puerto Natales. From Puerto Natales there are

buses (twice daily during summer, 2.5 hours) to Torres del Paine.

National park information

Torres del Paine, like Chile’s other national parks, is managed by its National Forestry Commission, CONAF (www.conaf.cl – in Spanish). Entrance to the park costs Ch\$15,000/5,000 (£17/5.60) in high/low season. Camping is allowed only at designated sites – usually next to a hut, or in a few cases, conveniently placed sites with a warden; open fires are prohibited. Keep to established trails, use biodegradable soap and carry litter out with you.

Where to stay

Completing the Circuit or the W requires a combination of camping and staying in *refugios* (huts – booking ahead advised). The huts and campsites are run by two companies, Fantastico Sur (www.fslodges.com) and Vertice (www.verticepatagonia.cl – in Spanish). Prices start from Ch\$3,500 (£4) for camping and Ch\$34,000 (£38) for full board in refugios. You can rent (not particularly lightweight) tents



and other hiking gear from refugios or from agencies in Puerto Natales. You could also try the geodesic domes of the environmentally friendly EcoCamp Patagonia (0800 051 7095 from UK, www.ecocamp.travel) near Las Torres in the east of the park; three-day packages start from US\$1,075/£663 high season.

For those not walking the Circuit or the W, there’s much to be said for staying in Puerto Natales rather than at a large hotel within the park – consider the environmental, as well as the scenic, impact of their presence there. Hotel Remota in Puerto Natales offers packages including accommodation, meals, transfers and an unbeatable list of inclusive excursions (£957pp for three nights in a double room). An excellent budget option in Puerto Natales is Casa Cecilia (+56 61 613560, www.casaceciliahostal.com); doubles from Ch\$24,000/£27. ■

Rudolf Abraham’s Torres del Paine – A Trekker’s Guide (*Cicerone*) is published in 2010.

NEXT ISSUE Brazil Carnival

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TOP TIPS

- ➔ **It’s pronounced ‘pie-nay’**
The source of Torres del Paine’s name is in dispute: some claim the ‘Paine’ derives from the Tehuelche word for ‘pale blue’, while others reckon it references an early Welsh climber. Either way, it’s not pronounced ‘pain’.
- ➔ **Get off the bus early**
While most trekkers jump off the bus from Puerto Natales at Laguna Amarga, consider starting from the CONAF office on Lago Toro, at the end of the bus route. This adds an extra day to your hike but is a far more impressive start, with stunning scenery opening up before you.

- ➔ **Bring plenty of cash to Puerto Natales**
The ATMs often run out, and credit cards will only get you so far within the national park.



- ➔ **Bring trekking sandals**
There are quite a few river crossings on the Circuit, particularly after heavy rain.



- ➔ **Treasure your free map**
The free map you receive with your entry ticket is as good as any, as well as being smaller and lighter. *Torres del Paine Trekking Map* (JLM Mapas, sheet #13) is also good, covering a wider area, and is widely available in Puerto Natales.